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Monumental Ego Sculptor: He's got this 1,200-ton gift ready for the taking. So why is it, no city is willing to take it off his hands?

June 24, 1997 | By Clara Germani | Clara Germani, SUN FOREIGN STAFF

MOSCOW -- Zurab Tsereteli, court sculptor of the New Russia, and if he can manage it, the rest of the world too, is not amused.

"I am an artist," he declares, scowling under a floppy black suede beret as he sketches an increasingly angry-looking cubist face across his neatly typed daily schedule. He's building up to a major rant.

"Zurab is world famous," he informs a visitor as hovering aides nod in vigorous agreement. Then he offers solid credentials. "I know De Niro. Giuliani. Reagan. Trump. Clinton. Mohammed Ali," he says, aides smiling and nodding some more. But there's a problem. He doesn't think Baltimore knows the real Zurab. He doesn't think Baltimore appreciates the wonderful offer he is making: a 306-foot-tall statue of Christopher Columbus to rival Charm City's tallest buildings.

So why, goes the logic of this volcanic artist whose statue has been turned down by three other American cities, do people keep repeating "negative facts" about him?

"Yes, why?" echoes the chorus of nodding aides.

Why can't this important man, who has designed every single major new monument in Moscow since the fall of communism, get an American city to just cooperate, take his gigantic, 1,200-ton gift and shut up?

"The maestro," as aides and friends sometimes refer to Tsereteli, thinks he knows the answer. The press.

"You printed lies about me -- apologize and tell your readers you lied," he demands, madly doodling with his expensive tortoise-shell fountain pen.

The "lies" are the opinions of his critics. They were quoted in an article in The Sun last month disclosing the existence of a committee of Baltimore politicians, businessmen and Italian-American leaders working to bring Tsereteli's Columbus to the Inner Harbor.

The article mentioned the controversy in Moscow over Peter the Great -- a Tsereteli monument much like his Columbus in grandiose style and size being constructed on the banks of the Moscow River. Some people in Moscow don't think much of Peter the Great's artistic merits. There was even a brief campaign to tear down the \$20 million project. But it was unsuccessful -- so Tsereteli doesn't think The Sun should have mentioned it.

"Hitler started like this, destroying artists," he growls.



"I had 48 [shipping] containers ready for shipment [to Baltimore] from St. Petersburg exactly when the article appeared. And it stopped because they tell me the [Baltimore committee] got frightened, and 20 percent of Baltimore public opinion is against me."

Does it all mean that Tsereteli's Columbus -- originally offered to America in 1992 as a Russian gift on the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America -- will not come to Baltimore after all?

"If I want, I'll have it erected there. If not, I won't," he pouts.

Other fish to fry

But Baltimore is just a trifle on the sweeping canvas of Tsereteli's life.

It's not totally clear whether the artist has ever been to the city. He cannot remember the names of the businessmen attempting to raise the \$20 million and public backing necessary to erect Columbus in Baltimore. But the peripatetic artist has got so much on his mind.

Tsereteli is a bundle of energy in a 5-foot-4 frame, juggling a schedule that looks more like that of a CEO or politician than an artist.

Russia's nascent democracy and capitalism have served him well.

When communism and its huge monuments to Marx, Lenin and the worker tumbled, up went Tsereteli monuments to fill the void, and up went the artist's net worth.

He drives a large Mercedes -- swerving and careening and missing the occasional red light while he digs in his briefcase and bends to answer his constantly trilling cell phone.

He has a New York apartment. He owns a country cottage near that of friend and powerful patron, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov.

He lives, works and maintains a busy but imaginative sculpture garden on the pre-revolutionary complex of buildings that once housed the West German embassy. He rents it from the prestigious Academy of Arts, an organization he heads.

He owns a gigantic St. Petersburg foundry capable of building the multimillion-dollar, multiton monuments he has erected all over the former Soviet Union, at the United Nations, in Spain, England and France.

He certainly doesn't resemble a starving artist -- an observation that annoys him tremendously.

"I'm outraged by this starving question," he says, looking at his assistants as if it is their fault. They shake their heads in dismay.

"This is some sort of trick. Show me a starving artist. ... A good artist does not starve."

Indeed, in his 62 years, Tsereteli has never starved. He is an eccentric survivor.

While government workers go months without wages in these lean post-Soviet times, he's somehow managing to squeeze public coffers for the millions necessary to erect his monuments.

In old photos of stiff, gray-suited Soviet arts officialdom, Tsereteli is the smiling rake with a plaid sport coat.

In the catalogs of Soviet art, he's the odd official artist never forced to do a single Lenin or a Marx.

In the Soviet era, Tsereteli was known as a bon vivant, a playboy, a nervously impatient artist -- in short, "a bit of a bad boy," explains Andrei Voznesensky, a poet, artist and longtime friend of Tsereteli.

The Georgia connection

He got away with a lot, both artistically and personally, because he was from Georgia, Voznesensky explains.

Tsereteli's native Georgia is a southern Caucasian republic on the Black Sea. Its culture is colorful and flamboyant: Legendary huge meals and elaborate gifts are lavished on guests.

