

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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For downloadable images, visit [pbs.org/pressroom/](http://pbs.org/pressroom/)

For the program companion website, visit: <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/desert-of-forbidden-art>

**DESERT OF FORBIDDEN ART, THE FASCINATING STORY OF SECRET ART  
COLLECTION WORTH MILLIONS, PREMIERES ON  
INDEPENDENT LENS ON TUESDAY, APRIL 5, 2011 AT 10 PM**

*“I found these paintings rolled up under the beds of old widows, buried in family trash, in dark corners of artists’ studios, sometimes even patching a hole in the roof. I ended up with a collection that no one in the Soviet Union would dare to exhibit.” - Igor Savitsky*

(San Francisco, CA) — *Desert of Forbidden Art* is the incredible true story of how one man, Igor Savitsky, saved a treasure trove of art worth millions of dollars by “hiding” it in a museum in the desert in Uzbekistan. A tireless collector of paintings that the Soviet government wanted destroyed, Savitsky traveled thousands of miles scheming, plotting, pleading, doing whatever it took to get his hands on the art he so passionately wanted to preserve. Written, produced, and directed by Amanda Pope and Tchavdar Georgiev, the award-winning *Desert of Forbidden Art* premieres on the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by America Ferrera, on Tuesday, April 5, 2011 at 10 PM (check local listings).

A frustrated artist, Savitsky was working as an archaeologist when he became fascinated by the indigenous cultures of Western Uzbekistan. He began to collect jewelry, coins, handmade clothing, and other items in danger of being lost as the Soviets sought to devalue distinctively ethnic artifacts. Savitsky even succeeded in convincing government officials to provide funding for a museum in Nukus, far from Moscow’s prying eyes.



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But then Savitsky discovered his true calling. Pretending to buy state-approved art, he daringly rescued more than 40,000 works by artists banned during the Stalin era for speaking out against authority, for being gay, or for simply refusing to paint in the style they were told. Risking torture, imprisonment, and death, this small group remained true to their artistic vision. Savitsky even managed to cajole the cash to pay for the art from the same authorities who had banned it.

Savitsky's greatest discovery was an unknown school of artists who settled in Uzbekistan after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. There they encountered an Islamic culture as exotic to them as Tahiti was for Gauguin, and they developed a startlingly original style that fused European modernism with centuries-old Eastern traditions. To Savitsky, the paintings were a revelation.

Around the saga of Savitsky and the artists, the filmmakers weave the cultural and political context of the times, juxtaposing beautiful and colorful images from the collection with rare Soviet archival film and stills. Ben Kingsley, Sally Field, and Ed Asner voice the diaries and letters of Savitsky and the artists, bringing to life a dramatic journey of sacrifice for the sake of creative freedom.

Today the priceless paintings that Savitsky spent his life collecting are located in one of the world's poorest regions, making them a lucrative target for Islamic fundamentalists, corrupt bureaucrats, and art profiteers. The collection remains as endangered as when Savitsky first created it, posing the question of whose responsibility it is to preserve this cultural treasure.

To learn more about the film, visit the *Desert of Forbidden Art* interactive companion website ([pbs.org/desert-of-forbidden-art](http://pbs.org/desert-of-forbidden-art)), which features detailed information on the film, including an interview with the filmmaker and links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter. The site also features a Talkback section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film, and more.

#### **About the Filmmakers**

**Amanda Pope (Producer/Director)** has directed, produced, written, and edited award-winning documentaries and dramatic and social advocacy programs during her more than 20-year career. Her work has focused on the dynamics of creativity in fine art, public art happenings, urban design, theater, and dance. Her award-winning public television documentaries — *Jackson Pollock Portrait*; *Stages: Houseman Directs Lear*; and *Cities For People* — have all been broadcast nationally on PBS. Most recently, she directed *The Legend of Pancho Barnes and the Happy Bottom Riding Club* about a pioneer woman aviator. Her program series, *Faces of Change*, documented grassroots reformers and emerging leaders in the former USSR. She has served on the board of New York Women in Film and the Women in Film Foundation in Los Angeles and has been a jury member for the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences student films, and the International Documentary Association's feature documentaries. Pope is an associate professor in production at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts.

**Tchavdar Georgiev (Producer/Director/Editor)** has produced, associate produced, and/or edited a number of award-winning fiction and nonfiction films as well as television

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programming for ABC, PBS, The History Channel, National Geographic, Channel 1 Russia, and MTV Russia. He was one of the editors on the documentary *We Live in Public*, which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, and the feature *Bastards*, which won the MTV Russia Award for best film. His editing credits include National Geographic's Emmy-nominated *Alien Earths*, *One Lucky Elephant*, *Divining the Human*, *Maybe Baby*, *View From a Grain of Sand*, and *Refusenik*. Georgiev is a graduate of the USC School of Cinematic Arts and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

**About *Independent Lens***

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS. The acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of their independent producers. *Independent Lens* features unforgettable stories about unique individuals, communities, and moments in history. Presented by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), the series is supported by interactive companion websites and national publicity and community engagement campaigns. *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts. The series producer is Lois Vossen.

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