Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art

New Perspectives

EDITED BY LOUISE HARDIMAN AND NICOLA KOZICHAROW

MODERNISM
AND THE SPIRITUAL
IN RUSSIAN ART

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Acknowledgements

Above all, we are grateful to our authors for enriching this book with their outstanding research and writing, and for sharing our interest in its theme. The project to publish this book evolved from discussions at a conference, 'On the Spiritual in Russian Art', which we organised at Pembroke College, Cambridge, on 7–8 September 2012, in honour of the centenary of the publication of Vasily Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* (1910–12). The event was the first international symposium to be hosted at the University of Cambridge by the Cambridge Courtauld Russian Art Centre (CCRAC), an academic collaboration established by Rosalind P. Blakesley of the Department of History of Art at the University of Cambridge and Professor John Milner of The Courtauld Institute with the goal of promoting and supporting Russian and Soviet art scholarship in Britain.[1] This volume reflects many of the values which the centre has sought to promulgate in the years since its founding in 2011, and stands as lasting testament to the stimulating dialogue that took place at the inaugural conference. We would like to thank the speakers and delegates, and especially Rosalind Blakesley, Richard Marks, Maria Mileeva, John Milner, Robin Milner-Gulland, and Elizabeth Valkenier for contributing to a memorable two days. Our keynote speakers, Wendy Salmond and Oleg Tarasov, not only gave outstanding presentations but have encouraged us throughout the process of the ensuing book project, and we are delighted to include chapters based on their papers here. We thank the funders of the conference for their support: the British Association for Slavonic and Eastern European Studies (BASEES); the George Macaulay Trevelyan Fund, Faculty of History, University of Cambridge; and the Department of History of Art, Cambridge. We also gratefully acknowledge the award of a Publication Grant from the Scouloudi Foundation in association with the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, towards the costs of this book. At Open Book Publishers, we are indebted to Alessandra Tosi, Bianca Gualandi, Lucy Barnes, and our cover designer, Heidi Coburn. We thank Alessandra and all those others who gave invaluable feedback on the manuscript at various phases of its creation, and two independent peer reviewers for their constructive comments. Finally, we thank our families, friends, and colleagues for their patience, encouragement, and unstinting support (and, of course, those of our authors); they have all played their part in the making of this book.

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1   For more information, visit: http://www.ccrac.org.uk. John Milner has since stepped down from his role as co-director, and this position is held by Dr Maria Mileeva of The Courtauld Institute.

Notes on Transliteration and Conventions

This book uses a modified form of the Library of Congress transliteration system with some exceptions. For readability, we leave out diacritical marks from proper names and nouns (e.g., Vrubel) in the main text, but maintain these in footnotes. Patronymics of Russian names are not used, and when a Russian name or place has a conventional or generally known transliteration that differs from the Library of Congress System, this has been used (e.g., Alexandre Benois, not Aleksandr Benua, and Nicholas Roerich rather than Nikolai Rerikh; Tretyakov Gallery). We use 'y' instead of 'ii' or 'yi' (Kandinsky, not Kandinskii), except for the titles of Russian texts in the footnotes. Standard western names are used for Russian rulers (Peter the Great, Nicholas I) and places (Moscow, Munich); however, we use the Ukrainian transliteration Kyiv, rather than Kiev. If an alternative method of transliteration has been used in a quotation from a source or in a source citation, this is upheld. We also maintain original spelling in quotations, rather than altering these to reflect British English. When the title of a publication or an artistic group appears for the first time in the main text, its translated name in English is used together with a transliteration of the Russian in parentheses; when the title is used again later, only its translation is stated. However, in the footnotes and bibliography, only the transliteration is given, with no English translation. When quoting Russian text in footnotes, original orthography has been used wherever possible, including pre-1917 spellings upheld in emigration (such as 'ago', rather than the currently used form, 'ogo'). This older orthography is used to maintain the integrity of émigré texts, but at the same time, letters which were eliminated after the Revolution, such as 'i', are not used. Translations of quotations are the author's own unless stated otherwise in the footnotes.

Contributors

Sebastian Borkhardt studied History of Art, East Slavonic Philology, and Religious Studies in Tübingen and St Petersburg. After completing his MA, he began doctoral research at the University of Tübingen. His dissertation examines the role of the Russian roots of Vasily Kandinsky in the reception of the artist's work in Germany and is supervised by Professors Eva Mazur-Keblowski (Tübingen) and Ada Raev (Bamberg). Borkhardt has received scholarships from the State Graduate Funding (*Landesgraduiertenförderung*) of Baden-Württemberg and the German National Academic Foundation (*Studienstiftung des deutschen Volkes*). His research interests include modernism, with a particular focus on Russian art, as well as reception history, human-animal studies, and contemporary museum practice. Borkhardt is a member of the Russian Art and Culture Group based at Jacobs University in Bremen (http://russian-art.user.jacobs-university.de) and co-editor of the 2017 issue of *Experiment: A Journal of Russian Culture* which is dedicated to the memory of Dmitry Sarabyanov.

Jennifer Brewin is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge. Her research, supervised by Dr Rosalind Polly Blakesley, explores the interaction of painting and national politics in Soviet Georgia under Stalin. Her research interests include all areas of Russian and Soviet art. She received her MA in History of Art from The Courtauld Institute of Art (2011) and her BA in Russian and History of Art from the University of Bristol (2008). She is a member of the advisory board of the Courtauld Cambridge Russian Art Centre (CCRAC). Her research is funded by the Lander PhD Studentship at Pembroke College, Cambridge.

Nina Gurianova is Associate Professor at the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, and Comparative Literary Studies Program at Northwestern University (USA). Her scholarship in the fields of literature and art history encompasses both Russian and European modernist and avant-garde movements, with a specific emphasis on the interrelation of aesthetics and politics. She has authored and edited six books on the Russian avant-garde and published extensively in Europe, the United States, and Russia. Gurianova served as the primary exhibition consultant for the Guggenheim Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and participated in

the organisation of many exhibitions. Gurianova's most recent book, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012) won the AATSEEL Best Book in Literary/Cultural Studies annual award. Her research was supported by the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities at Northwestern University, the Society of Fellows at Harvard University, the William F. Milton Fund, IREX, the National Humanities Center, and the National Endowment for Humanities. Currently she is working on a monograph, *New Art and Old Faith*, which explores in depth the themes outlined in her chapter.

Louise Hardiman is an art historian specialising in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian art. She is a graduate of the universities of Oxford, London, and Cambridge, where she completed a PhD on the history of Russian Arts and Crafts in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Her primary research concerns the history of the 'neo-national' movement and Anglo-Russian cultural exchange. She was consultant and catalogue contributor for the exhibition A Russian Fairy Tale: The Art and Craft of Elena Polenova (Watts Gallery, Guildford, 2014–15), and is the editor of Elena Polenova, *Why the Bear Has no Tail and other Russian Folk Tales* (London: Fontanka, 2014) and *The Story of Synko-Filipko and other Russian Folk Tales* (London: Fontanka, forthcoming). In 2016–17 she held a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art to work on her book *The Firebird's Flight: Russian Art in Britain, 1851–1917*.

Nicola Kozicharow is the Schulman Research Fellow at Trinity Hall, Cambridge and an Affiliated Lecturer in History of Art at the University of Cambridge. She is a specialist in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and Russian art, and her current book project is entitled *Visual Culture and the Construction of Russian Émigré Identity*. Her research has recently been sponsored by the Getty Research Institute and the Likhachev Foundation. Kozicharow received her PhD and MPhil from the University of Cambridge, and holds an MA from University College London, and a BA in History of Art (Honors) and Slavic Studies from Brown University.

Myroslava M. Mudrak is Emerita Professor of the History of Art at The Ohio State University. Her research centres on modernist art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with special emphasis on avant-garde and abstract art in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Ukraine. Her primary interest is in the ideological discourses, socio-political influences, and artistic practices within East European cultures that use modernity to signify national identity. Mudrak has curated and produced catalogues for two historic exhibitions at The Ukrainian Museum in New York: Borys Kosarev: Modernist Kharkiv, 1915–31 (2012) and Staging the Ukrainian Avant-Garde 1910s–1920s (2015), the latter winning the prestigious Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Award for Smaller Museums, Libraries, Collections, and Exhibitions, under the auspices of the College Art Association in 2016. Mudrak's publications include essays on Ukrainian Dada and Dissidence, Propaganda Pavilions, the Ukrainian Studio of Plastic Arts in

Prague, Panfuturism, Constructivism, David Burliuk, and 'Neue Slowenische Kunst and the Semiotics of Suprematism'. Her seminal work, *New Generation and Artistic Modernism in Ukraine* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1986), soon to be published in a Ukrainian translation, was awarded the Kovaliw Prize for Ukrainian Studies.

Natalia Murray has a PhD from the Courtauld Institute of Art, and prior to this she studied History of Art at the Academy of Fine Arts in St Petersburg and completed the PhD course at the Hermitage Museum. In 2012 she wrote her monograph, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde. The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin (1888–1953)* (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic, 2012). At present she is lecturing on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian art at The Courtauld Institute of Art, the Art Fund, and The Arts Society; she also works as head of education and public programmes at GRAD (Gallery for Russian Art and Design), and curates exhibitions of Russian art in England. She recently curated a major exhibition for the Royal Academy of Arts entitled Revolution: Russian Art 1917–32 (11 February–17 April 2017) and is now editing her next book, on the subject of post-revolutionary festivals in Petrograd.

Wendy Salmond is Professor of Art and Art History at Chapman University, CA. She has written and lectured extensively on Russian and Soviet art, the Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau, and Russian modernism. Her current project is a book tracing transformations in the perception and function of icons in Russia, from objects of devotion to works of art. Salmond has been a guest curator of exhibitions at Hillwood Museum and Gardens, Washington, DC (Tradition in Transition: Russian Icons in the Age of the Romanovs, 2004) and The New York Public Library (Russia Imagined, 1825–1925: The Art and Impact of Fedor Solntsev, 2006). She is a prolific translator of texts on Russian art and culture, and has edited volumes on the sculptor Sergei Konenkov, the Bolshevik sales of Russian art in the 1920s and 1930s, and the reception of Art Nouveau in Russia.

Oleg Tarasov is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. He has an MA in History and a PhD in History and Theory of Arts from Moscow State University and a PhD in History from the Russian Academy of Sciences. Tarasov is the author of *Icon and Devotion. Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), *Framing Russian Art: From Early Icons to Malevich* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), and *Modern i drevnie ikony: Ot sviatyni k shedevru* (*Art Nouveau and Ancient Icons: From Sacred Object to Masterpiece*) (Moscow: Indrik, 2016). He is also a consultant and catalogue contributor for many exhibitions including Picture and Frame (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2014).

