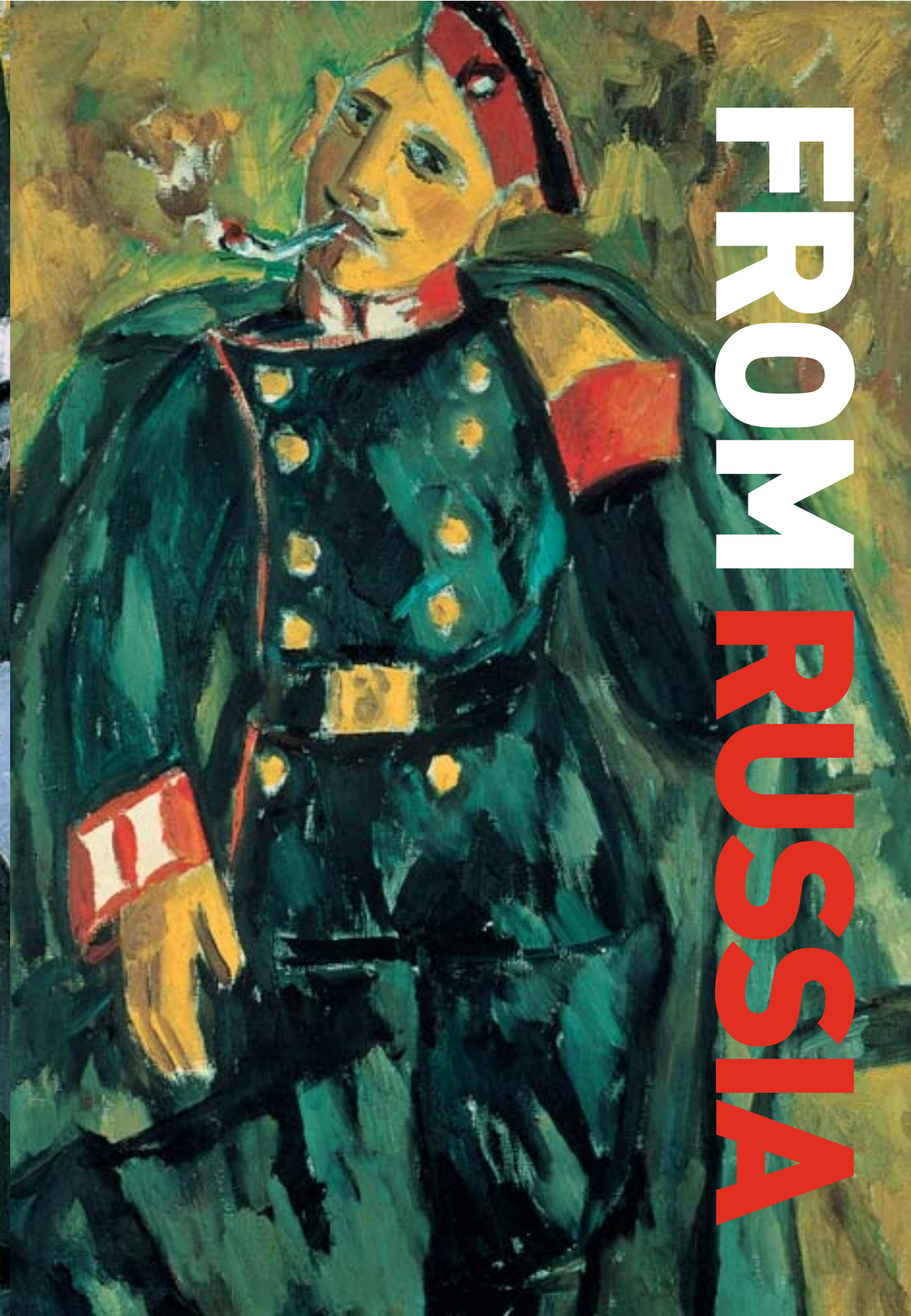




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FROM RUSSIA

FROM RUSSIA

**FROM RUSSIA:
FRENCH AND RUSSIAN
MASTER PAINTINGS
1870–1925 FROM MOSCOW
AND ST PETERSBURG
MAIN GALLERIES
26 JANUARY – 18 APRIL 2008**

**AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
EXHIBITION FOR TEACHERS
AND STUDENTS
WRITTEN BY GREG HARRIS
FOR THE EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT
© ROYAL ACADEMY OF ARTS**

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FRONT COVER
MIKHAIL LARIONOV
Smoking Soldier (detail), 1910–11
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Photo © The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2008

BACK COVER
LYUBOV POPOVA
Portrait of a Philosopher (detail),
1915
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg
Photo © The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg

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Royal
Academy
of Arts

'Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, madonnas and shameless Venuses, shall we witness a work of pure, living art.

I have transformed myself in the zero of form and dragged myself out of the rubbish-filled pool of Academic art.

I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things, from the horizon ring that has imprisoned the artist and the forms of nature.'

KAZIMIR MALEVICH, 1915

INTRODUCTION

For most of the second half of the nineteenth century, Russian painting, unlike its literature, would not have been judged to be at the cutting edge of artistic innovation. Few people at the turn of the century would have predicted that within fifteen years Russia would be showing the work of one of the first pioneers of abstraction, and that around him would be a group of painters actively involved with the avant-garde.

As this exhibition demonstrates, contact with contemporary French painting, through exhibitions, travel and the extraordinary activities of Russian collectors, led to an unprecedented period of creativity and experimentation. But while the formal preoccupations of French painters contributed enormously to this ferment, Russian artists also drew on the tradition of religious icons, the spiritual importance of the Orthodox Church, and the rich body of folk art which still maintained a contact with a deeper pagan past. This ebb and flow of Western influence and Russian independence runs through the many different artistic groupings that sprang up during the period.

