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VERBATIM

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RICHARD DIEBENKORN: From Russia with Love

Richard and Phyllis Diebenkorn sent these postcards to the artist's mother in the fall of 1964 while on a cultural tour of the U.S.S.R. In the midst of the Cold War, President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev established an exchange program as an attempt at diplomacy, inviting artists and writers to travel throughout each country visiting schools and engaging with selected figures. The program was organized by the United States Information Agency (USIA); Diebenkorn found himself invited not only because of his success as a representational painter in the Soviet Union's preferred mode of social realism, but also because of his relatively quiet and steady lifestyle. This was his and Phyllis's first trip outside North America; it threw them into a political and social whirlwind they were neither expecting nor prepared for.



Their visit proved formative for Diebenkorn's work. The couple toured the State Hermitage Museum, in St. Petersburg, and the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, in Moscow, to view their restricted collections. Diebenkorn was particularly struck and influenced by the dozens

of Matisse paintings. The environment was rife with history: Khrushchev's resignation was announced the day Diebenkorn visited Matisse's *The Conversation*.

William Luers, an American diplomat who accompanied the couple, recalled, that at times, their days were "disturbing and confusing." Diebenkorn and Phyllis both grew paranoid that they were being spied on, but maintained a cheery tone in their letters home. Their homesickness and isolation are palpable—they seem to have transferred their worries about the trip into missing their loved ones, and nagged Diebenkorn's mother and their son for not being in touch. According to Luers, "[...] they were riveted and opened up by their experience in Moscow and Leningrad but at times frightened by dramatic political moments they experienced in the U.S.S.R. We often talked about the disturbing Soviet environment and the suffering of Russians. They were both profoundly affected by that exchange visit to the U.S.S.R.[...] And also stimulated by the strange and exotic energy of Russia [...] They were, I believe, greatly relieved when it was over while treasuring the experience."