Maria Taroutina is Assistant Professor of Art History at Yale–NUS College in Singapore. She received her PhD in 2013 from Yale University and has published a number of articles and essays on the art and architecture of Imperial and early Soviet Russia. She is also co-editor, with Roland Betancourt, of *Byzantium/Modernism: The*

Byzantine as Method in Modernity (Leiden: Brill, 2015). Her first sole-authored book monograph, provisionally titled *The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival*, is forthcoming with Pennsylvania State University Press. It charts the rediscovery and reassessment of medieval Russian and Byzantine representation in Russia in the years 1860–1920. Currently, she is working on another edited volume, which will address new narratives and methodologies in Russian and Eastern European art.

1. Introduction:
Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art

Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharow

It also belongs to my definition of Modernism […] that art, that aesthetic experience no longer needs to be justified in other terms than its own, that art is an end in itself and that the aesthetic is an autonomous value. It could now be acknowledged that art doesn't have to teach, doesn't have to celebrate or glorify anybody or anything, doesn't have to advance causes; that it has become free to distance itself from religion, politics, and even morality. All it has to do is be good as art.

Clement Greenberg[1]

In his 1961 text 'Modernist Painting' and other writings since, renowned art critic Clement Greenberg contended that the significance of modernist painting lay precisely in its aesthetic qualities. The autonomy granted to an artwork rendered factors outside of its formal aspects, such as artistic intention, tangential to its meaning or value. Art was now free from religious, political, or moral content and ideas, however strongly intended or present. Greenberg's theory of formalist modernism has been criticised at length since the 1960s, yet scholars still find it necessary to refute it, especially in discussions of the importance of spirituality or religion in the history of modern art, showing its lasting power.[2] For Russian modernism, however, Greenberg's theories

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1 Clement Greenberg, 'Modern and Postmodern', in *Late Writings*, ed. by Robert C. Morgan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). [First given as the William Dobell Memorial Lecture, Sydney, Australia, 31 October 1979; first published in *Arts 54*, 6 (February 1980), http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/postmodernism.html].

2 See, for example: Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 129; Maurice Tuchman, 'Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art', in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, ed. by Maurice Tuchman, *et al.* (exh. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), pp. 17–61 (p. 18).

have little relevance. It is this book's contention that, in Russia, extrinsic ideas and influences — and, most of all, those of Russian religious and spiritual traditions — were of the utmost importance in the making, content, and meaning of modern art. The claim is not entirely new; for example, scholarship in recent years has engaged with such highly pertinent questions as how icon painting became an inspiration for the Russian avant-garde.[3] Highlighting fresh research from an international set of scholars, this volume introduces new interpretations and approaches, and aims to energise debate on issues which have been circulating in scholarship on modern art over the past century. Ten chapters from emerging and established historians illustrate the diverse ways in which themes of religion and spirituality were central to the work of artists and critics during the rise of Russian modernism.

The relationship between modernism and the spiritual has been, and continues to be, a subject of debate in art historical scholarship in the west. Vasily Kandinsky, whose seminal treatise, *On the Spiritual in Art* (*Über das Geistige in der Kunst*), of 1911–12 (fig. 1.1) has been hailed as one of the most important texts in the history of modern art, is a key figure in such discussions.[4] Kandinsky's theories, based upon spiritual notions outside of Russian Orthodoxy, are now interpreted as owing much to Theosophy;[5] indeed, the influence of spiritual traditions beyond mainstream religion has informed much scholarship to date on the nexus between modernism and spirituality. Appearing soon after Greenberg set out his definition of modernism, Sixten Ringbom's publications on Kandinsky pioneered the discussion of the spiritual in theories of modern art.[6] In the past fifty years more research has emerged, often in connection with the multitude of exhibitions on the theme of 'the spiritual in modern art' that took place in the late 1970s and 1980s.[7]

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3   See, for example: John E. Bowlt, 'Orthodoxy and the Avant-Garde: Sacred Images in the Work of Goncharova, Malevich, and Their Contemporaries', in *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, ed. by William C. Brumfield and Milos M. Velimirovic (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 145–50; Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon. Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 2008); Jane Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natal'ia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

4   Vasily Kandinsky, 'On the Spiritual in Art', in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982), Vol. 1, pp. 121–219. The first English translation of 'On the Spiritual in Art' by Michael T. H. Sadler, entitled *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), can be read online: https://archive.org/details/artofspiritualha00kandrich. Also see John E. Bowlt and Rose Carol Washton-Long, *The Life of Vasilii Kandinsky in Russian Art: A Study of 'On the Spiritual in Art'* (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1980); Lisa Florman, *Concerning the Spiritual — and the Concrete — in Kandinsky's Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

5   For a recent discussion of theosophical influences in Kandinsky's oeuvre, see Marian Burleigh-Motley, 'Kandinsky's Sketch for "Composition II", 1909–1910: A Theosophical Reading', in *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture*, ed. by Rosalind P. Blakesley and Margaret Samu (De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), pp. 189–200.

6   Sixten Ringbom, 'Art in the "Epoch of the Great Spiritual": Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1966), 386–418, https://doi.org/10.2307/750725. Also see Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos. A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1970).

7   S. Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Cubists and Post-Impressionists* (Chicago, IL: McClurg, 1914); Sheldon Cheney, *A Primer of Modern Art* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1924); Harold Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the*
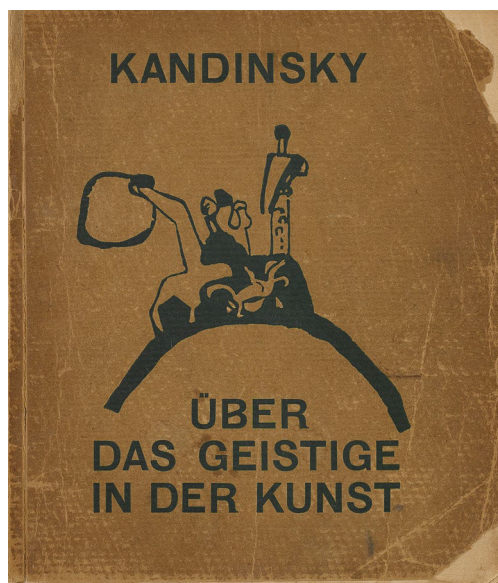
1.1 Vasily Kandinsky, cover of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*
(*On the Spiritual in Art*), 1911 (dated 1912).[8]

Displays such as Perceptions of the Spirit in Twentieth-Century American Art (Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1977) and The Spiritual in Modern Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985 (Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art, 1986) did much to change the terms of debate (indeed, the latter was described by James Elkins as "watershed work").[9] The momentum continues. To take a more recent example, the relationship between Russian art and religious culture was examined in the exhibition Jesus Christ in Christian Art and Culture of the Fourteenth to Twentieth Centuries (*Iisus Khristos v khristianskom iskusstve i kul'ture XIV–XX veka*) in 2000 to 2001 at the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg.[10] At the time of publication there has been an

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Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, ed. by Maurice Tuchman, *et al.* (exh. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, New York: Abbeville Press, 1986); Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Modern Art* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988); *Piet Mondrian 1872–1944: A Centennial Exhibition* (exh. cat., Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1971); *Art of the Invisible* (exh. cat., Bede Gallery, Jarrow, 1977); *Kunstenaren der Idee: Symbolistische tendenzen in Nederland ca. 1880–1930* (exh. cat., Haags Gemeente-museum, The Hague, 1978); *Abstraction: Towards a New Art* (exh. cat., Tate, London, 1980).

8   Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kandinsky,_ Umschlag_über_das_Geistige_in_der_Kunst,_ver._1911,_dat._1912.jpg

9   James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 78.

10 Evgeniia Petrova, '"Zemnaia zhizn" Iisusa Khrista v russkom izobrazitel'nom iskusstve', in *Iisus Khristos v khristianskom iskusstve i kul'ture XIV–XX veka*, ed. by Evgeniia Petrova (St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), pp. 13–24; *The Russian Avant-Garde: Siberia and the East*, ed. by John E. Bowlt, Nicoletta Misler, and Evgeniia Petrova (exh. cat., Florence, Palazzo Strozzi; Skira, 2013).

upsurge in books, conferences, and academic networks focused upon the relationship between modernism and spirituality and/or religion, making this volume's publication especially timely.[11]

With these developments in mind, one of the principal aims of this book is to broaden the debate on Russian artists and the spiritual beyond Kandinsky. Instead, the discussion expands to highlight other modern artists, critics, and mediating figures. Our intention is to open research in new directions; this is not, and does not claim to be, a comprehensive survey. The plurality of religious and spiritual traditions with active followers in Russia during the timeframe under consideration, and the resulting effects upon art, cannot meaningfully be reflected by a group of disparate authors without forfeiting analytical depth and the detail of their research. For example, none of the chapters deals with Judaism, which naturally falls into the frame in any discussion of avant-garde artists such as Marc Chagall, Nathan Altman, and others. Esoteric spirituality here is reflected only by Theosophy, but encompasses a far broader set of belief practices that influenced modernist art during this period — the story of Shamanism and Kandinsky is a notable example.[12] Although this volume highlights the richness of the spiritual theme, it should be remembered that this did not necessarily have an impact upon the work of every Russian artist of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century; rather, this phenomenon represented a pervasive theme within Russian modernism.

