

VISIONS OF RUSSIAN MODERNISM: CHALLENGING NARRATIVES OF IMITATION, INFLUENCE, AND PERIPHERY _____

Introduction

Allison Leigh

During the reign of Peter the Great (1682–1725), Russian artists first began reflecting on the art styles prevalent in the major western European capitals. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, artists were more frequently traveling to cities like Rome, Paris, and London. They often used what they saw abroad to grow their artistic skill, but they also occasionally expressed anxiety about what they perceived to be Russian art's belatedness compared to her western neighbors. Initially, Rome was the preferred destination for artists; it was seen as the font of classicism. Painters, printmakers, sculptors, and architects alike were sent there to hone their abilities. By the 1860s, Paris had become the new destination of choice, though many Russian artists also visited London, as well as various cities in Germany.¹ Throughout the nineteenth century, members of the intelligentsia expressed concern over the influence this was having on Russian art and literature. In the late 1820s, Petr Chaadaev, one of the most vocal exponents of the notion that Russia lagged behind her western neighbors, declared that the nation was: “confined to a blind, superficial, [and] often awkward imitation of other nations.”² Even some fifty years later, critics like Vladimir Stasov still found it necessary to defend against the notion that Russian artists were “mere copyists and followers” and the idea that “Russian art is nothing more than ... a reflection of what originated and developed so vigorously in the West.”³

The conventional assumption that Russian art has been heavily influenced by western styles and artistic movements is, therefore, not a new one. In fact, the idea became prevalent in much of the scholarship that was produced in the twentieth century, leading even experts like S. Frederic Starr to describe

1. Rosalind P. Blakesley, “Slavs, Brits and the Question of National Identity in Art: Russian Responses to British Painting in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” in *English Accents: Interactions with British Art c. 1776–1855*, Christiana Payne and William Vaughan, eds. (Burlington, VT, 2004), 203.

2. Petr Chaadaev, *Philosophical Works of Peter Chaadaev*, Raymond T. McNally and Richard Tempest, eds. (Dordrecht, Netherlands, 1991), 23.

3. Stasov, “Twenty-Five Years of Russian Art” (*Dvadtsat’-piat’ let russkogo iskusstva. Nasha zhivopis’*), *Evropeiskii vestnik* (Nov.-Dec., 1882) (Feb., June, Oct. 1883). Translated in Elizabeth Valkenier and Wendy Salmond, eds., *Russian Realist Painting. The Peredvizhniki: An Anthology* (Los Angeles, 2008), 318.

Russian art as “remarkably subject to Western European influences.”⁴ Rising parallel with this sensibility, the study of the transnational networks connecting Russia and the west became especially popular in the last two decades, leading to several important publications.⁵ Projects like this one were followed by the recent intensive studies by leading scholars like Rosalind Blakesley and Molly Brunson.⁶ These works struck a careful balance between examining the unique qualities of Russia’s national tradition while still providing a nuanced and transactional historiographic perspective on artists’ indebtedness to foreign conventions.

The cluster of articles contained in this issue of *Slavic Review* continues this work by exploring the ways that Russian artists from the second half of the nineteenth century responded to the work of their west European counterparts. Aligned with the ongoing demand to take a more global approach to the study of both nineteenth-century art and literature, all three articles challenge longstanding notions of Russian art as constantly beleaguered by “the heavy imposition of Western influence.”⁷ In the interest of this goal, each author focuses discussion not only on the ways that the artists and authors under investigation were affected by their exposure to western styles and subjects. They each also methodically consider the ways Russian artists produced work that variously aligned with, departed from, or capitalized on the aesthetic preoccupations of their more well-known French and British counterparts. In this sense, each author is invested in challenging the narratives of imitation and influence that produced the modernist canon (and its concomitant exclusions and blind spots).

Writing along similar lines, Partha Mitter has described how the study of influence “as an art historical category ... ignores significant aspects of cultural encounters, especially the enriching value of the cross-fertilization of cultures that has nourished societies since time immemorial.”⁸ Through careful studies of individual artists and the cultural milieus they immersed themselves in, each article in the cluster explores the kinds of complicated cultural encounters that Mitter described—all in the interest of restoring to the history of modernism a greater pluralism and more accurate sense of artistic heterogeneity. Beginning this effort, the cluster opens with my essay on Il’ia

4. S. Frederic Starr, “Russian Art and Society, 1800–1850,” in Theofanis George Stavrou, ed., *Art and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Bloomington, 1983), 88.

5. There are numerous examples of this kind of scholarship, including works like: Rosalind Blakesley and Susan Reid, eds., *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts* (DeKalb, IL, 2007); Jane Sharp, *Russian Modernism Between East and West: Natal’ia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Eng., 2006); Dmitrii Shvidkovskii, *Russian Architecture and the West* (New Haven, 2007); and Russell Bova, *Russia and Western Civilization: Cultural and Historical Encounters* (New York, 2015).

6. Rosalind Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757–1881* (New Haven, 2016); Molly Brunson, *Russian Realisms: Literature and Painting, 1840–1890* (DeKalb, IL, 2016).

7. John E. Bowlt, “Russian Painting in the Nineteenth Century,” in Stavrou, ed., *Art and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Russia*, 136.

