NEW MASSES

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DAVID BURLIUK

Moses Soyer discusses a great painter and his work. "The people who own his pictures love them and would not part with them."

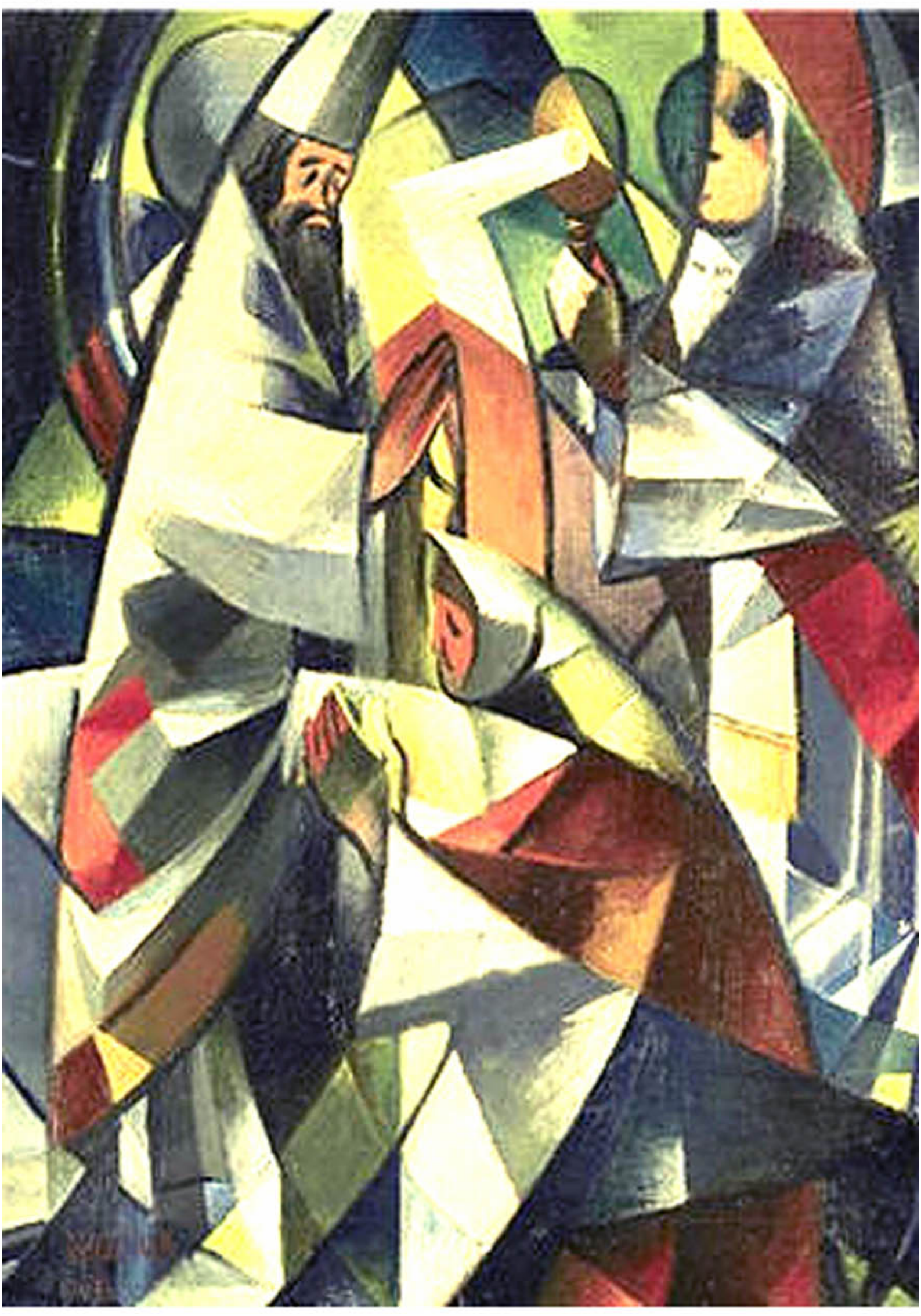
BEFORE I write about the pictures of David Burliuk, currently on exhibition at the ACA Galleries, I would like to say a few words about their creator. Burliuk is sixty-two years old. His life has been rich in experience, travel, and achievement. He has known the world's great. He was Mayakovsky's teacher and Maxim Gorky's intimate friend. He came to America more than twenty years ago, already famous as the father of Russian futurism, a seasoned veteran of many artistic and political battles. "Before I came here," he tells Michael Gold, "I had grandiose and exotic dreams of Java and Thailand as my home. But I picked the United States —it seemed to me the most romantic of all the new worlds, and I have not been disappointed. It is a great continent. It has taught me patience."

Yes, Burliuk is a most patient and industrious man. For twenty years he lived in an East Side cold tenement flat, working as an actor, proofreader, journalist, and feature writer. At night he studied and painted. Although a small group of artists, collectors, and art lovers knew him and his work and prized him for his genius, general recognition in this country came late in life. It is only in the last few years that his work has begun to sell. The people who own his pictures love them and would not part with them. I know a young girl whose sole possessions, literally, are the clothes she wears and a small landscape by Burliuk, which she acquired on the installment plan. "I don't need a room with a southern exposure," she says blithely. "Wherever I hang my sunny Burliuk, there is my home."