Throughout this publication, 'spiritual' is used as an umbrella term to encompass a broad range of religious sources and art that engaged — and, at times, entranced — critics and artists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Credit is given to the variety of influences, including Russian religious art — primarily icons and frescoes,

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11   James D. Herbert, *Our Distance from God. Studies of the Divine and the Mundane in Western Art and Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2008); Lynn Gamwell, *Exploring the Invisible: Art, Science, and the Spiritual* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002). 'Modernism and Spirituality', Conference at Tate Modern, Linda Nochlin and Sarah O'Brien-Twohig, 2013; Sam Rose, 'How (Not) to Talk About Modern Art and Religion', at 'Modern Gods: Religion and British Modernism' symposium, The Hepworth Wakefield, 24 September 2016; Thomas Laqueur, 'Why The Margins Matter: Occultism and the Making of Modernity', *Modern Intellectual History*, 3 (April 2006), 111–35, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244305000648; Leigh Wilson, *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004); Charlene Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Leah Dickerman, 'Vasily Kandinsky, Without Words', in *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, ed. by Leah Dickerman and Matthew Affron (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), pp. 50–53; *Enchanted Modernities: Mysticism, Landscape and the American West*, exhibition at the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University, 2014; Jonathan A. Anderson and William A. Dyrness, *Modern Art and the Life of a Culture: The Religious Impulses of Modernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

12   See, for example: Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Charlotte Gill, 'A "Rupture Backwards": The Re-emergence of Shamanic Sensibilities Amongst the Russian Avant-Garde from 1900–1933' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Durham, 2015).

which, in the late nineteenth century, were appreciated for the first time as artistic, rather than religious, objects — and spiritual concepts such as Theosophy, ideas of the Russian 'soul', and the translation of mystical concepts. Religion — that "noncultic, major system of belief" and all its often public and communal trappings (hymns, catechisms, liturgies, rituals, etc.) — is thus united with spirituality — the "private, subjective, often wordless".[13]

Scholarship in Russia and the west has explored some of the overarching themes of this book with reference to a variety of figures, mostly artists themselves, over a wide chronology. The narrative spans from Aleksandr Ivanov's exploration of religious ideas in his paintings of the first half of the nineteenth century, to the Soviet nonconformist artists of the 1960s, and ultimately to other artistic media, for example, Andrei Tarkovsky's films of the latter half of the twentieth century.[14] However, this book concentrates on the critical years of modernism in Russia from its early stages in the late nineteenth century, when artists began to challenge the traditional boundaries of painting, sculpture, and architecture by consciously adopting more radical techniques, media, or themes, until the Thaw period, by which time socialist realism had become thoroughly entrenched as the official art of the Soviet Union. The diverse array of spiritual influences during this period fuelled new formal and theoretical investigations in art, incited fierce debates among artists and critics as to how such concerns were to be deployed, and drew interest from followers and enthusiasts in the west. The notion of the spiritual, broadly defined — whether drawn from conventional religious art or from esoteric ideas — helped shape modernism in Russian art and underpinned some of its most radical experiments. This was especially the case with Russia's pioneering exponents of non-objective painting — Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Natalia Goncharova, and Mikhail Larionov — who now appear at the heart of the standard art historical narrative of early abstraction.[15] This volume offers new readings of a history only partially explored, delving into less familiar stories, and challenging long-held assumptions.

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13   Elkins, p. 1.

14   See, for example: M. N. Tsvetaeva, *Khristianskii vzgliad na russkoe iskusstvo: ot ikony do avangarda* (St Petersburg: R. Kh. G. A., 2012); Anna Lawton, 'Art and Religion in the Films of Andrei Tarkovskii', in *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, pp. 151–64; John E. Bowlt, 'Esoteric Culture and Russian Society', in Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art*, pp. 165–83; Charlotte Douglas, 'Beyond Reason: Malevich, Matiushin, and their Circles', in Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art*, pp. 185–99; Jane Sharp, '"Action-Paradise" and "Readymade Reliquaries": Eccentric Histories in/of Recent Russian Art', in *Byzantium/Modernism: The Byzantine as Method in Modernity*, ed. by Roland Betancourt and Maria Taroutina (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 271–310.

15   See, for example, the treatment of Russian art in survey texts such as *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars*, ed. by Briony Fer, David Batchelor, and Paul Wood (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 87–169; *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, ed. by Hal Foster, *et al.* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), pp. 174–272.

Between East and West: Religion in Russian Art

Thanks to Kandinsky, Russian art has frequently appeared at the heart of discussions of western modernism and spirituality, with a chronology that begins in the 1910s.[16] However, in scholarship concentrating on Russian art, the link between art and the spiritual tradition has been a more constant thread. This has much to do with the exceptionally close relationship between art and religion over centuries in Russia's history, and the particular dynamics of art production in the Church/state relationship, after Grand Prince Vladimir I of Kyiv adopted Orthodoxy from Byzantium as the state religion in AD 988. At the other end of the timeline, the era of emerging modernism was concomitant with a period in the late nineteenth century when various historical developments prompted a deeper, renewed interest in religion and spirituality among artistic communities.[17]

Until the late seventeenth century, artistic production in Russia was largely dedicated to the service of the Russian Orthodox Church and the ceremonial and personal needs of the Tsars. The visual arts were dominated by the Byzantine tradition of icon painting brought over from Constantinople; the only notable exception was the tradition of folk art that dated from ancient times and continued to develop in parallel with other arts. However, the era of Peter the Great (reigned 1682–1721) saw radical cultural changes as a result of his decision to secularise the arts and implement western modes of representation. This new, secular tradition continued under the auspices of the Imperial Academy of Arts, founded in 1757 in St Petersburg by Empress Elizabeth (reigned 1741–62), and reshaped and energised by Catherine the Great (reigned 1762–96). As in Europe, Russian academic history painting — officially the most elevated genre — encouraged the painting of religious scenes, as well as those from history and classical myth. Among others, the history painter Anton Losenko painted scenes from the Bible such as his vibrant depiction of the apostles hauling up Christ's miraculous net full of fish (*The Miraculous Catch*, 1762, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg). Here, however, the religious narrative was used to showcase the artist's prowess at emulating the best of European artistic practice (for example, Rubens and Raphael had both executed canvases on the same subject), rather than engaging with the spiritual dimensions of the content.

16   See, for example, Bowlt, 'Esoteric Culture and Russian Society'; Douglas, 'Beyond Reason: Malevich, Matiushin, and their Circles'.

17   This has most recently been taken up in the United Kingdom by the Leverhulme-funded network 'Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, Modernism and the Arts, c.1865–1960' at York University, 2012–15, and the symposium 'Modern Gods: Religion and British Modernism, 1890–1960', The Hepworth Wakefield, 24 September 2016.
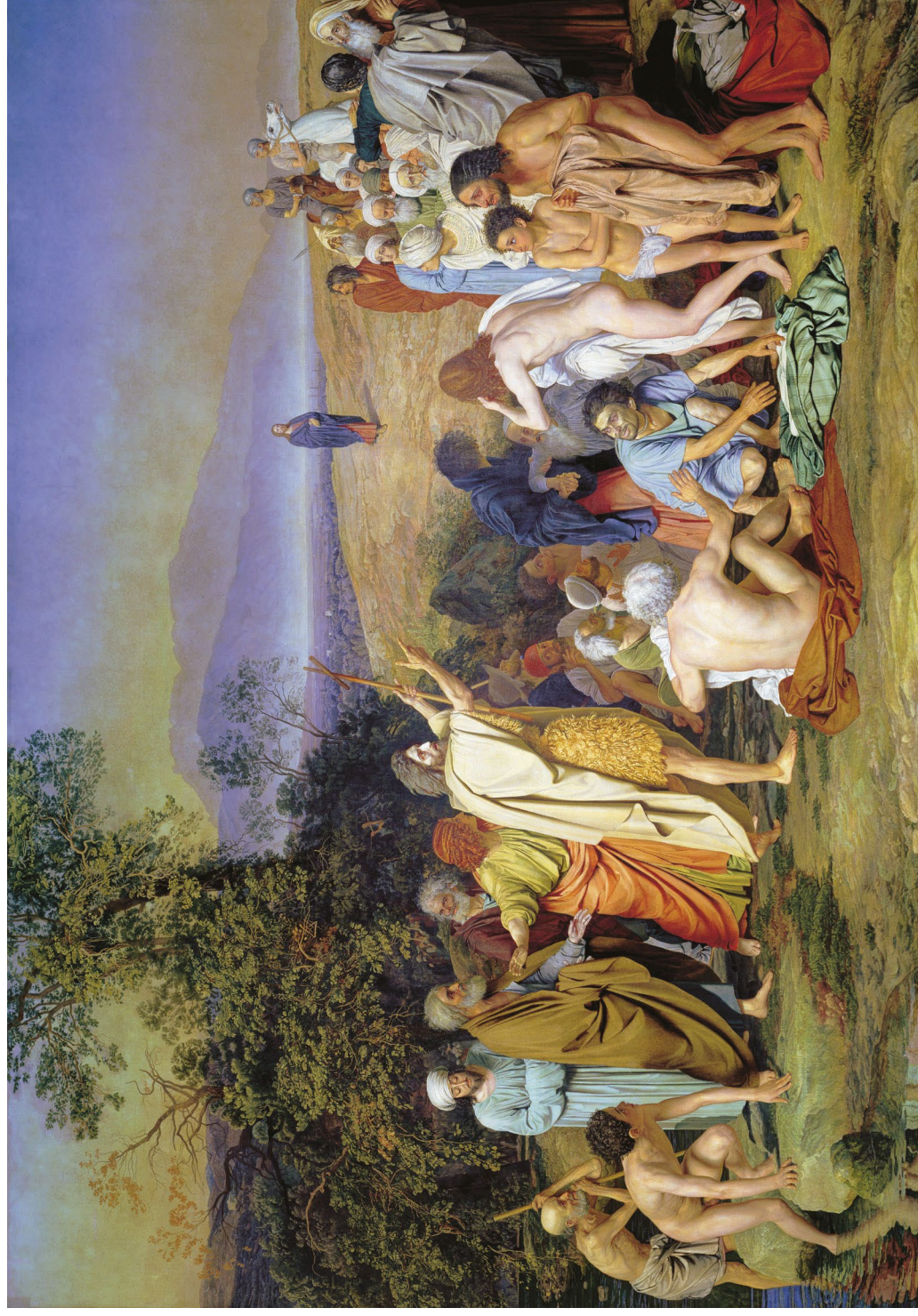
1.2 Aleksandr Ivanov, *The Appearance of Christ to the People*, 1837–57. Oil on canvas, 540 x 750 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_Andrejewitsch_Iwanow_-_The_Appearance_of_Christ_before_the_People.jpg

The shift toward a more deeply felt engagement with spiritual themes has been credited to Aleksandr Ivanov, whose magnum opus, *The Appearance of Christ to the People* (1837–57, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) can be seen as a more fully formed expression of an interest in religious painting emerging earlier in the century (fig. 1.2). For Rosalind Blakesley, Ivanov's precursor, Fedor Bruni, "was the grit in the oyster in pushing Russian history painting in spiritual directions", but Ivanov "cast the pearl".[18] Contemporaries praised Bruni's *The Brazen Serpent* (1834–31, State Russian Museum) for the "profoundly religious thought that gave soul to the painting".[19] This "soul", wrote one commentator, set Russian painting apart from that of European artists, for, if a Frenchman had painted this work, "nothing would have engaged our soul and overcome the harsh reality of this world".[20] Thus by the 1830s Russia's artistic identity had, at least for some observers, developed a distinctive spiritual character.