THE WANDERERS

When Peter the Great (1672–1725) created his new capital, St Petersburg, on the marshy banks of the river Neva as it flowed into the Baltic Sea, his aim was to open Russia to Western trade and influence. Italian and French architects helped to build the city and French became the accepted language of the aristocracy. When the St Petersburg Academy of Arts was founded in 1757, it took its aesthetic standpoint and methods of teaching from the established European academies, favouring the teaching of history painting in a Neoclassical style.

Right from the start Peter's pro-Western policy had attracted criticism from Russians who felt that the country's Slavic past, religious traditions and connections to the East were being abandoned for the sake of a more secular, scientific modernity. In painting, matters came to a head when fourteen students at the Academy rejected the chosen topic for the 1863 competition, 'The entry of Wotan into Valhalla', as irrelevant to their concerns. In doing so they reflected the ideas of the aesthetic theorist Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) who explored the artist's moral and social accountability. In 1855

he had written: 'Art does not limit itself only to the beautiful ... it embraces the whole of reality ... the content of Art is life in its social aspect'.

In 1870 many of those rebels formed themselves into a group known as the Peredvizhniki (the 'Wanderers' or 'Itinerants'), dedicated to taking their art into the countryside with travelling exhibitions, and in their own painting to reflect the life and landscape of Russia. In many ways it matched the movement known as Populism, when idealistic students went out into the countryside in an attempt to raise the consciousness and improve the lives of serfs who had been liberated in 1861.

Ilya Repin (1844–1930) was one such painter, who had come to the Volga river to work on a picture of the peasants who pulled the heavily loaded barges. Spending weeks with one team, he did many drawings and sketches, immersing himself in their life and characters. The finished picture, *The Boatmen on the Volga* (1870–73, fig. 1), has acquired an iconic status in the history of Russian realism, an expression of the suffering of the people that demanded a response.

Taking up a travelling scholarship given to all graduates of the Academy, Repin visited Paris in 1874 and found himself pulled in a completely different direction. Under the guidance of the landscape painter, Aleksei Bogoliubov (1824–96), Repin was instructed in *plein-air* painting at Veules on the Normandy coast. He wrote to his fellow painter Vasily Polenov (1844–1927), 'I cannot contain my excitement'. Polenov joined them, and admitted that, by working from nature with Bogoliubov, 'I learnt more in several hours than by working for months alone'.

In Paris Repin saw the first Impressionist exhibition. Cautiously admiring their art, he acknowledged that 'an original language will always be noticed sooner', and was eager to work on Parisian urban subjects or a portrait 'à la Manet'. Repin's return to Russia in 1876 was greeted with horror by Ivan Kramskoi (1837–87), the leader of the Wanderers, who sent him back into the countryside to 'regain his powers ... of a realist, of a national artist ... fully capable of creating and representing thoroughly national types'. Repin knuckled under and continued to deal with the turbulent political and social conditions of his country, as well as becoming a distinguished portrait painter, both of peasants and of leading Russian cultural figures, who occasionally allowed the softer-edged brushwork of his French experience to emerge.

Polenov was not attracted to the socially conscious form of Wanderer realism, working as a landscape artist and painter of religious subjects. His quiet and intimate *Moscow Courtyard* captures a particularly northern silvery light that owes something to his *plein-air* French experience. At the more liberal Moscow College, Polenov briefly taught Isaak Levitan (1860–1904), who became Russia's leading landscape artist. Levitan studied and copied French



FIG. 1
ILYA REPIN
The Boatmen on the Volga, 1870–73
Oil on canvas
The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg
Photo Russia/Giraudon/
The Bridgeman Art Library

'There was something eastern and ancient about it ... the face of a Scyth ... He seemed to me a colossal mystery, and for that reason I loved him. Kanin, with a rag around his head, his clothes in patches made by himself and then worn out, appeared none the less as a man of dignity: he was like a saint.'
ILYA REPIN

'And the old lady herself sobbed and gesticulated, and she felt faint, too, and lay down on her trunk. Neither of them noticed that patches of blue had made their appearance in the sky, that the clouds were more transparent, that the first sunbeam was cautiously gliding over the wet grass in the garden, that with renewed gaiety the sparrows were hopping about the puddles which reflected the racing clouds.'
ANTON CHEKOV, BAD WEATHER

1
ISAAK LEVITAN
After the Rain, Plès, 1889
Oil on canvas
64.5 x 80.1 cm
The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Photo © The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

pictures, particularly admiring Camille Corot (1796–1875) in the collection of Pavel Tretyakov (1832–1898), the great patron of the Wanderers, who gave his vast collection to the city of Moscow in 1892.

Levitan's earlier work shows an understanding of the relationship of man to nature with all its fluctuating moods of weather and light. As he developed, his paintings took on an air of mystery, as though the vast and silent spaces of the Russian countryside embodied some spiritual power and as if the visible was a means of understanding the invisible. Levitan was a close friend of the writer Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) and both artists shared a feeling for landscape tinged with melancholy.

1 Levitan rarely included people in his landscapes, allowing the spectator an unfettered entry into his chosen view. In his depiction of the small town of Plès, a trading post on the mighty Volga, he suggests a narrative of activity that will be resumed when the sky has cleared. The broadly horizontal composition is broken by the forward thrust of the middle boat, whose bow, just left of centre, points towards the artist/viewer where the curve of the land allows a firm footing. The sense of moisture and changing light is captured through the dappled white of brushstrokes on the foreground water, which are matched in the scrubby vegetation at the right.

