

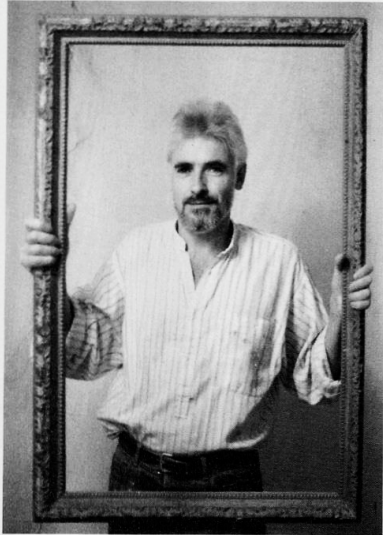
ALEXANDER KALETSKI

Dead Ancestors

D I L L O N G A L L E R Y

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Alexander Kaletski, 1995. Photo: TED PHILLIPS



A stroll through the venerable galleries of the Frick Museum offers us the opportunity to meet and make the acquaintance of many imperial, affluent, and illustrious personages depicted by some of the greatest painters in the history of Western art. From Jan van Eyck to James A.M. Whistler, one can study and engage in a silent dialogue with kings, saints, scurrilous blackmailers, soldiers of fortune, lyric poets, gamblers, corpulent burghers, countesses with rosy cheeked children, witty dukes, and even an actress who caused a sensation by riding to a fox hunt on an elephant. Getting

to know these people, by their demeanor, expression, gaze (with those who make eye contact), and attire, is one of the joys of a visit to the Frick, and several have become friends (dare I say family?), over the years.

About two years ago, Alexander Kaletski began a series of paintings of curious figures that gradually emerge from darkened backgrounds, taking on the characteristics of persons of significance, dignitaries of sorts. Having emigrated from Russia in 1975, Kaletski's desire was to paint ancestral portraits based on the cultural diversity that he found in America, mostly from memory, of people or images that he had seen in his travels, and his impression of America as a place where almost everyone is from somewhere else. As a former member of a theater company that toured the U.S., Kaletski has an innate sense of the theatrical, of how identity is closely linked with a status based on external appearances.

Yet although Kaletski's *Dead Ancestors* appear to be individuals of distinction and accomplishment, the artist finds ways to subvert their self-importance with a wry, gently ironic humor. His portraits are the "types" that can be associated with historical figures from the 14th to the 20th centuries, who look familiar, as though we have seen them before in history books or paintings. Together they form a gallery of archetypal or generic portraits that represent Kaletski's meditations on the inherent values of art and society.

Curiously enough, Kaletski's initial exploration of this theme started when he drew quick figure sketches on steamed bathroom windows and later on glass that had been soaped over during the construction of the Dillon Gallery. This led to an equestrian portrait of a Bonaparte-like general, reminiscent in pose and attitude of Velazquez's *The Count-Duke of Olivares* in the Metropolitan Museum.

Kaletski's *Leader of the Charge* shows the stern-faced cavalryman in full military dress, waving, presumably to his troops. Typical of this sort of portrait, the black steed is rearing-up as the general is caught in a classic, time honored display of self-aggrandizing power. By way of contrast, Kaletski also painted *Queen's Favorite*, depicting a saluting soldier, complete with high hat, gold epaulets and waxed moustache, about to fall into murky waters along with his trusted horse. Here the artist plays with the notion of pomp and ceremony; the dutiful soldier keeping up appearances at all costs.

Several other portraits are of various luminaries decked out in sumptuous regalia, among them a rather severe looking armored knight (looking like the father of El Greco's *Vincenzo Anastagi* in the Frick collection), a suspicious, even paranoid Elizabethan Queen, (Hamlet's mother, or Lady Macbeth?), and a confident, suave governor, whose key to the city and Dutch habit make him resemble a young Peter Stuyvesant. There is also the *Lord Chamberlain*, a rather portly official with gold-brocaded jacket and powdered wig, his hands planted on his hips, seemingly as intransigent as a spoiled child.

In an interview, Kaletski described a primary concern in making "portraits of angular people, where I'm trying to show not just interesting individuals, but also the mysterious world inside them...trying to capture a hidden subconscious world of the character." A pair of portraits, entitled *Don* and *Doña*, are of a Spanish couple who gaze at each other with intense pleasure, the Don's feathered hat even flying off his head in his excitement. The distinct angularity of these figures in black costumes and ruffled white collars, their exaggerated expressions and postures, make them into almost abstract symbols of the emotional tension of formal courtship.

Finally, one would be remiss not to mention the grand-scaled family gathering in *Royal Pain*, in which a stiffly posed, worried looking king tries to remain calm as his disheveled, probably inbred family (and leering dog), make his personal life miserable. Kaletski humorously captures a moment of a typical family in chaos, their excesses coming back to haunt them, as it has so many of the dead ancestors of royal families, as well as those of more common folk, then and now.

Robert G. Edelman, 1995



Leader of the Charge 64" x 50"
oil on linen