Ivanov's *The Appearance of Christ* heralded the next phase of Russian religious painting — that of realism.[21] When the painting was finally revealed to the public in 1858, Bruni called the figures' nakedness "unchristian", and one in particular, he wrote, had a head like "a deformed, half-decayed corpse".[22] These realistic portrayals offered a fresh approach to how spiritual themes might be conveyed in paint. As Ivanov wrote to the radical thinker Nikolai Chernyshevsky, he sought to "combine the technique of Raphael with the ideas of modern civilisation — that is the role of art in the present time".[23] To make Christ's message relevant for contemporary viewers, Ivanov chose to focus on the moment of its *reception* rather than the figure of Christ himself; the reactions of the slave and other onlookers thus became the main subjects, and Christ was relegated to the background. This was an inversion of the traditional hierarchy of religious figures, for Ivanov had produced a painting in the academic manner, yet with an unprecedented authenticity. To prepare, he had visited synagogues, read accounts of the Holy Land, sketched *en plein air*, and, like the pre-Raphaelite artist William Holman Hunt in England, he attempted to travel to Palestine. Text, too, was crucial: Ivanov knew the Bible by heart and, after reading David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1835–36), which underlined the significance of Christ as a living person, he travelled to Germany to meet the author. Such actions place Ivanov as an early experimenter on the path towards modernism, in that they signal the artistic freedom and individuality

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18   Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757–1881* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 154.

19   Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas*, p. 152.

20   *Ibid.*

21   On the relationship between artistic realism and literary realism of the period, see Pamela Davidson, 'Aleksandr Ivanov and Nikolai Gogol': The Image and the Word in the Russian Tradition of Art as Prophecy', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 91, 2 (April 2013), 157–209, https://doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.91.2.0157

22   Blakesley, p. 163.

23   *Ibid.*, p. 160.

that would characterise modernist painting, the turn away from the studio to lived experience, and, crucially in this context, the idea of the spiritual quest — a notion that would become more important as the century progressed. Ivanov's explorations of art and spirituality brought him into contact with the Nazarenes, a group of German Romantic painters formed in 1809. These artists had a significant influence on him, sharing his interest in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century devotional art of Giotto and Fra Angelico, and, indeed, in the nature of devotion itself.[24] However, *The Appearance of Christ* did not have the religious impact Ivanov had hoped. Rather it was Ivanov's proto-realist approach that remained his lasting legacy. Yet the part played by broader notions of the spiritual in the creative process did not end with Ivanov. Indeed, parallels can be drawn between his use of textual and artistic sources, his interest in spiritual ideas, and the role of his own religious faith and those of artists in subsequent decades, in ways that are well illustrated by this volume. Moreover, as Pamela Davidson has argued, Ivanov can be seen as inaugurating a more fully developed tradition in the visual arts of 'artist as prophet', foreshadowing Kandinsky and other spiritually oriented artists and thinkers of the Silver Age.[25]

In the politically charged climate of the 1860s and 1870s, the state of Russian society and its ills became a rich source of debate in intellectual circles, and the hallmarks of a critical realist art movement emerged when a number of artists broke away from Academic painting and began to approach religious themes in unusually bold ways. Corruption in the Orthodox Church had incited public debate since the 1840s, but it was not until this moment that artists would openly criticise the church in paint, provoking hostile reactions.[26] When Vasily Perov exhibited his work *The Village Religious Procession at Easter* (1861, Tretyakov Gallery) at the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, the Holy Synod ordered that it be removed from display, owing to its brazen depiction of drunken clergy. The Society acquiesced, and the censor banned its reproduction in print form until 1905.

This censorship did not deter realist artists who tackled biblical scenes in their work. The most notable of these, Nikolai Ge and Ivan Kramskoi, were founder members of the dominant exhibiting society of the late nineteenth century, the 'Association of Travelling Art Exhibitions' (*Tovarishchestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok*, 1870–1923) known as the '*Peredvizhniki*'. Both artists' depictions of Christ were fiercely debated. Their approaches had in common with Ivanov's that they sought to portray Christ as a living man and opposing force against the troubled state of society. This was especially true of Ge, whose strong faith prompted him to declare a wish to incite religious ire among his spectators: "I will shake their minds with Christ's agony. I

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24   *Ibid*., p. 161.

25   Davidson, 'Aleksandr Ivanov and Nikolai Gogol".

26   See, for example, Vissarion Belinsky, 'Letter to Gogol', in *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology*, ed. by Marc Raeff (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), p. 252.

want them, not to sigh gently, but to howl to the heavens!"[27] Enamoured with the religious writings of Leo Tolstoy, he began corresponding with the writer. Tolstoy had broken away from Orthodoxy to found his own belief system, one so controversial that by 1901 he would be excommunicated. Tolstoy saw Ge's work as representing "the living Christ", but others reacted with vitriol.[28] For Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ge's *Last Supper* (1863, State Russian Museum) presented "not the Christ we know [...] there is no historical truth here [...] everything here is false".[29] Furthermore, in 1890, Ge's *What is Truth?* (Tretyakov Gallery) — a bold image of Christ and Pontius Pilate — was exhibited at the *Peredvizhnik* exhibition in St Petersburg, only to be removed and banned from further display.[30] This direct involvement of the state and the Holy Synod in censoring works of a religious nature continued well into the early twentieth century, affecting the work of Natalia Goncharova and Symbolist artists of the 'Blue Rose' group, among others. Disapproval might be directed at the choice of imagery or, more broadly, the spiritual ideas which underpinned the work. Indeed Ge, whose work often fell outside the Orthodox and academic canons, can be seen as a precursor of those modernist artists whose unconventional spirituality led them to a new artistic approach, but one that was destined for a difficult reception.

Paths to Modernism: Realism and Nationalism

The rise of realism coincided with an upsurge in nationalist sentiment from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and realist painters were championed by influential writers such as Vladimir Stasov, who regarded them as the embodiment of a 'national school' for their interest in contemporary Russian subjects. The Russian landscape was one of the most prominent of these themes, and artists' engagement with their native land prompted a spiritual turn that, at times, harked back to the Romanticism of earlier in the century. Such concerns emerged even among the most committed of realist painters: witness the unsettling scenes of deep forest and desolate snowy wildernesses of Ivan Shishkin. A subtly spiritual mood is evoked by such works as *In the Wilds of the North (after Lermontov)* (1891, National Art Museum of Ukraine, Kyiv), a stark depiction of a solitary pine against the wild, snowy expanse that, as in the works of Caspar David Friedrich, positions landscape as sublime; the expression of a highly 'spiritualised' Russian landscape would later reach its height in the work of Isaak Levitan, most notably in such works as *Above Eternal Peace* (1894) and *Evening Bells* (1892) (both Tretyakov Gallery).

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27 Dmitry Sarabianov, *Russian Art: From Neoclassicism to the Avant-Garde: 1800–1917* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 130.

28 Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, *Tolstoy's Letters: Volume II. 1880–1910*, trans. by R. F. Christian (London: The Athlone Press, 1978), p. 508.

29 Fyodor Dostoevsky, 'A Propos of the Exhibition', *A Writer's Diary: Vol. I. 1873–1876* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), p. 216.

30 Translator's footnote in Tolstoy, *Tolstoy's Letters*, p. 460.

1.3 Viktor Vasnetsov and Vasily Polenov, *The Church of the Saviour Not Made by Hands*.
1881–82. Photograph. Abramtsevo Estate and Museum Reserve.[31]

In the last two decades of the nineteenth century artists also began increasingly to draw inspiration from the native tradition of folk art, exploring new motifs, colours, and styles, and experimenting in media beyond painting and sculpture. In so doing, they moved beyond conventional modes of representation — the verisimilitude and linear perspective of the Academy and the realists. The germ of these innovations first took root at Abramtsevo, a country estate some sixty kilometres outside Moscow owned by the industrialist Savva Mamontov. An aspiring artist himself, whose passion found its outlet in patronage rather than practice, Mamontov urged the artists in his circle to try their hand at theatre design, ceramics, and mosaics in an environment free from restrictions.

For the Abramtsevo artists, the medieval art and architecture of the Russian Orthodox Church became a key source of inspiration, and naturally shaped their first major collaborative art project: the design of a new church on the estate, which they named *The Church of the Saviour Not Made by Hands* (1881–82) (fig. 1.3). This project was fundamentally one of artistic and architectural revivalism, but it should also be

viewed in the broader context of professionally trained artists' involvement in church design and decoration during the mid- to late nineteenth century; quite apart from such private spaces as Abramtsevo, church commissions were an important source of work for artists during this period, and supplied another means for a direct encounter between modernising artists and the legacy of Russia's religious past.[32] When church building became a key ingredient in Tsar Nicholas I's official policy of 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality' ('*Pravoslavie, Samoderzhavie, Narodnost'*'), adopted in 1833, artists such as Bruni and Karl Briullov painted icons and frescoes for monumental Imperial churches, such as St Isaacs Cathedral in St Petersburg (1818–58). But western styles and approaches had dominated such commissions, whereas the Abramtsevo church was inspired by early Russian art and architecture; Viktor Vasnetsov's designs for the exterior evoked twelfth-century churches of Novgorod and Pskov.[33] However, the interior, masterminded by Ilia Repin and Vasily Polenov, was an exemplar of the eclecticism characteristic of the Arts and Crafts movement: the ornamental iconostasis and mosaic floor engaged with ancient art, but the figures on the icons were painted realistically, departing from the canon, and reflecting a modern idiom.

   Of the Abramtsevo artists, Mikhail Vrubel was the most radical in combining his interest in religious art with formal innovation, moving even further beyond the official canon of the Orthodox Church. Vrubel's experimentation in media such as mosaic informed his ground-breaking paintings of the 1890s, such as *Demon Seated* (1890, Tretyakov Gallery) (figs. 2.7 and 2.8), in which he broke down the surface into geometric shapes, leaving areas of blank canvas. This technique, sometimes superficially compared with that of Paul Cézanne, made him arguably the first modernist artist in Russia. But, as Maria Taroutina argues in Chapter 2, a more likely catalyst for his new approach was his interest in the tradition of medieval Russian icon painting and frescoes inherited by the Orthodox Church from Byzantium. In his commission to restore the frescoes of the twelfth-century Church of St Cyril in Kyiv in 1884, Vrubel's use of heavy stylisation and icon-like facial features reflects his serious attention to medieval precursors, whereas Vasnetsov's frescoes for St Vladimir's Cathedral in Kyiv (1886–96), on the other hand, demonstrate realistic modelling and a strong sense of three-dimensional space. The stylistic gulf between the two clearly illustrates the shift in priorities in Russian art at the end of the nineteenth century, from being faithful to reality, to valuing art's expressive and formal potential. These new

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32   The employment of fine artists to create religious art was not an entirely new phenomenon, just as icon painters training as fine artists was also commonplace. For example, the two major portraitists of the late eighteenth century — Dmitry Levitsky and his pupil, Vladimir Borovikovsky — began their careers as icon painters in Ukraine.