How do you think the distant boat and the church relate to each other in the composition?

What relationship does the light and breaking cloud have to the principal elements of the picture?



THE WORLD OF ART

During the 1880s Wanderer painting had become increasingly prescriptive, veering towards a chauvinistic representation of the country's history. A reaction was needed and it came from St Petersburg where Alexander Benois (1870–1960), Léon Bakst (1866–1924) and a group of like-minded friends formed the 'World of Art' in the early 1890s. Described as a society, an exhibiting organisation and a magazine, they sought to open up Russian art to Western influence, to escape the limitations of the Wanderer's philosophy, and to promote Russian art in the West. 'A creator must love only beauty; only with beauty can he converse as he softly and enigmatically brings out his divine nature', wrote their great impresario Sergei Diaghilev (1872–1929).

Many of their members travelled abroad, attracted by the Art Nouveau artists of Germany and France. It was these painters that were initially featured in the magazine started by Diaghilev in 1898, rather than the more radical European artists. Symbolist authors, with an interest in the relationship between the arts, also became involved with the magazine.

The World of Art attracted a wide range of artists. Among them, the portrait painter Valentin Serov (1865–1911) and the Impressionist-influenced Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939), who declared that his aim was 'to serve beauty, to influence viewers aesthetically, to charm with colour and form. Never any lectures to anyone, no tendentiousness, no protocols'.

One of the most original of these painters was Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910), who had been a brilliant student at the St Petersburg Academy. Recommended to work on the restoration of the wall paintings in a twelfth-century church in Kiev, Vrubel became absorbed in the traditions of Byzantine art. Here he found 'the ornamental arrangement of form, which emphasises the flatness of the wall'. A trip to Venice introduced him to the emphasis on colour that marked the city's painters but also the richness of Byzantine mosaics in St Marks. Vrubel drew on Russian literature and its fairy tale tradition to create images of psychological complexity, whose mood was enhanced by his emotional use of colour.

2 'I saw the Lord seated on a throne ... About him were attendant seraphim, and each had six wings.' Isaiah's vision of a group of angels that became renowned for the fervour of their love provides the subject for Vrubel's intense and richly coloured image. Closer to home, Alexander Pushkin's (1799–1837) early poem *The Prophet* describes how a traveller in search of spiritual grace encounters a seraph.

Vrubel orchestrates his picture through the use of closely related colours, the mosaic-like brushstrokes building up a swathe of fluttering colour sensation. The wings enclosing the body deny any real sense of form, emphasising the flatness of the image.

How does Vrubel vary his brushstroke when dealing with the figure?

**Do you feel this figure might be judging us?
If so, why do we have this impression?**

With the closure of the World of Art magazine in 1904 and the organisation of his last great exhibition of Russian art in Paris in 1906, Diaghilev turned his attention to the theatre. His productions of opera and ballet gave World of Art artists the opportunity to bring together music, movement, costume and set design into one unified whole. The highly coloured Oriental fantasies of Bakst, or the more sombre pantheism of Nikolai Roerich (1874–1947) would draw as much on their Russian inheritance as on the new influences of French art.

THE COLLECTORS

Ivan Morosov (1871–1921) came from a textile and banking family. His brother Mikhail collected the paintings of the French Impressionists while Ivan preferred Russian works. His brother's death in 1903 led Ivan to venture abroad, and often with the help of Russian artists he began to acquire Impressionist and Nabi paintings and, later, the works of Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). Uncertain of his judgement, he relied on dealers like Ambroise Vollard (1866–1939) to provide him with good examples of the artists he was interested in, and further help came from Sergei Shchukin (1854–1936).

Shchukin came from another textile family and was again encouraged by an older brother. Blessed with an exceptional eye, he started collecting in the 1890s, at first extremely conservatively, but as he came to understand the Impressionists, he moved on to more contemporary work. Rather like a swimmer jumping into water that might be too cold, Shchukin needed to recover from the shock of an unfamiliar acquisition. His first works by Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) were hidden away in a back room before he summoned up the courage to show them to visitors. As an importer of oriental textiles and with a brother who also collected Islamic art, he was attracted to the work of Henri Matisse (1869–1954). Buying his first painting by Matisse in 1904, his important commissions inspired radical developments in Matisse's own art. Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) was to come later, since when Matisse took Shchukin to see *Les Femmes d'Alger*, his response to Picasso's new painting was 'What a loss to French art'. Nevertheless, he was soon buying the artist's works, and while Picasso felt that Shchukin never understood the latest developments, Shchukin was undeterred and always caught up in the end.

Paul Gauguin gave up his comfortable life as a stockbroker to become a painter. Initially working and exhibiting with the Impressionists, he found the direct interpretation of nature too literal and began to work in a more synthetic, symbolical style. He drew his subject matter from the supposedly 'primitive' life of the peasants of Brittany and, using a flattened perspective, an emphasis on line and silhouette and areas of unmodulated colour, he created images with

**'A connoisseur of serene
and profound pleasures
whose favourite pastime
was visiting the Egyptian
antiquities in the Louvre.'
HENRI MATISSE
on Shchukin**