Tsereteli, who is more articulate in the Georgian language than in Russian, is considered typically Georgian in his largess.

When Voznesensky's own poetry and art was out of favor among Soviet authorities in the 1970s, it was Tsereteli who offered him a place to stay. And Tsereteli even helped Voznesensky publish when it was impossible in Russia.

"He wasn't rich then. But he did this for me. And it's just like him to give presents and gifts and meals," observes Vosnesensky. "He doesn't do this to get something in return. But when his gifts are denied, it hurts him."

Vosnesensky describes how he and Tsereteli together tweaked the Soviet officials' sensibilities when they collaborated in the 1980s on a large monument erected in Moscow to commemorate peace between Georgia and Russia. They didn't tell anyone, until the monument was unveiled, that it would include bronzed lines of poetry from the banned writer Boris Pasternak at the base. Because it was already set in bronze, the authorities simply overlooked it.

Tsereteli's friends describe him as an incredible workaholic.

Vosnesensky says that while other people would smoke when they were nervous, Tsereteli would swipe out an oil painting. As a result, his cheerful studio today is stacked with thousands of finished canvases -- boldly colored oils, resembling Picassos.

He watched the artist slave in the brutal Georgian sun perfecting the large mosaic enamel pieces that won Tsereteli his first recognition. They were brightly colored abstracts that were considered fresh compared to the typical official artistic output of the time.

But he was fast with his work -- able to organize it, execute it himself or inspire work crews to execute it perfectly. And this ability to overcome artistic airs and come in on time on his projects became his most appreciated ability -- and perhaps what wins him contracts even today.

"His productivity is stupefying. He's not only an artist but an entrepreneur in the arts. He's got a sort of megalomania -- it's monumentalism, the bigger the better," observes Thomas Gamkrelidze, director of Georgia's Oriental Institute and an old friend.

The dream scheme

Tsereteli says his ideas come to him in full-color dreams.

Often they become public relations nightmares.

Peter the Great was the worst. But one of his World War II monuments, the Sorrow of the People, showing a long line of people melting into their graves, was deemed too depressing to be seen on a main thoroughfare and was unceremoniously moved by the mayor to a less public spot.

Columbus has been turned down in Miami, New York and Columbus, Ohio. In Baltimore, the statue's potential costs and benefits are still being assessed. But public reaction has been less than enthusiastic.

"Why would anyone want to undue the progress we have made in the beautification of the Baltimore harbor by placing Russian architect Zurab Tsereteli's 306-foot-tall Christopher Columbus statue in the harbor?" asks Daniel Chapin of

Cockeysville in a letter to The Sun. "Mr. Tsereteli has an extraordinary imagination. But unfortunately, the statues he creates are hideous monstrosities. This eyesore must be rejected."

A former Israeli diplomat laughs when he hears Baltimore is on the receiving end of what he calls a Tsereteli "ambush." The diplomat, based in Moscow in the early 1990s, remembers one himself.

At a lavish brunch at Tsereteli's studio, the sculptor fished a drawing out of a huge pile of work and announced, "I have a plan for Israel."

"With this extraordinary chutzpah he tells me he wants to put up a huge and complicated Holocaust memorial on a whole hillside in Jerusalem," says the retired diplomat, who asked not to be identified.

"Of course I told him it would cost a Fort Knox treasure to erect it. I didn't even get to how colossally inane the idea was [politically and aesthetically]," says the Israeli diplomat. "Tsereteli didn't appreciate it. He said it was a great work of art and Israel needed it."

But Tsereteli's works do stand in London, Seville and Paris. One of his best-known is "Good Defeats Evil," a popular attraction outside U.N. headquarters in New York. The four-story St. George, on horseback, lances a two-headed dragon constructed from the rubble of U.S. and Soviet nuclear missiles.

"Many countries want my work," Tsereteli says defensively.

The Ohio story

Columbus, Ohio, certainly did, says Jane Butler, a restaurant owner who chaired the committee to bring Columbus to Columbus between 1993 and 1996.

The committee loved Tsereteli, the lavish attention he gave them and the economic development the Columbus statue might have meant for the city.

Tsereteli personally paid for nine of the committee members to fly to Moscow and see his studio and foundry in 1993.

The committee had no illusions about Tsereteli's good will, says Butler. "There's a real business mind there. He's not starving artist, he's not naive. He's very calculating and intelligent, and he understands capitalism extremely well."

The Columbus statue may be a gift from Russia, she says, but the statue's residuals are the payoff for Tsereteli.

His foundry has already produced thousands of "little watches and little knickknacks to be sold as Columbus souvenirs," she explains. And there will be deals that give Tsereteli a cut of restaurant and museum revenues associated with the statue, she says.

In the end, it was Tsereteli who gave up on Columbus, Ohio, because the committee wasn't able to get the mayor to endorse the project, even though Butler had lined up an impressive array of other political support, including the Ohio governor.

Tsereteli faded away, she says, and predicts the same in Baltimore if there isn't appropriate political adoration of the project.

"These kinds of projects take decades," she observes. "And my feeling was that Zurab thought, 'My God I'm giving this gift to them and how ungrateful they are that it won't be erected overnight.' "