33   William Craft Brumfield, *The Origins of Modernism in Russian Architecture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 35.

aesthetic considerations, which had shaken off the last vestiges of academic tradition and, unlike realism, no longer depended on the external world for representation, thus mark the beginning of the narrative of modernism in Russian art.

Symbolism and the Age of Enquiry

The spiritual turn at Abramtsevo associated with Mikhail Vrubel is now seen as the beginning of Russian Symbolism, which was allied to the broader European Symbolist movement, and thus a more international conception of Russian modernism. Other artists associated with the circle who were forging new paths in this direction included Maria Vasilevna Iakunchikova and Mikhail Nesterov. Iakunchikova, who spent her formative years at the estate before moving her main home to Paris in 1889, painted elegiac, muted landscapes of rural chapels and deserted fields, in which mood and meaning predominate. Likewise, Nesterov often depicted the surrounding Russian landscape, but prioritised religious figures and spiritual themes, as in his famed *Vision of the Youth Bartholomew* (1889–90, Tretyakov Gallery) (fig. 1.4). By the early twentieth century the focus upon national content had faded in the second wave of Symbolist practice, and now, spirituality could be conveyed by colour, and certain favoured themes evoking life's essences: love, fear, motherhood, birth, and death. Critical in this respect was Viktor Borisov-Musatov, an artist from Saratov who, like Iakunchikova, was exposed to Symbolism while studying in Paris. He returned to Russia in 1898 to inspire the mystically charged colour experiments of the group of artists known as 'Blue Rose', who can be seen as the first 'avant-garde' artistic movement in Russia.

Artists of the Blue Rose continued the precedent set by Vrubel for experimenting with church design in ways which stepped further away from the established canons of the Orthodox Church. They worked on several commissions to paint the interiors of churches of the early 1900s, the most notable of which was the project executed by Pavel Kuznetsov, Petr Utkin, and Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin in 1902 to decorate the Church of the Kazan Mother of God in Saratov. Their bold frescoes were so far from the Orthodox canon that they provoked public outcry and were destroyed. Similarly, designs by Nicholas Roerich for the church at Talashkino (1909–11) — the second major centre of the national revival in decorative art, seen as the inheritor of Abramtsevo's legacy — were too radical for the Orthodox Church to consecrate the building, as Louise Hardiman discusses in Chapter 3. The application of new developments in secular painting to church design reflected the important place religious art had come to occupy in Russian modernism. They also underline the fact that while artists engaged with Orthodox artistic traditions, the church's official canon was largely ignored. This gave rise to subjective and imaginative renderings of church design that were anathema to its strict codes of representation.

1.4 Mikhail Nesterov, *The Vision of the Youth Bartholomew*, 1889–90.
Oil on canvas, 160 x 211 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain.
Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mikhail_Nesterov_001.jpg

Fear of the noxious effects of materialism and industrialisation continued to grow as the new century drew near, and thinking beyond ordinary perception and the outside, tangible world took on new significance.[34] The paintings of the Russian Symbolists had made manifest in images the ideas that were emerging in Silver Age poetry and philosophy, and responded to an existential disquiet which conventional religion seemed unable to answer. This wider Symbolist movement, involving such figures as Aleksandr Blok, Andrei Bely, Aleksandr Scriabin, and Vladimir Solovev, dominated Russian culture at and around the *fin de siècle*. Most influential of all was Solovev, whose *Spiritual Foundations of Life* (*Dukhovnye osnovy zhizni*) had been published in the early 1880s.[35] Symbolism influenced later religious thinkers of the early twentieth century too, notably Nikolai Berdiaev, Pavel Florensky, and Sergei Bulgakov. They inaugurated a new breadth to the notion of the spiritual in art and literature, exploring theological ideas outside of Orthodoxy such as Sophiology. The turn away from materiality espoused by the Symbolists engineered a shift in artists' attention from conventional Orthodoxy to broadly conceived ideas of spirituality. Their influence was far-reaching and enduring, as Jennifer Brewin's discussion of Symbolist trends in Soviet Georgia in Chapter 11 witnesses. In this respect, the new research on Symbolism presented in several chapters of this volume is of especial importance, and has highlighted the lack of a comprehensive monograph on the Symbolist movement in Russian art.[36]

With Symbolist discussions of higher levels of reality and inner expression already in place, mysticism and occultism, too, became increasingly popular in Russia in the early 1900s, as well as the Theosophy of Madame Helena Blavatsky, who co-founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875.[37] The notion that the artist had privileged

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34   Spretnak, *The Spiritual Dynamic*, pp. 64–65.

35   Vladimir Solov'ev, '*Dukhovnye osnovy zhizni*' (1882–84). For the collected works, see Vladimir Solov'ev, *Sobranie sochinenii* (12 vols.) and *Pis'ma* (4 vols.), 16 vols. (Brussels: Zhizn' s Bogom, third edition, 1966–70).

36   In terms of English language scholarship, Avril Pyman's landmark *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) mainly concentrates on literature. Bowlt's doctoral thesis of 1972 and his articles and book chapters on the subject are, to date, the most comprehensive sources for scholars of early artistic Symbolism (John Bowlt, 'The "Blue Rose" movement and Russian symbolist painting', PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 1972, https://research-repository. st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/3703; John Bowlt, 'Russian Symbolism and the "Blue Rose" Movement', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 51, 123 (April 1973), 161–81. Bowlt has written extensively on mid to late Symbolism, too, in sources too numerous to list here. Also see: William Richardson, *Zolotoe Runo and Russian Modernism: 1905–1910* (Ardis Publishers, 1986); A. A. Rusakova, *Simvolizm v russkoi zhivopisi* (Moscow: Belyi gorod, 2001). More recently, some attention has been paid to symbolism by Russian scholars; see, for example, this year's exhibition Borisov-Musatov and the 'Blue Rose' Society at the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg (V. Kruglov, *Borisov-Musatov and the 'Blue Rose' Society*, ed. by Evgeniia Petrova (exh. cat., The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2017)).

37   Bowlt, 'Esoteric Culture and Russian Society', p. 173.

access to higher or inner forms of reality as a 'prophet' or 'superman' was taken up by artists such as Kandinsky, Malevich, and Roerich, playing roles mirroring those which Dostoevsky and Tolstoy (once described as a "seer of the flesh" and a "seer of the soul" respectively) had famously adopted in literature.[38] An active Theosophist, Roerich even founded his own spiritual system, Agni Yoga, together with his wife Elena, and, in the 1920s, organised a highly publicised expedition to India, Tibet, and Mongolia. His vividly coloured canvases often portrayed mystical landscapes and figures, and reflected a preoccupation with rites and rituals (fig. 1.5). Roerich's work serves as a reminder that questions of the spiritual in Russian art are not only about responses to a religious tradition entwined with the country's nationalism.

New areas of science and pseudoscience investigating areas beyond physical reality and the natural world also permeated the arts. The first X-rays were shown in public at the Berlin Physical Society in 1896, and the possibility of non-Euclidian geometry and the fourth dimension — as first discussed by Charles Howard Hinton in 'What is the Fourth Dimension' (1884), and expanded upon by Petr Ouspensky in *The Fourth Dimension* (1904) — became of interest to the avant-garde in particular. These ideas helped to shape the theories underpinning artists' experiments with non-objective forms in the early 1910s, such as Kandinsky's notion of the 'inner' sound or vibration of the soul. This concept was embodied in his famed 'Compositions', among others, for example, *Composition VII* of 1913 (Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) (fig. 1.6). A further interesting figure in this respect was the Lithuanian Symbolist painter Mikalojus Čiurlionis, who shared with Kandinsky the credo that art was part of a world of higher perception and beyond physical reality.[39] Both men claimed to possess the gift of 'synaesthesia' — the ability to see colours as sounds; both were synthetists too, working across multiple media. Čiurlionis, for example, was a composer as well as artist, and, like Kandinsky, gave many of his paintings musical titles. Other theories giving rise to purely abstract works of art included Mikhail Larionov's Rayism — the depiction of rays of light reflecting off a physical object — and Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism — the expression of higher levels of consciousness through simple geometric shapes. Artists' serious engagement with spiritual ideas, as well as contemporary developments in science, psychology, and music thus led to some of the most pioneering work of Russian modernism.

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38 On Kandinsky and esotericism, see Rose-Carol Washton Long, 'Occultism, Anarchism, and Abstraction: Kandinsky's Art of the Future', *Art Journal*, 46, 1 (Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art) (Spring 1987), 38–45, https://doi.org/10.2307/776841

39 On Čiurlionis and Symbolism, see John Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the 'World of Art' Group* (Oriental Research Partners: Newtonville, MA, 1982, second edition), pp. 78–79.

1.5 Nicholas Roerich, *The Call of the Bells (from the old Pskov series)*, 1897. As reproduced in *International Studio*, 70, 279 (June 1920), facing p. 60. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:International_studio_(1897)_(14760097306).jpg

The Icon Rediscovered

The artistic traditions of the Orthodox Church, and icon painting in particular, continued to play an important part in the work of artists during this period. Until the late nineteenth century, icons had no place in the fine arts in Russia — they were not considered artistic objects. With their meaning intrinsically linked to the context of the Church, they served as a physical medium through which believers could access the Holy Spirit. Their creators were often unknown, and they were re-painted time and again over the years; often they were blackened from the accumulation of dust and soot from incense and sometimes were encased within an *oklad* — a metal, ornamental casing that covered much of the painted surface. The icon historian Nikodim Kondakov (discussed by Wendy Salmond in Chapter 8) blamed the vogue for western culture from the reign of Peter the Great onwards for this widespread neglect of icons among Russians.[40] During Nicholas I's reign (1825–55) in the mid-nineteenth century, however, Orthodox Church culture became of renewed interest to the government. Restoration of medieval church frescoes began, while icons started to be removed from churches and placed in museums.[41] The first proper museum collections of icons appeared in the 1860s, yet these were only showcased to the public specifically as art for the first time in 1898 at an exhibition of medieval Russian art.[42] Moving into the early twentieth century, Shirley Glade and Jefferson Gatrall mark two seminal moments in this rediscovery and rehabilitation of icon painting that had an enormous impact on modernist artists: firstly, the restoration of one of the most celebrated icons — Andrei Rublev's Trinity (fig. 1.7) — between 1904 and 1906, and secondly, the Exhibition of Old Russian Art which took place in Moscow in 1913.[43] A restoration team led by Vasily Gurianov stripped away layers of overpaint and varnish to reveal unexpectedly bold colours and the sophisticated technical prowess of Rublev, who soon became a canonical figure in the history of Russian art.[44] This led to other important restoration projects, and dealers and collectors scoured remote Russian provinces in search of unknown masterpieces. Prominent art collectors, such as Ilia Ostroukhov and Stepan Riabushinsky, hired hereditary icon painters (*ikonniki*) to work on their private collections.[45] The exhibition of 1913, which included objects

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40   Jefferson J. A. Gatrall, 'Introduction', in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. by Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2010), pp. 1–26 (p. 8).