2

MIKHAIL VRUBEL

Six-Winged Seraph, 1904

Oil on canvas

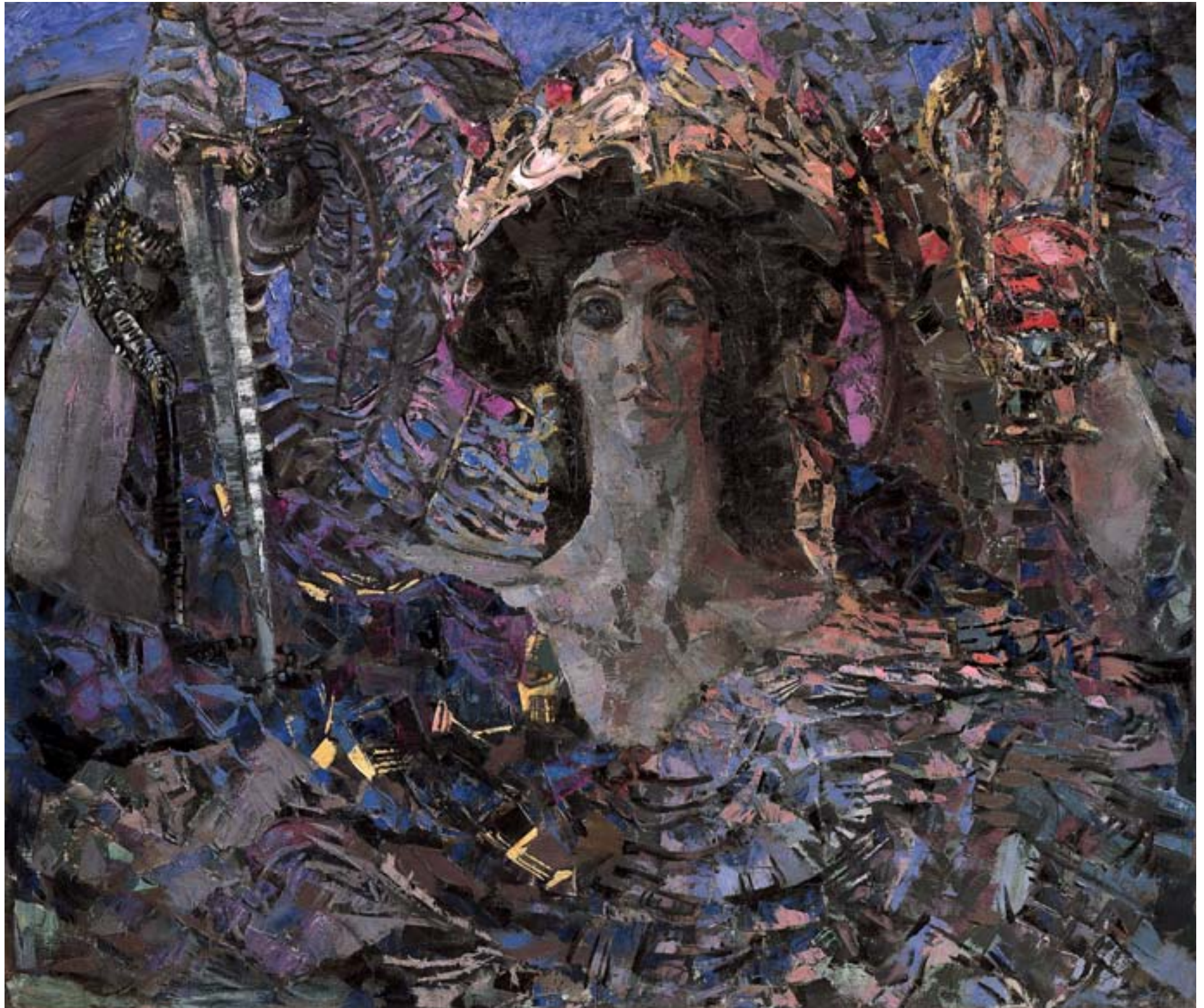
131 x 155 cm

The State Russian Museum,
St Petersburg

Photo © The State Russian
Museum, St Petersburg

'Rays of hope ... brief moments of ecstasy, of supersensitive intuition, which allow other interpretations of the phenomena of our world, penetrating deeper beyond their outer shell to their very core. The fundamental task of art really consists in engraving these brief moments of insight, of inspiration.'

VALERY BRYUSOV, 1904





'Art is an abstraction, extract it from nature, dreaming before it, and think more of the creation which will result than of nature.'
PAUL GAUGUIN, 1888

3
PAUL GAUGUIN
Her Name was Vairaumati, 1892

Oil on canvas
 91 x 68 cm
 The State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
 Photo © The State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

a dream-like quality. He said that 'everything happens in my wild imagination', and to feed that imagination he left for Tahiti in 1891 in search of an even more exotic primitivism.

Tahiti had been discovered by the West in 1767 and by the time Gauguin arrived, there was very little left of the original mythology, religion or art. Nevertheless, with the help of a book published in 1837, itself full of inaccurate speculation, Gauguin was determined to imagine an idealised paradise.

3 Attracted by descriptions of the Arioi, a priestly elite whose rituals were sexual as well as religious, Gauguin depicts the beautiful Vairaumati, beloved by the gods. Seated on a circular mound at the foot of a stone idol, which Gauguin had to invent, drawing on his photos of Buddhist and Cambodian art, Vairaumati's sideways pose is reminiscent of an Egyptian queen. In many of his Tahiti pictures Gauguin uses a more ordered sense of space, with the diagonal from bottom right to upper left leading us from foreground to middle and then to the distant house and trees. Only the closeness of the watchful attendant, with the emphasis on the silhouette of Vairaumati's shoulder and arm against red loincloth, creates a feeling of flatness.

How does Gauguin use the decorative elements and colour to bind the picture together?

Why do you think Gauguin avoids any suggestion of light in his picture?

