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## Spear's meets Zurab Tsereteli - the most famous artist you've never heard of

6TH FEBRUARY 2019 by **ARUN KAKAR**



*Big in Russia, doesn't quite cut it for Zurab Tsereteli, who has his first major UK retrospective at the Saatchi right now. Arun Kakar uncovers the life and work of one of Russia's most prolific artists - who's also admired by Donald Trump*

The work of Zurab Tsereteli is omnipresent in Russia, particularly in Moscow where his public monuments are a fixture of the city's skyline. His 94-metre Peter the Great sculpture in downtown Moscow is the eighth tallest statue in the world, and he has undertaken important commissions across the Russian capital including the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour.

And Tsereteli is not just a big name in Russia; he counts among his admirers, the US President Donald Trump, who has described him as 'major'. Tsereteli has also played a fundamental role of shaping his country's artistic trajectory throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His list of accomplishments is remarkable: he is founder of the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, president of the Russian Academy of Arts and a goodwill ambassador for UNESCO. He is a recipient of the 'Honored Artist of Georgia' title and the Legion d'honneur.

'For him, the main thing is to create works,' explains his grandson, Vasili, who is also executive director of the Moscow Museum of Modern Art. 'Inspiration comes like air.'

Indeed, when *Spear's* meets Tsereteli in the Saatchi Gallery in Chelsea, the 85-year-old is drawing in his sketchbook. The retrospective, which runs until 17 February, takes up the entire third floor of the gallery and encompasses paintings, sculptures as well as archival footage documenting his life and work.



Zurab Tsereteli, *Larger Than Life*, Saatchi Gallery, 23 January - 17 February 2019; [zurabtsereteli.com](http://zurabtsereteli.com)

Born in 1934 in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, Tsereteli was educated in bronze, stone, glass, wood, enamel and mosaics. The study of archaeology and ethnology were particularly important in informing his work. 'Since [he was] young, he participated in tours, sketched 12th Century frescos [where it] was very important to study the ethnography,' says Vasili. Anatomy was a particular influence.

'When serious teachers taught him to draw, they got him to draw corpses,' Tsereteli tells *Spear's* through his translator. 'When somebody dies, the skin settles in a certain way, and you see the anatomy of a person in a way that you don't see when they're alive.'

'That was part of his education: very good teachers who go to that sort of extreme to hone the skills of being an artist.'

Formative experiences with Picasso and Chagall also had a lasting influence - and are referenced explicitly in works such as *My Favourite Artists*, a 2009 sculpture depicting Picasso, Modigliani, Chagall, Matisse and Van Gogh.