8. Mitter, “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *The Art Bulletin* 90, No. 4 (Dec., 2008): 538.

Repin and the three years he spent studying in Paris between 1873 and 1875, a time in which he was exposed to a great amount of French modernist painting and during which he created a singular work entitled *Un café du boulevard*. Exploring the development of Repin's painting in relation to more well-known works by the French artist Edouard Manet, the essay shows that Repin did not consider his painting practice as inferior or subordinate to what was being produced in the hegemonic mega-center of Paris. Instead, he found ways to negotiate his position as both an artist from the eastern "periphery" and a painter of cosmopolitan modernity. He made strong claims about being a vital part of a shared modern culture.

Viktoria Paranyuk examines the practice of the landscape painter Arkhip Kuindzhi along similar lines, putting his paintings in dialogue with western modes of display and embedding his works in contemporary scientific knowledge regarding sensory perception. Kuindzhi desired to create environments for viewing his paintings based on the physiology of vision then being explored by Fëdor Petrushevskii and Hermann von Helmholtz. What becomes clear from Paranyuk's discussion are the ways Kuindzhi cannot be considered a passive imitator of western trends. Instead, her investigation highlights how Kuindzhi was actively participating in shifting paradigms of representation that align him more with the innovators of European modernism than with the masters of Russian realism, his contemporaries back home. The cluster concludes with Daria Ezerova's investigation of visual and conceptual resonances between the Russian Symbolists and the British Pre-Raphaelites. Where most scholars have seen the relationship between these Russian poets and painters and their British counterparts as passively derivative and largely imitative, Ezerova reexamines the works of Vladimir Solov'ev, Mikhail Vrubel', and Aleksandr Blok to show how each participated in the circulation of ideas then occurring in the larger cultural sphere.

As in my essay on Repin and in Paranyuk's on Kuindzhi, what comes to the fore in Ezerova's article are the ways that Russian artists of the second half of the nineteenth century did not perceive themselves as members of a cultural periphery. Instead, all the artists and writers under discussion in the cluster force us to reconsider what Anne Lounsbury has called "the ambiguities of Russia's situation."⁹ Wholly belonging neither to the east nor the west and not easy to conceptualize as on the periphery due to its enormity, Russia and her artists occupy an extremely unusual position on the world cultural stage. And, as Ezerova points out in her essay, none of the artists under discussion considered themselves insufficiently modern either, in fact what comes to the fore in the cluster are the ways Russian modernism might better be viewed as a self-standing phenomenon, one that was potentially "ahead" of European modernism in ways that have gone largely undetected.

In a larger sense, this reexamination of established narratives for conceptualizing both Russian culture and modernism more broadly proves the conceptual framework that binds the articles together both thematically and conceptually. Each article forces a reconsideration of the biases that have

9. Anne Lounsbury, "Mirovaia literatura' i Rossiia," trans. O. Naumova, *Voprosy literatury*, vol. 5 (2014): 9–24.

inherited to studies of modernism in the Russian context—a subject that has been the focus of much recent scholarship and resonates well beyond the fields of art history and literary studies.¹⁰ All three articles also share the use of specific methodological approaches that assist in their effort to overturn what Partha Mitter once called “the embedded hierarchy implied by the modernist canon.”¹¹ Each author brings to the fore translations of primary source materials hitherto unavailable in English. In my case, this takes the form of excerpts from the letters of Repin and his fellow realist painter Ivan Kramskoi. In Paranyuk’s article, she highlights the accounts of Kuindzhi’s contemporaries, provides translations from portions of letters, and also translates sections of the handbook for painters written by Fëdor Petrushevskii. Likewise, Ezerova features vital selections from Vrubel’s letters that shed light on his admiration for the Renaissance Venetian masters and the Russo-Byzantine tradition.

This shared social historical approach is mirrored by each author’s potent use of visual analysis. By consistently returning to vigorous descriptions of the paintings under consideration, the authors constantly foreground the art that is at the center of each discussion. Throughout the cluster, this combined emphasis on artists’ writings *and* their artworks restores a sense of agency to the producers themselves, allowing their voices to underscore directly the way that ideas and forms that were exchanged under the condition of modernity influenced the works they created. In the end, the cluster as a whole challenges the conventional narrative of Russia’s peripheral modernism by recalibrating our idea of what it meant for Russian artists to be “influenced” by the styles, subjects, and techniques of their west European counterparts. By highlighting the uniqueness and specificity of each artist’s engagement with modernist discourse, what becomes apparent is just how plural, chaotic, and hybrid modernism actually was—and continues to be.

10. Besides those sources contained elsewhere in these notes, just a few of the most notable works on this topic include: Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, 1987); Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Tony Pinkney, ed. (London, 1996); Harsha Ram, “Futurist Geographies: Uneven Modernities and the Struggle for Aesthetic Autonomy: Paris, Italy, Russia, 1909–1914,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough, eds. (Oxford, 2012); and Piotr Piotrowski, “East European Art Peripheries Facing Post-Colonial Theory,” *nonsite.org*, December 2014, at <http://nonsite.org/article/east-european-art-peripheries-facing-post-colonial-theory> (accessed August 1, 2016).

11. Mitter, “Decentering Modernism,” 532.