Henri Matisse was released from his long apprenticeship as a painter of subdued still lifes and interiors by the revelation of the light and colour of the Mediterranean. Over many years he searched for ways of unifying colour and drawing. In 1905 he worked with André Derain (1880–1954) and others in the Mediterranean port of Collioure and the work they exhibited earned them the nickname 'Les Fauves' ('Wild Beasts'). In these paintings, Matisse drew with pure colour, avoiding all sense of tonal modelling, often allowing the opposition of red and green to create a vibrant intensity – an intensity that in many ways went against his desire for serenity and harmony. This he was to achieve in his famous *Red Room (Harmony in Red)* through the use of the arabesque patterns of one of his favourite textiles. Applying this pattern and colour scheme to table and wall, Matisse flattens the space, absorbing the silhouette of the woman's body into the overall rhythm. The stylised exterior offers nature's own patterns, and the opposition of red and green is softened by the yellow and orange window-sill and the pink of the distant building.

4 overleaf
HENRI MATISSE
Dance, 1910

Oil on canvas
 260 x 391 cm
 The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg
 Photo Archives Matisse, Paris
 © Succession H. Matisse/DACS 2008

4 *Dance* and *Music* were commissioned to decorate the staircase of Shchukin's Moscow palace. They brought to a climax a number of works in which Matisse sought to redefine the integrity of the human figure in response to the violence of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The simplicity of the setting and the brick-red colouring of the figures impart both a primitive and timeless quality to the scene, the Apollonian calm of *Music* contrasting with the Dionysian



energy of *Dance*. Here the linearity of the figures and their outstretched limbs create an arabesque of movement, forming an interplay between figure and ground, the curving line between blue and green echoing their circular motion.

How important is it that Matisse takes his figures to very edge of the canvas?

Which is the point of greatest tension in the picture?

Few painters had the ability to turn their borrowings from contemporaries, the art of the past or of another country into something original and completely their own as Picasso did. Cubism arose partly from his interest in the figural distortions of African sculpture and partly from the small distortions of form and space involved in Cézanne's use of multiple viewpoints. Picasso and his friend Georges Braque (1882–1963) explored the possibilities of analysing an object or human figure, observing it from a multiplicity of viewpoints and laying out these fragmented observations on different, closely interlocking planes. Denying any sense of perspective, these paintings trod a delicate balance between representation and abstraction.

In the early stages of Cubism, colour played little part, as the paintings were built up of closely related shades of brown and grey. The introduction of collage, applying scraps of newspaper or material and then strips of coloured paper, led to a change in approach. In what is known as 'Synthetic' Cubism the artist developed an abstract schema over which the elements of the object could be placed.

5 Picasso uses a grid of four vertical strips (which might have been pieces of paper but are here painted), on which to lay the elements of his violin. (Although titled *Violin and Guitar*, it is generally accepted that only a violin is represented.) The scroll and faintly drawn neck of the violin occupy the upper part, the bridge and more firmly indicated strings the middle, while the body of the violin bulges out to the left. The grid covers part of the shape of a circular black table on which sit two glasses, one containing a green liquid and two straws. The straws reach up to the wallpaper frieze whose pattern reflects the violin scroll and wittily appear to change its direction.

How many different ways has Picasso applied the paint to create different textures?

Does any part of the picture suggest real space?

By the time their active collecting came to an end in 1914, the collections of Shchukin and Morosov gave Moscow an unrivalled overview of the major strands of French painting from Impressionism to Cubism. No other city had either the quantity or the quality of their acquisitions.

'The surface was coloured to saturation, to the point where blue, the idea of absolute blue, was conclusively present. A bright green for the earth and a vibrant vermilion for the bodies. With these three colours I had my harmony of light and also purity of tone.'
HENRI MATISSE

'I paint forms as I think them, not as I see them.'
PABLO PICASSO

'Youths stood with mouths agape before the canvases of artists of the most extreme tendencies, like Eskimos listening to a gramophone.'
PRINCE SERGEI SHCHERBATOV on the student reaction to Shchukin's collection



5
PABLO PICASSO
Violin and Guitar,
c. 1912–13
Oil on canvas
65 x 54 cm
The State Hermitage Museum,
St Petersburg
Photo The State Hermitage
Museum, St Petersburg
© Succession Picasso/DACS 2008



6
MIKHAIL LARIONOV
Smoking Soldier,
1910-11

Oil on canvas
100 x 72.5 cm

The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Photo © The State Tretyakov
Gallery, Moscow
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London
2008

THE RUSSIAN RESPONSE

Russian political life had been thrown into turmoil by defeat in the 1904–5 war with Japan. Bloody repression of demonstrations against the autocratic rule of Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918) and the failure to institute land reform threatened to lead to full-scale revolution and Nicholas was forced to concede a parliament, known as the Duma. The liberalisation was more apparent than real, as he refused any meaningful changes, asserting the mystical communion of the Tsar with his obedient people as justification for his actions.

In 1906, as the pace of political change was hopefully accelerating, so too was Russia's exposure to French art. A group known as 'The Golden Fleece', founded in the same year, was to organise important exhibitions in 1908 and 1909 of the leading contemporary French painters. Their magazine published influential texts by Matisse and Maurice Denis (1870–1943), one of the leaders of the Nabi, who had provided decorations for Morosov's house. Among the Russian painters exhibiting alongside their French contemporaries was Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964).

Larionov's earlier work had been Impressionist in style, but, under the influence of the Fauves and Gauguin, his work took on a more strident 'primitive' tone. Larionov and his partner Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962) would emphasise the Russian qualities of their art, despite their clear borrowings from the French.