41   Gatrall, 'Introduction', p. 7.

42   *Ibid.*, p. 5.

43   The history of how the icon came to be regarded as art rather than artefact is a topic that has benefited from much discussion in recent years. See, for example, Shirley A. Glade, 'A Heritage Discovered Anew: Russia's Reevaluation of Pre-Petrine Icons in the Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Period', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 26 (1992) 145–95; V. N. Lazarev, 'Otkrytie russkoi ikony i ee izuchenie', *Russkaia ikonopis' — ot istorikov do nachala XVI veka* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1983), pp. 11–18. For an overview of this, see Gatrall, 'Introduction', pp. 4–9. 'Old Russian' is translated from the Russian word '*drevnerusskii*' and refers to the period before the westernising reign of Peter the Great.

44   Rublev was the subject of Andrei Tarkovsky's 1966 eponymous film.

45   Sarah Warren, *Mikhail Larionov and the Cultural Politics of Late Imperial Russia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 111–32.

from these collections, was unprecedented in its range, and showed previously unseen fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Novgorod works. Other ecclesiastical objects such as embroideries and medieval manuscripts were also on display. Sponsored by the state, the display served to legitimise the icon as a symbol of Russian national culture.[46]

1.6 Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 200 x 300 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.[47]

In tandem with restorers, artists thus rediscovered the icon as an object of artistic creation and a rich source of inspiration. As new attitudes towards the collection, display, and conservation of icons were only just beginning during the 1880s — this volume's starting point — artists of the *fin de siècle* did not yet have thirteenth-century Novgorod icons that had been newly restored and cleaned to inspire them. As Chapters 2, 3, and 4 by Taroutina, Hardiman, and Myroslava M. Mudrak discuss, the first generation of modern artists mainly responded to religious art *in situ*, such as church architecture and mural painting. On the other hand, as Chapters 5 and 6 by Oleg Tarasov and Nina Gurianova explain, the later, more radical generation of Russian avant-garde artists, like their counterparts in Europe, looked to other so-called 'primitive' art forms for new approaches to representation, and their search for new material would lead to a re-examination of the artistic potential of icons. Across Europe, avant-garde artists responded to objects such as African masks, Japanese woodcuts, and children's drawings, which were unfettered by western artistic conventions such as chiaroscuro and modelling that had dominated painting since the Renaissance. For Russian avant-garde artists, the source of 'primitive' art came from within as they saw Russia as more closely aligned with the east in its origins. Western artistic influences needed to be cast off, in favour of crafting an intrinsically national culture. As Aleksandr Shevchenko

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46   *Ibid.*, p. 112.
47   Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vassily_Kandinsky,_1913_-_Composition_7.jpg

wrote in his text outlining this movement — Neoprimitivism — in 1913, "The spirit of […] the East, has become so rooted in our life that at times it is difficult to distinguish where a national feature ends and where an Eastern influence begins […]. The whole of our culture is an Asiatic one".[48] Russian culture abounded with examples of art that was less constrained by western pictorial traditions: icons, Russian broadsheet prints (*lubki*), trays, and signboards offered "the most acute, most direct perception of life — a purely painterly one, at that".[49]

The pictorial characteristics of icon painting — inverse perspective, heavy outlining, general flatness, and large, bold areas of colour — informed the avant-garde's new artistic language. This approach found little favour with the press and public, and exhibitions of the avant-garde were met with hostility and controversy. As with earlier artists such as Vrubel, this was especially the case when artists applied experimental approaches to religious themes. The censor, for example, removed Goncharova's *Evangelists* (1910–11, State Russian Museum) from the Donkey's Tail exhibition in Moscow in 1912 for the seemingly sacrilegious combination of a sacred subject with such a vulgar exhibition title.[50] Such reactions did not discourage artists from underlining the link between the new art and icon painting: Larionov pointedly staged an exhibition of icon patterns (*podlinniki*) and *lubki* in Moscow in 1913 (129 icons came from his own collection) at the same time as the 'Target' — the latest exhibition of avant-garde art he had organised.[51] The deliberate juxtaposition emphasised that both shows were united in their rejection of the west, and that religious art — above all, the icon — was the most revered of native, primitive sources reawakened by Russian artists. As the émigré artist Boris Anrep claimed, "For us Russians, who have been raised to revere the divine countenances created by the piety of our icon painters […] Matisse's art is neither a great revelation nor a great novelty".[52] Matisse himself was famously riveted by Russian icons on a visit to Moscow in 1911; in a statement echoing the sentiments of the avant-garde, he wrote: "The icon is a very interesting type of primitive painting. Nowhere have I ever seen such a wealth of colour, such purity, such immediacy of expression."[53] And so an entire generation of Russian artists was stimulated by the icon not only for its aesthetics but also as a symbol of what Russian art could achieve outside of the west.[54]

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48 Aleksandr Shevchenko, 'Neo-primitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements', in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, ed. by John E. Bowlt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 41–54 (p. 48).

49 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

50 Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863–1922* (Thames & Hudson: London, 1986), p. 134.

51 For the catalogues, see *Vystavka ikonopisnykh podlinnikov i lubkov, organizovannaia M. F. Larionovym* (*The Exhibition of Icon Patterns and Lubki, Organised by M. F. Larionov*) (exh. cat., Moscow Art Salon, Bol'shaia Dmitrovka, Moscow, 1913); *Mishen'* (*Target*) (exh. cat., Moscow Art Salon, Moscow, 1913).

52 Boris Anrep, 'Apropos of an Exhibition in London with Participation from Russian Artists', in *Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art: 1890s to Mid-1930s*, ed. by Ilia Dorontchenkov, trans. by Charles Rougle (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 106–08 (p. 107).

53 Quoted in Bowlt, 'Orthodoxy and the Avant-Garde', p. 148. For more on the visit, see Alison Hilton, 'Matisse in Moscow', *Art Journal*, 29, 2 (1969–70), 166–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/775225; Iu. A. Rusakov, 'Matisse in Russia in the Autumn of 1911', trans. by John E. Bowlt, *The Burlington Magazine*, 117 (May 1975), 284–91.

54 Avant-garde artists who wrote on icons include: Shevchenko, 'Neo-primitivism' and A. Grishchenko, *Voprosy zhivopisi. Vypusk 3-i. Russkaia ikona kak iskusstvo zhivopisi* (Moscow: Izdanie Avtora, 1917).

1.7 Andrei Rublev, *Trinity*, 1411 or 1425–27. Tempera on wood, 142 x 114 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Angelsatmamre-trinity-rublev-1410.jpg

Revolution and its Aftermath

The October Revolution of 1917 ushered in a new era for the arts in Russia, and, under the anti-religious Bolshevik regime, continued interest in spiritual ideas and culture became highly controversial and increasingly dangerous. The Soviet government stripped the Orthodox Church of its property rights and launched campaigns to seize, sell, or destroy its art and valuables. Yet amid the destruction of churches and ecclesiastical objects appeared prodigious efforts to save them. The renewed appreciation of the icon's artistic value in the early 1900s initially continued to flourish in the years following the Revolution. The secular context of the museum was seen as a safe space where the centuries-long damage that icons had endured in the hands of the Church, such as overpainting and failure to clean layers of black soot from candles and incense, could be rectified. Previously unknown ancient icons were discovered on expeditions to monasteries and churches in the Russian north, and fresh restoration projects, notably those of the Trinity and Vladimir Mother of God icons, led Soviet scholars to condemn earlier interpretations of the icon's history, as Wendy Salmond discusses in Chapter 8. The government's anti-religious campaigns of the late 1920s, however, heralded a devastating new wave of iconoclasm and fierce persecution of those who defended religious culture. Figures such as priest and scholar Pavel Florensky, restorer and art historian Iuri Olsufev, and art historian Nikolai Punin, whose work on the link between the icon and the avant-garde is discussed by Natalia Murray in Chapter 10, were arrested and executed. Yet, despite the attempts of the authorities to undermine the Russian spiritual tradition, it would survive in art in a number of ways. The instinct to practise religion could not, of course, be completely quashed, and artists continued to engage with religious and spiritual themes. In some cases this practice moved underground, in others, abroad; in yet others, echoes of pre-Revolutionary spiritual approaches could be found at the periphery of the Union, as Jennifer Brewin testifies in Chapter 11.

With religious practice and spirituality increasingly under threat in Russia itself, the Russian diaspora tasked itself with keeping her traditions alive abroad to bequeath to future generations. The mass exodus of approximately 1.5 million Russian citizens to countries around the world was the most dramatic but often overlooked consequence of the Revolution and subsequent Civil War (1917–22). For this widespread population of émigrés, which included many modernist artists, including Kandinsky, Roerich, Goncharova, and Larionov, preserving Russian national culture was not only of collective benefit to society, but had a very personal dimension — it helped re-forge their individual connection to home. For many, the rejuvenated Orthodox Church abroad became a symbol of sustaining pre-1917 rituals and traditions, especially those facing eradication in the Soviet Union. While artists remaining in the Soviet Union were barred from working on church commissions or religious subjects, those who had emigrated received new opportunities to

engage with religious art outside Russia's borders (the case of one such émigré, Dmitry Stelletsky, is discussed by Nicola Kozicharow in Chapter 9). The practice of icon painting, for example, gained new-found interest abroad, and, in 1927, the Icon Association — a new school of icon painting — was established in Paris with artists such as Ivan Bilibin and Stelletsky among its members. This continuation of Russian religious art in emigration symbolises the broader endurance of spiritual values — and even modernism itself — in the face of its suppression in the Soviet Union. The spiritual dimensions of Russian modernism thus ultimately transcended borders, and evaded any political efforts to curtail their lasting power.

