

People are Talking about out of the picture

In organizing a de Staël show at the Hermitage, the painter's son discovers the father he never knew.



DE STAËL IN HIS STUDIO THE YEAR BEFORE HE DIED; LEFT, LANDSCAPE, 1955, ONE OF HIS LAST PAINTINGS.

canvases hang or lean against the walls in rooms flooded with sunlight. Whether of footballers in full battle or of the sea at Antibes, the paintings' striking colors and rhythmic intensity remind one why de Staël—an athletic aesthete whom Braque revered and who refused to belong to any movement other than his own—was admired then

as much by existentialist poets as he is now by Palm Beach decorators. A curator in charge of exhibitions at l'Hôtel de Ville in Paris, Gustave selected the 50 works in the show

from the decade following World War II, his father's seminal years, with the hope of connecting de Staël's life of exile in France with his formative years in Russia. "When I first went to St. Petersburg last summer," Gustave says, "and a curator from the Hermitage took me into the first room of the museum overlooking the Neva, it was a de Staël that you saw through the windows: the same boats and the river with the immensity of a large sea." He adds, "I realized that my father felt something of the depths of the Neva. His style of relating colors, of diffusing light, came from there, even when his actual model was the sea in Normandy or the Seine."

The St. Petersburg of de Staël's childhood represented a moment of privilege and comfort to which there would be no return. The grandson of a general in the Russian army, Nicolas was born to aristocratic splendor. His parents lived in a mansion facing the park of Catherine the Great on Nevsky Prospect, and Nicolas was appointed a page in the imperial court of Czar Nicholas II. Three years after the October Revolution of 1915, however, the family was forced to flee to Poland. Both parents died soon after, and Nicolas and two sisters were taken in by family friends in Belgium. "My father always left this background aside," Gustave says. "He had the family papers and the family seal. He knew it was all important. But it was the past. Then, in 1951, he wanted to go back. But everyone said that with Stalin it was impossible." De Staël never returned to his homeland.

While the events of his boyhood loomed over de Staël's life and contributed to his nervous temperament—he was always in a hurry, Gustave says, and gave an impression of perpetual speed—painting became his great escape. "There was something inside him that said he didn't have much time," Gustave says. By contrast, the paintings are heavy, with their rich impasto, and their tactile luxuriousness evokes what lasts. "His work is very present—it has assurance, stability. He was the opposite, but painting, which demanded so much nuance, calmed him. Work enabled him to focus his energy." But the calm didn't last.

art On March 16, 1955, the last day of his life, the painter sent a note to a friend: "In the event that someone is organizing some exhibition of my paintings, say what has to be said so that they can be seen. Thanks for everything, Nicolas." He could well have addressed these words to the little boy in the lace collar, who, five decades later, has found his own way of coming to terms with the distant past. As de Staël himself once wrote, "The tougher a thing is, the more intimate one must become with it."—NICHOLAS FOX WEBER *pata* ▶ 162



Upon the birth of his son, Gustave, in 1954, Nicolas de Staël, the Russian-born French painter, wrote to a friend, "My wife has completed my portrait in miniature. It's a very lively object... an eye that seems to be riding a horse... an impossible nose, a lace collar up to his right ear, and the sad head of a thinker lost in the emptiness." Eleven months later, de Staël jumped to his death from the balcony of his studio in Antibes.

But now Gustave has reconnected with his father in an extraordinary way. In organizing an exhibition of de Staël's work, which will open on May 15 at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg—the city of the painter's birth—Gustave has given himself and the Russian public the chance to consider the artist as never before.

The son still resembles the father of whom he has no memory—the same lean face, aquiline nose, and shock of smooth, dark hair. In Gustave's comfortable countryish house in central Paris, de Staël