6 Larionov had done military service in 1910 and would produce a number of paintings based on his experience. This figure of a soldier owes its pose to one of Cézanne's portraits in the Shchukin collection. Cézanne's *Smoker* leans his elbow on a table, his hand against his head as he smokes a pipe. Larionov has produced a much flatter image, the sense of form indicated by the darker passages across the soldier's uniform. His brushstrokes have little of Cézanne's carefully modulated strokes of colour, the paint applied in a rougher, more arbitrary manner, and the exterior background merely sketched in.

Would you say this was a portrait or a representation of a 'type'?

How does the use of the red and the yellow work in the painting?

Larionov's other 'soldier' paintings were much cruder in their depiction of brutalised and bored men, whose figures were anatomically distorted and placed in ambiguous spatial relationships. He frequently introduced vulgar graffiti, scribbled over the painted surface. Larionov's attempts to develop a specific Russian primitivism were influenced by his love of the *lubok*, peasant woodcuts that dealt with a variety of subjects, often in a satirical manner. They too incorporated text, had similar figural distortion and a disregard for illusionistic perspective. Many of these aspects were derived from the tradition of icon painting, an important influence for Larionov, who collected over a 100 of them.

Icons played a large part in the emotional life of the Orthodox believer, since they both represented and evoked the presence of Christ, a saint or an event in sacred history (fig. 2). Their distinctive spatial organisation relied on line, silhouette and colour, with no developed perspective, so that different parts of the composition appear to exist on the same plane, although it was understood that figures or objects appearing above were further away. Endlessly copied, their basic structure changed very little over the centuries and even the humble village painter understood the established conventions. The most prized icon would hang across the so-called 'beautiful corner' of the main room and others would decorate the house.

Icons contributed to the art of Goncharova, who frequently painted religious pictures incorporating their stylisation of figures and spatial distortions. Another of her favourite subjects was the agricultural life of the peasants, which she had observed on the family's country estate. An example like fig. 3 shows her debt to French painting, with its strong saturated colour and ochre outlines, but also her interest in the repetitive designs of peasant embroidery. Her earlier painting, *Salt Pillars*, had been based on the stone *babas*, large statues found on the southern Russian Steppe.



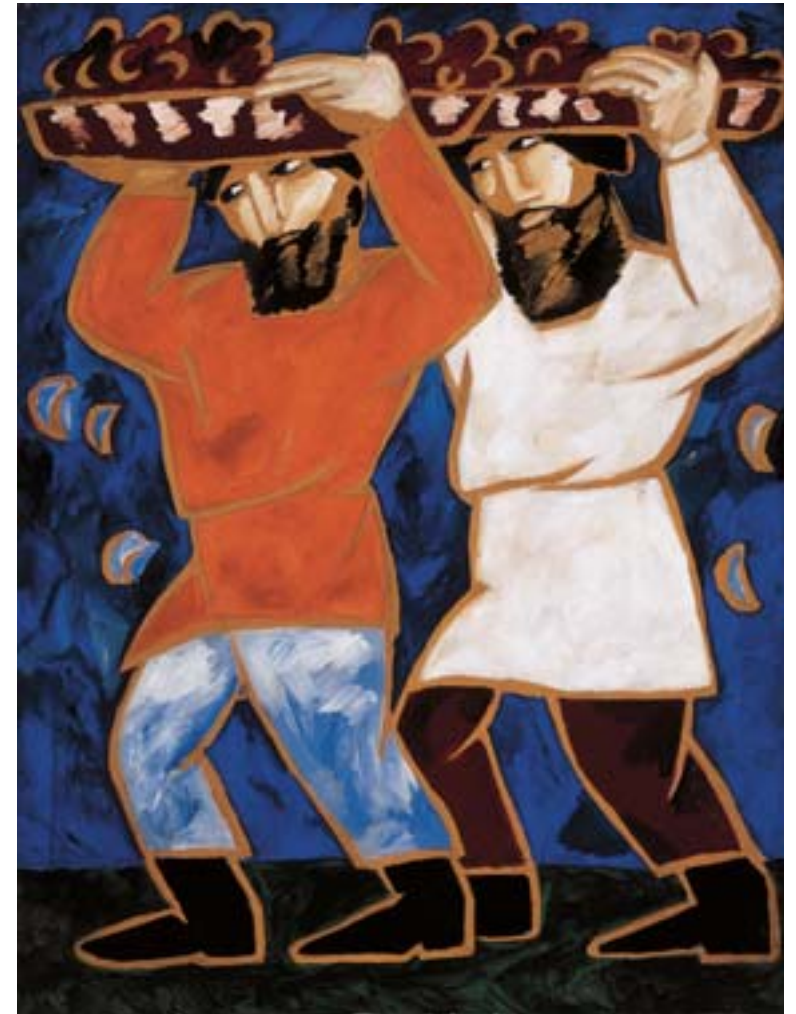
FIG. 2
Old Testament Trinity,
16th century icon by
Russian School

© University of Liverpool Art Gallery
& Collections, UK/The Bridgeman
Art Library

FIG. 3
NATALIA GONCHAROVA
Peasants, 1911

Oil on canvas
131 x 100.5 cm

The State Russian Museum,
St Petersburg
Photo © The State Russian
Museum, St Petersburg
© ADAGP, Paris and DACS,
London 2008



Larionov and Goncharova participated in the first 'Knave of Diamonds' exhibition in December 1910, in the hope of encouraging 'the deliberate simplification and vulgarisation of forms'. Later they broke with the other organisers accusing them of 'Cézannism', of being too much under the spell of the French artists. Among this group were Ilya Mashkov (1884–1944), whose *Portrait of Varvara Petrovna* shows his debt to Matisse, with its simplified drawing and brightly coloured decorative background. The more reserved work of Robert Falk (1886–1958), like his *Self-Portrait*, reflects his interest in Cézanne.