Modernism and the Spiritual: From Symbolists to Soviets

This book highlights the importance of the thriving, multifarious dialogue on spirituality and religion that permeated the visual arts in Russia from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. Arranged in roughly chronological order, the ten essays rethink existing interpretations of spiritual themes and influences in the oeuvre of an individual artist or artists (Chapters 2, 4, 6, and 11 by Taroutina, Mudrak, Gurianova, and Brewin) and enhance our understanding of how mediating figures were instrumental in shaping perceptions, whether of spirituality and nationality (Chapters 3, 7, and 9 by Hardiman, Borkhardt, and Kozicharow), or such fundamental questions as the role of icons in, or *as*, art (Chapters 5, 8, and 10 by Tarasov, Salmond, and Murray). Our objective is to illustrate precisely the diversity of approaches among modern artists to the notion of spirituality, and document their soul-searching, exploratory quests, which are so characteristic of the period. These essays illustrate more clearly the ways in which some painters (for example, Kandinsky and Malevich) assumed the role of artist as prophet. At the same time, though modernism has been associated with a sense of individuality and artistic freedom, age-old practical considerations remained, such as responding to the desires and requirements of patrons and consumers.

After Kandinsky and his theories, it is the influence of the icon upon Russian modernism which has received the most scholarly attention in recent years. In this volume, we seek to extend and deepen this analysis in several ways. A number of our authors expand the discussion of Orthodox artistic tradition to include other media such as mosaic, fresco, and Old Believer icons. While the significance of avant-garde artists such as Malevich remains a central focus, experiments by artists who have typically been excluded from scholarly discussions are here brought to the fore. Under the broad banner of Russian modernism, the book includes such figures as Vrubel — an early practitioner of more radical approaches to painting — and Stelletsky, whose work the Russian avant-garde criticised for being too reliant on the formal characteristics of religious art. Moreover, it re-emphasises how modernising tendencies spanned a wide range of artistic movements across the late Imperial era;

for example, it adds weight to the case for integrating the Arts and Crafts movement, in its Russian guise, into the longer history of Russian modernism.

The volume begins in the late nineteenth century with Maria Taroutina's chapter on Vrubel (Chapter 2), whose art foreshadowed the seismic shift towards abstraction.[55] Taroutina considers the radical new ways in which this creative and experimental artist interpreted the Orthodox artistic tradition. Her chapter shifts the chronology of the avant-garde's engagement with icons back by two decades, to the period associated with the neo-national and Symbolist movements. Taroutina shows that as early as the 1890s the icon was already more than what Gatrall has described as a "parochial craftwork […], an antiquarian curio".[56] She strengthens the case for Vrubel's modernism, not only in her analysis of his formal innovations (which she contends bore relation to his early experiences in mosaic) but also in his idiosyncratic use of religious art as a source. Vrubel found his inspiration mostly in national sources; drawing from the Byzantine Orthodox tradition, he interwove fresco, icon, and religious (or mythological) symbolism in his oeuvre, for example, in his use of the recurring motif of the demon. His example illustrates dramatically the intense complexity of the spiritual question for the Russian *fin-de-siècle* artist.

In Chapter 3, Louise Hardiman considers aspects of the neo-national movement and the *fin de siècle*, turning the spotlight upon the Talashkino colony and Russian Arts and Crafts. Proposing the existence of a shift from Orthodoxy at Abramtsevo to a less conventional spirituality at Talashkino, this chapter re-examines the debate around the 'Church of the Spirit' ('*Khram dukha*') commissioned by Talashkino's founder, Maria Tenisheva, and finally completed in 1914 with the assistance of Roerich. It then charts a common thread toward esotericism by exploring the spiritual turn to Theosophy of Aleksandra Pogosskaia, one of Tenisheva's collaborators, who devoted her career to selling Russian peasant art and Arts and Crafts, primarily in the west. Hardiman suggests that the beliefs espoused by the Theosophical Society, of which Pogosskaia, and later Roerich, were members, correlated strongly with the pagan traditions inherent in Russian folk belief. This led to a scenario in which unconventional belief systems and neo-nationalist trends in art could naturally intersect.

Turning to the avant-garde, Myroslava M. Mudrak in Chapter 4 extends existing accounts of the relationship of Kazimir Malevich with religion and spirituality, by concentrating on his early Symbolist work and its relation to Ecclesiastic Orthodoxy. Suprematism, the artist's self-proclaimed new artistic movement of the mid-1910s, is usually thought of as *sui generis*, and necessarily secular — a replacement for the prevailing Orthodoxy. Indeed, as Christina Lodder reminds us in her catalogue essay

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55 See, for example: Josephine Karg, 'The Role of Russian Symbolist Painting for Modernity: Mikhail Vrubel's Reduced Forms', in *The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art*, ed. by Michelle Facos and Thor J. Mednick (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 49–57; Josephine Karg, *Der Symbolist Michail Vrubel': Seine Malerei im Kontext der russischen Philosophie und Ästhetik um 1900* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2011).

56 Gatrall, 'Introduction', p. 3.

for Tate Modern's Malevich retrospective exhibition in 2014, the artist's placement of *Quadrilateral* (1915) (the painting now known as *Black Square*) (fig. 5.2) in the 'red (or beautiful) corner' of the room (*krasnyi ugol*) at the Last Futurist Exhibition 'Zero Ten' (0.10) (fig. 5.3) was "an iconoclastic action, annihilating the old values and shocking the public".[57] Yet, like that of Kandinsky, Malevich's relationship with the Russian spiritual tradition is complex and multi-faceted, not least his transformation from the Catholicism of his upbringing to his revolutionary, apparently secular Suprematism. Through her careful analysis of Malevich's early work, Mudrak supplies a new interpretation of the artist's engagement with his native religious and spiritual traditions.

Oleg Tarasov, in Chapter 5, picks up the story with Malevich at the point where Mudrak ends, explaining clearly how Malevich's concept of Suprematism drew directly from the principles of the icon; Tarasov then considers the importance of the icon to the wider Russian avant-garde. In this sense his chapter, reflecting the extensive scholarship that led to his groundbreaking texts, *Icon and Devotion* (2002) and *Framing Russian Art* (2011), acts as the centrepiece of this book. It conveys the central story of this period — the meaning, role, and influence of 'the spiritual' in the work of the avant-garde as they attempted to find a new spirituality based on a "common search for what we might call essences".[58] Tarasov maintains that, unlike representational art, abstract paintings and icons are 'signs' — images in which symbol equals meaning. Thus "the real project of the avant-garde was not formal innovation […] but the attempt to place the individual in touch with the transcendental and to transform the world on the basis of 'ideas' revealed only to the artist".[59] Here there is an obvious debt to the notion of artist as prophet, and, echoing Chapter 4, the Theosophical concept of wisdom and long-held truths that are known to a select few initiates.

In Chapter 6 the focus is upon two other prominent figures of the avant-garde, Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. Nina Gurianova adds new depth to existing analyses of these artists, contending that their religious influences should be viewed in the context of the Old Belief movement, rather than contemporary Orthodoxy. The Old Believers were instrumental in the preservation and conservation of ancient icons, *lubki*, hand-made and hectograph books, manuscripts and the like, resulting in what Gurianova calls a "brief 'golden age' of Old Believer culture" between 1905 and 1917.[60] Other influential aspects of this movement adopted by Futurist and Neoprimivitist artists included the focus on apocalyptic symbolism and metaphor. In a detailed

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57 Christina Lodder, 'Malevich as Exhibition Maker' in *Malevich* (exh. cat., London, Tate Modern, 2014), pp. 94–99 (p. 95). Also see: Evgeniia Petrova, 'Malevich's Suprematism and Religion', in *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism*, ed. by Matthew Drutt (New York, Guggenheim Museum, 2003), pp. 88–95; Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 79–84.

58 Chapter 5, p. 116.

59 *Ibid*.

60 Chapter 6, p. 134.

account of sources and art works, the chapter traces how national identity and past spiritual traditions were inextricably linked.

Chapters 7 and 8 shift the focus from Russia to the west, and the role of critics in shaping interpretations of religious art and the spiritual tradition. Specifically, they illustrate how the notion of a Russian spiritual tradition in art (Chapter 7) and the Russian icon itself (Chapter 8) were received outside Russia. In looking at Kandinsky through the eyes of German critics, Sebastian Borkhardt's analysis in Chapter 7 provides another perspective from which to view the artist and his seminal text, *On the Spiritual in Art*. His account provides a stark contrast with Rebecca Beasley's recent analysis of Kandinsky's impact on the British Vorticist movement: Beasley finds that the British avant-garde saw Kandinsky as German, rather than Russian (even though the founding artists of The Blue Rider (*Der Blaue Reiter*) were of both nationalities), while Borkhardt shows that many German critics felt that he was thoroughly Russian.[61] In Germany the reception of the artist during the 1910s drew heavily upon existing perceptions of Russia and Russian art, specifically its 'eastern mysticism' as opposed to 'western rationalism'. But, in a fascinating exploration of differing critical stances, Borkhardt argues that the ideas of Wilhelm Worringer, who had linked abstraction with the "transcendental" character of the Gothic ("a supra-temporal principle that pervaded 'northern' culture"), may have led another modernist critic, Paul Fechter, to redefine Kandinsky's spirituality in terms of "old Gothic soul" and bring his art into a German cultural context.[62] When Fritz Burger subsequently categorised these commonalities as part of the "new cosmic life" of the modern era, these ideas crystallised into those which seem again to repeat universal spiritual themes.