DAVID BRULIUK

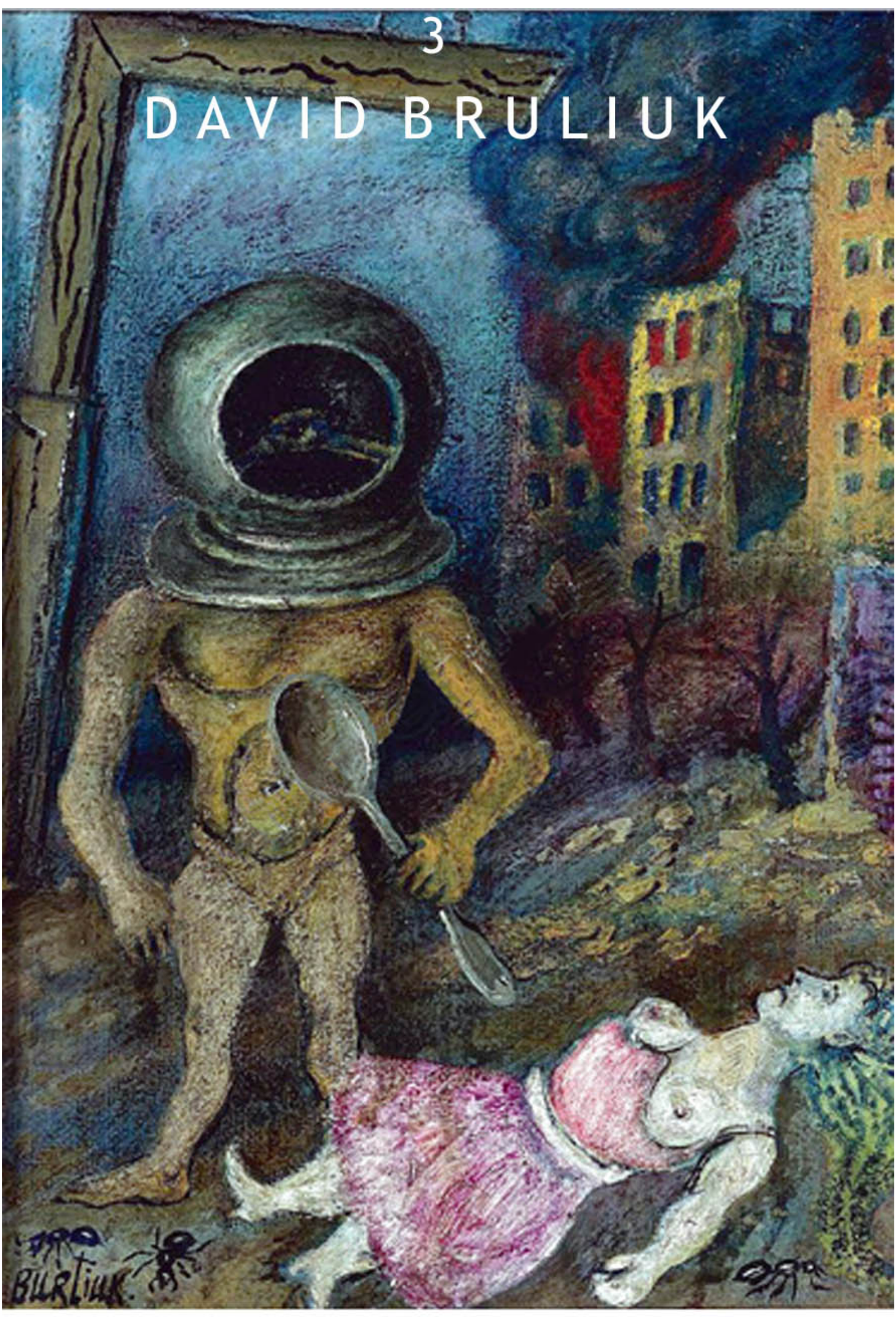
Raphael Soyer owns a little self-portrait by Burliuk, painted some two years ago. In it he painted himself in a thoughtful mood, seated at a table with his hand resting upon an open volume. Other objects scattered about on the table are a globe, a watch, a glass of wine, and a frugal still-life of fruit and bread. In the background are shelves filled with books by his contemporaries — Mayakovsky, Aseyev, Kamensky—and on the wall hang paintings by his friends, which he loves to collect. In the corner on a pedestal one discerns Noguchi's bust of Burliuk's wife, Mary. Painted in a serious, almost solemn vein, as the old masters did at times, one feels that Burliuk represented himself in this painting as he would like to be known to posterity.

ON ENTERING the ACA Gallery, I was impressed by the amazing vitality, bouyancy, and fantasy of the canvases. With the exception of the painting "Unconquerable Russia," the subject matter is of the Burliukian type that is so well known: brightly dressed girls with blue, yellow, and red cows; variations of his famous "tea-drinkers," especially the very forceful "Tolstoy drinking tea at the home of Widow Kopylov." The portraits of Lenin and Stalin on the wall add a quaint anachronistic note to the picture.



A BURLIUK exhibition is never complete without a portrait of his wife. This contains two. One of them shows her seated at a window with an open book; in the other she is painted in her garden at Hampton Bays, surrounded by lilacs. Both are tenderly painted tributes to his lifelong companion and collaborator.

One day in my studio in the course of conversation, I said to old, one-eyed Burliuk, "I have seen you in many moods: cheerful, explosive, sarcastic, but never in



the other she is painted in her garden at Hampton Bays, surrounded by lilacs. Both are tenderly painted tributes to his lifelong companion and collaborator.

One day in my studio in the course of conversation, I said to old, one-eyed Burliuk, "I have seen you in many moods: cheerful, explosive, sarcastic, but never in a melancholy one." He gave one of his characteristic unexpected answers. "My dear friend, why should I be unhappy? My life is behind me." Then, smiling, he added, "Good artists become more optimistic and diligent as they get older. Didn't Cezanne build his largest studio four years before his death and didn't Renoir paint his gayest pictures with the brushes tied to his paralytic hands?"

Moses Soyer.