Larionov and Goncharova took with them two important newcomers, Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), who was exploring peasant subjects refracted through his interest in a wide range of French art, and Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), an artist more influenced by the icon tradition, who flattened the space in his pictures, his figures elaborated through simplified curves and arcs.



7
WASSILY KANDINSKY
 Lake, 1910

Oil on canvas
 98 x 103 cm

The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
 Photo © The State Tretyakov Gallery,
 Moscow
 © ADAGP, Paris and DACS,
 London 2008

'Technically, every work of art comes into being in the same way as the cosmos – by means of catastrophes, which ultimately create out of the cacophony of the various instruments that symphony we call the music of the spheres. The creation of the work of art is the creation of the World.'
WASSILY KANDINSKY, 1913

KANDINSKY

Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) had shown at the Knave of Diamonds exhibitions, along with other artists from the German school. He had abandoned his early career in law and political economy to study art in Munich in 1896. Open to Western influences, he was also deeply attached to a romanticised view of old Russia, and his early work consists of imagined historical scenes, in many of which he included references to the shamans of Russia's pagan past.

After an unsatisfactory time in Paris in 1906–7, during which Kandinsky failed to respond to the city's art, he returned to the small town of Murnau in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps. Here Kandinsky began to abstract the shapes of the townscape and surrounding country in the search for a non-descriptive, more spiritual form of painting. He had been influenced by Theosophy, a set of ideas popularised by Helena Blavatsky (1831–91), that drew on Greek philosophy and Chinese and Indian religion. One of its aims was the study and development of the latent divine powers in man, an evolution towards a higher spiritual consciousness that conceived of 'thought forms' generated by spiritual energy. To give his work a sense of structure he drew on current ideas that related music to painting, sound to colour, that obsessed the composer Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915) and were developed by many Russian symbolist writers.

7 In this painting Kandinsky is poised between figuration and abstraction. From a high vantage point, we recognise the three crescent-shaped boats, the three rowers in each boat with three visible oars. The boats move over the dark and forbidding water towards the other shore whose shapes have been abstracted beyond recognition. Is there a yellow landing strip huddled at the base of a mountain, a red sun emerging through streaky clouds? On the lake, possibly a boat with a red bow, slips in front of the image of a church, taken from an icon.

Do you feel the image of the church holds the composition together?

Do you think this painting might describe some kind of a spiritual journey?

At the start of the First World War, Kandinsky, like many Russian painters moved back to the homeland. It was to be a comparatively unproductive period for Kandinsky, during which he kept his distance from those artists moving towards abstraction.

CUBO-FUTURISM

This fusion of elements of Cubism (the handling of pictorial space, the fragmentation of the object) with the more active elements of Italian Futurism (concepts of movement, speed, machinery and urbanisation) was a distinctive

Russian contribution to the avant-garde. One of its distinguishing features was the number of women artists involved in its development. Some had the opportunity to travel and absorb these concepts directly. Alexandra Exter (1882–1949) first visited Paris in 1907 and learnt about Cubism from contact with its inventors. Exter's attitude to colour meant that she could never embrace its disciplines with any enthusiasm, but she adapted ideas from Paris and her knowledge of Futurist painters to create her own individual works. *City at Night* grows from the recognisable buildings at top and edge into a kaleidoscopic display of colours and forms, bouncing off each other and conveying a vital rhythmic energy.

Nadezhda Udaltsova (1886–1961) and Lyubov Popova (1889–1924) studied the theory and practice of Cubism at La Palette Academy in Paris during 1912 and 1913. Of the two, Udaltsova is the more faithful to Cubist principles, although using them not to analyse an object, but rather as a means of constructing a painting. *Restaurant* reduces her two diners to sharply etched geometrical shapes. The strong linearity of the composition, with vertical and diagonal lines, splits objects and space into small areas of muted colour that develop an overall rhythmic unity.

8 Popova's portrait of her younger brother incorporates Cubist fragmentation but also the suggestion of futurist movement. The head, spaced out over a number of different planes, conveys a multiplicity of responses to the modern world. Through the use of dynamic diagonal lines, Popova builds up triangular shapes that overlap and play off against each other. By lightening the tone or changing the colour along certain edges, many of these shapes project energetically forward into space, contributing a vibrant quality to the painting.

How does Popova's use of similar elements move your eye around the painting?

What is the feeling created by her choice of colour?

Olga Rozanova (1886–1918) lacked the opportunity to travel, but copied Picasso's *Guitar and Violin* in the Shchukin collection. Her partner was Alexei Kruchenykh (1886–1968), one of the leading Futurist poets. In the same way that painters fragmented their images, so writers explored language to find associations 'beyond meaning'. Known as 'zaum', this poetry employed street slang, infantile expression and jumbled up words that were frequently broken down into their component syllables, to reach beyond the conscious mind.

Futurist poets owed something to Larionov's disregard for accepted conventions, and he provided illustrations for their early books. He and Goncharova's contribution to the move towards abstraction was a short-lived style known as 'Rayonism', which built on Futurist ideas of light and colour. By 1914, their influence on their contemporaries was waning and when they left Russia to join Diaghilev in Paris, leadership of the avant-garde passed into other hands.

8
LYUBOV POPOVA
Portrait of a Philosopher,
1915

Oil on canvas
89 x 63 cm

The State Russian Museum,
St Petersburg
Photo © The State Russian
Museum, St Petersburg

'Artists have always been knights, poets, and prophets of space, in all times. Sacrificing to everyone, dying, they were opening eyes and teaching the crowd to see the great beauty of the world concealed from it. So it is now; Cubism has raised the flag of the New Dimension, of the new learning about the merging of time and space.'

MIKHAIL MATYUSHIN,
1913





9
KAZIMIR MALEVICH
Suprematism, 1915
Oil on canvas
87.5 x 72 cm
The State Russian Museum,
St Petersburg
Photo © The State Russian
Museum, St Petersburg

MALEVICH AND ABSTRACTION

Despite never having the opportunity to travel abroad, Malevich absorbed practically every Western influence that Russian painters were exposed to, but did it with the sure-footed agility of an artist who senses his ultimate goal. A famous photograph of Malevich's contribution to the exhibition *0.10* shows *Black Square* hung across one corner of the gallery in the manner of an icon. Surrounding it, and in a sense deriving from it, are twenty other paintings in a style that Malevich called Suprematism, by which he meant that it superseded other forms of art. The square for Malevich was pregnant with possibilities, of other geometrical shapes that related to it, of ideal and harmonious proportions that could be put to use in this new 'objectless' form of painting, to express current philosophical and scientific ideas.

In 1909, the Russian theosophist Peter Ouspensky published his book *The Fourth Dimension* in which he proposed that time exists spatially, arguing that events 'must exist before and after their accomplishment and be, as it were, on the same plane'. 'Moments of different epochs, divided by long stretches of time, exist simultaneously and may be adjacent.' (The French writer Marcel Proust would, on a personal level, have readily endorsed these ideas.) Access to this dimension would expand man's spiritual possibilities and extend control over his life. Malevich's interest in the idea of control over nature can be seen in his participation in the futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, performed twice in December 1913. Malevich designed the sets and costumes in a Cubo-Futurist manner, making use of black squares, divided squares, etc., while Kruchenykh wrote the libretto and the composer-painter Mikhail Matyushin (1861–1934) provided the music. Involving time travellers, an aviator and a strongman, the significance of *Victory over the Sun* lay in man's control over time and his escape from the sun's daily and annual rhythm.

9 This painting is the most dynamic and varied in its forms and colours of all the work that Malevich showed in 1915. Its centre of gravity lies in the red rectangle on which the dynamic blue V rests. Behind both, the tilting black bar releases a scurry of tiny forms to the right and pushes towards the upper part of the painting. The work has much of the rhythmic energy that was present in Malevich's paintings of peasants, and we might be tempted to see some representation of human movement. But the yellow trapezoid shape that hovers freely in the upper half also suggests a feeling of weightlessness, and Malevich associated Suprematism with the idea of flying, stating that in man's consciousness 'there is a striving toward space. An urge to take off from the earth.'

Do you see any significance in the three small squares in each of the primary colours?

How many different ways do the forms interact with each other?

Malevich and Tatlin had quarrelled over the organisation of *O. 10*, Tatlin objecting to what he considered the amateurism of Malevich's new paintings. He himself was showing a number of his reliefs, constructed from real materials like tin, wood, iron or string. These were prompted by an earlier visit to Paris where he had seen Picasso's Cubist sculptures. But Tatlin was not concerned with representation, but rather with an investigation into the nature of the materials (in a similar manner to the 'zaum' analysis of language) and the resolution of their conflicting qualities in a construction that established its own spatial parameters.

THE REVOLUTION AND AFTER

Entry into the First World War and Russia's failure to check the German advance had sealed Tsar Nicholas's fate and he was forced to abdicate in March 1917. Divisions within the groups that made up the Provisional Government and its refusal to seek peace allowed the Bolsheviks to take control in October of the same year under the leadership of Lenin (1870–1924).

One of Lenin's early steps in 1918 was the appointment of the broad-minded and cultured Anatoly Lunarcharsky (1875–1933) to oversee education and the arts. Purchasing works for the thirty-six new museums set up around the country in the next three years, Lunarcharsky bought many examples from the avant-garde, arguing that these were artists 'who were outlawed during the reign of bourgeois taste'. While in no sense social revolutionaries, the artists themselves saw the opportunity to influence people's lives and redefine the position of the artist in society. Putting easel painting to one side, they threw themselves into revolutionary propaganda, designing posters, decorating 'agit-prop' trains and staging re-enactments of revolutionary events. Through involvement in education and theatre, and a wide range of industrial design, whether of textiles, pottery or furniture, their taste infiltrated Russian visual culture.

The opportunity to fulfil their aims was of course short lived. In 1922 the foundation of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia harked back to the more reactionary ideals of Wanderer realism, and in ten years their version of 'Soviet heroism' would become the dominant form of expression. Tatlin's model for his *Monument to the Illrd International* is an iconic image of an unrealised dream. Its dynamic spiral was designed to incorporate a cylinder, a cone and a cube, each rotating at different speeds and housing different activities, proclaiming the mastery of the 'New Man' over his environment.

CONCLUSION

An exhibition like this demonstrates that art feeds on art, that all artists draw on the work of their immediate and recent contemporaries or on the art of the past to find new solutions to creative expression. Another theme is the way in which art reflects a national consciousness. Many of these artists wished to explore their sense of being Russian, and the experience of the revolution showed the desire of artists to change people's lives, to affect their way of thinking. How successful they might have been is an unanswered question, but the nervousness of a repressive regime confronted by the avant-garde could still be felt in 1959 when the Royal Academy of Arts, in collaboration with the British Council, held an exhibition of Russian art. No works produced between 1906 and 1925 were shown and the visitor moved seamlessly from a painting by Benois to early examples of Soviet Realism, while at the same time many of the masterpieces from Shchukin's and Morosov's collections languished in museum storerooms.

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