Wendy Salmond's engaging account of the history of Ellis Minns's translation of *The Russian Icon* by Nikodim Kondakov in Chapter 8 sheds important new light on how Kondakov was seen initially as a pioneer in the study of the Russian icon during the pre-Revolutionary period, but his ideas fell out of favour by the 1920s. Salmond suggests that his reputation as an expert would have endured far longer, had it not been judged retrospectively through the lens of subsequent developments in conservation and the more recent scholarship of younger intellectuals such as Pavel Muratov and Aleksandr Anisimov. Defending Kondakov's scholarship, she nevertheless shows how Minns took on the role of a skilled mediator when creating his translation — he wanted the text to be available in the west but also tried to adjust some of its more outdated material. Salmond considers *The Russian Icon*'s reception in the west during the Soviet period, and ends with an appraisal of its contemporary relevance. Above all, she stresses that this work, and its translation, bear witness to "a particular moment in the unfolding history of the Russian icon", pointing to "the bitter

61   Rebecca Beasley, 'Vortorussophilia', in *Vorticism: New Perspectives*, ed. by Mark Antliff and Scott W. Klein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 33–50 (p. 33), https://global.oup.com/academic/product/vorticism-9780199937660

62   Chapter 7, p. 154–56.

irony" of its appearance in 1928, when the "worst period of Militant Atheism and the wholesale destruction of icons began".[63]

Both Borkhardt's and Salmond's chapters demonstrate vividly how, where reception and cross-cultural exchange are concerned, the mediator, the process of mediation, and the culturo-historical context in which it takes place are of prime significance. In literature, the distorting impact of translation and associated intrusion of the mediating point of view are long-established truths; likewise, in the reception of art, the effects of this process lead to equally surprising consequences. For Borkhardt, the German historical context is all; despite a generally receptive, though polarised, interpretation of Kandinsky's work and his theories among critics earlier in the twentieth century, the advent of Nazism led to denunciation of the artist. By contrast, in the case of Minns and Kondakov, it had been the foreigner who sought to reclaim — for the international audience — the reputation of the national whose theories had become discredited through changes in political ideology.

The last three chapters deal with the period following the October Revolution of 1917. In Chapter 9 Nicola Kozicharow maintains the focus on Russian art in Europe, by examining Dmitry Stelletsky's designs for the icons and frescoes of what is perhaps the most significant Orthodox church outside of Russia — Saint-Serge in Paris — which became a bastion of Orthodox faith for the tens of thousands of Russians who fled the turmoil of the Revolution and subsequent Civil War and settled in France. As the first theological institute beyond Russia's borders, Saint-Serge was also a new centre of Orthodox theology, attracting thinkers such as Nikolai Berdiaev and Bulgakov. Returning to the theme of church commissions, Kozicharow explores the designs for the church interior in order to question the avant-garde's condemnation of the artist's work as unoriginal and too derivative of medieval precursors. His radical approach to church design, which continued the late nineteenth-century revivalist (or neo-Russian) style in emigration, pushed the boundaries of what was deemed acceptable within the Orthodox canon. Stelletsky's strict Orthodox faith also raises a key issue that has gone relatively unexplored in scholarship, namely the role of artists' beliefs in approaching religious themes in their work.

Tracing another path of critical engagement with icons during the early to mid-twentieth century, Chapter 10 returns to Russia. Natalia Murray continues to restore the important historical legacy of Nikolai Punin in Russian modernism, a process which she began in her biography of 2012.[64] Murray explains how Punin's study of icon painting shaped his interpretation of the avant-garde, leading to his conclusion that for these artists icons were "a revelation [...], the highest ideal".[65] She describes how Punin's criticism was pioneering in its approach, appearing at a time when artists

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63 Chapter 8, p. 191.
64 Natalia Murray, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2012).
65 Chapter 10, p. 218.

themselves were still working out these ideas. In the early Soviet period, Punin fought to preserve icon painting in Mstera while he was Head of the Visual Arts Department of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment in Petrograd (*Narkompros*) and Commissar of the Hermitage and Russian Museums. The account ends poignantly with the personal suffering of Punin under Stalinist repression, after he refused to compromise his modernist and spiritual principles and was incarcerated as a result, dying in a Gulag camp in 1953.

Chapter 11 sets the chronological end point of this collection during the Thaw. However, in reprising some themes of this book's early chapters, it illustrates the enduring nature of the 'spiritual' as an artistic influence, and Symbolist tendencies in particular, despite the shift to secular Soviet rule and the imposition of the official style of socialist realism in 1934, which condemned continued interest in modern movements or themes as 'formalist'. Jennifer Brewin concentrates upon a single artist, Ucha Japaridze (1906–88), in Georgia. Though existing scholarship has cast Japaridze as a staunch exponent of socialist realism, Brewin recognises his formative influences as the Symbolist poetry group, the Blue Horns, and the Georgian Symbolist painter, Lado Gudiashvili. In her close readings of several of his paintings, she seeks to overturn a realist reading and emphasises the enduring legacy of spiritual influence in the secularised artistic space of Soviet Georgia even as late as the 1960s. In addition, Brewin raises the issue of how modernist trends were interpreted by artists at the periphery of the Union.

What becomes clear as the overarching chronology unfolds is that the detailed essays here serve as staging posts in a narrative of Russian artistic modernism in which the engagement of artists, critics, and scholars with the religious and spiritual tradition is fundamental. This engagement is, we contend, the driving force behind some of the most significant artistic innovations of the period. From the Orthodox — the church's art and rituals — to the 'un-Orthodox' — spirituality, mysticism, and esotericism — new ideas and artistic approaches abounded. Coming from within and beyond the ranks of the Russian avant-garde, artists are instead located within the wider picture of modernism in Russia, and reflect a number of institutional positions and associations. The geographical and chronological scope of the intersection between the spiritual and the arts is also expanded, showing that the story extends far beyond Moscow and St Petersburg, and lasts far longer than has previously been claimed. Within this more widely framed discussion, the relationship between the spiritual and modernism in Russian art deserves proper study, and revisiting its well-trodden histories and exploring its uncharted corners becomes all the more valuable.

2. From Angels to Demons: Mikhail Vrubel and the Search for a Modernist Idiom

Maria Taroutina

In his 1911 biography of Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910), the artist Stepan Iaremich recounts a telling episode. In the spring of 1901, Iaremich had accompanied Vrubel to the twelfth-century Church of St Cyril in Kyiv, where the latter had both restored and recreated a large number of frescoes in 1884. Standing in front of his *Lamentation* mural (fig. 2.1), Vrubel commented that "in essence, this is the kind of work to which I should return".[1] At that point, Vrubel was based in Moscow and had already painted some of his most celebrated masterpieces: *Demon Seated* (1890) (fig. 2.7), *Portrait of Savva Mamontov* (1897), *Pan* (1899), *Lilacs* (1900), and *The Swan Princess* (1900) (fig. 11.11). However, Vrubel himself felt that he had produced his best work during his stay in Kyiv in the 1880s, a period which was largely dominated by his restoration work in the Church of St Cyril and his sketches for the unrealised murals in the Cathedral of St Vladimir.[2] The art historian Nikolai Punin agreed with the artist's self-assessment, praising Vrubel's Kyivan frescoes as some of his best work, in which he had "touched upon the known problems of painting" with "such strength of spirit and insight […] that the few existing pages that narrate Vrubel's Kyivan period of creativity should […] grow into a huge body of literature, exclusively dedicated to [examining] the meaning and significance of these compositions".[3]

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1   Mikhail Vrubel, quoted in Stepan Iaremich, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel'; zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Knebel', 1911), p. 55. "Вот к чему в сущности я должен бы вернуться."

2   From 1887 to 1889, Vrubel had produced a large number of sketches for the interior decoration of the St Vladimir Cathedral in Kyiv. Unfortunately, the jury that oversaw this project rejected almost all of Vrubel's designs.

3   Nikolai Punin, 'K risunkam M. A. Vrubelia', *Apollon*, 5 (May 1913), 5–15 (p. 7), http://www.v-ivanov. it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon. "В этих работах художник коснулся такой силой духа и прозрения известных проблем живописи, что те немногии страницы которые повествуют о киевском периоде творчества Врубеля, должны, на наш взгляд, возрасти в громадную литературу, всецело посвященную смыслу и значению именно этих композиций."

Although a few scholarly monographs have discussed this formative stage in Vrubel's career, the majority of the literature has focused instead on his 'mature' Moscow period, and especially on the large number of drawings, paintings, and sculptures on the subject of the 'Demon', as well as the decorative work and folkloric paintings that he produced at the artistic colonies of Abramtsevo and Talashkino.[4] Still fewer studies have considered how and why Vrubel's preoccupation with religious subject matter came to influence his artistic outlook, evolving into an important sub-theme within his oeuvre and culminating in the intriguing cycle of biblical and apocryphal paintings made at the end of his life, which typically have been dismissed as his weakest work and the result of the onset of mental illness.[5] And yet, in their unusual combination of modernist forms with mystical, transcendental themes, these works ought to be understood as nineteenth-century precursors to a particular strain of visionary modernism that found its full expression in the paintings of the subsequent generation of artists such as Pavel Filonov, Vasily Kandinsky, and Kazimir Malevich, to name but a few. Indeed, not only did Vrubel's sustained engagement with the Russo-Byzantine pictorial tradition catalyse the production of some of his most radical and canonical works, including the Demon paintings, but it also both anticipated and shaped the twentieth-century avant-garde interest in icons by nearly thirty years.[6]

Vrubel was born in Omsk in 1856 into the family of a military lawyer. As a result of his mixed parentage — his father was of Polish descent, while his mother came from an old noble Russian family — Vrubel was intimately familiar with both Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy.[7]

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4   See: Aline Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910)* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982); Nina Dmitrieva, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel'* (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1984), pp. 32–56 and 67–90; Mikhail Alpatov, *Zhivopisnoe masterstvo Vrubelia* (Moscow: Lira, 2000), pp. 87–112; Viktoria Gusakova, *Viktor Vasnetsov i religiozno-natsional'noe napravlenie v russkoi zhivopisi kontsa XIX–nachala XX veka* (St Petersburg: Aurora, 2008), pp. 121–49.

5   For example, see Dmitrieva's discussion of Vrubel's late religious works in *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel'*, pp. 82–84.

6   In the first two decades of the twentieth century a large number of Russian artists turned to the iconic tradition as a source of pictorial and conceptual inspiration. Avant-garde engagement with iconic representations ranged from a primitivising adaptation of iconic forms to thematic and iconographic borrowings. For a detailed account of the widespread influence of icons on early twentieth-century Russian art, see: Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Aldershot, Hampshire; Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2008); *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. by Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Jane A. Sharp, *Russian Modernism Between East and West: Natal'ia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 143–95, 221–53; Margaret Betz, 'The Icon and Russian Modernism', *Artforum* 15, 10 (Summer 1977), 38–45; John Bowlt, 'Neo-Primitivism and Russian Painting', *The Burlington Magazine*, 116, 852 (March 1974), 133–40; Robin Milner-Gulland, 'Icons and the Russian Modern Movement', in *Icons* 88, ed. by Sarah Smyth and Stanford Kingston (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1988), pp. 85–96.

7   In a letter to his sister Anna, Vrubel mentions attending Catholic mass with his father. Letter from Mikhail Vrubel to Anna Vrubel, October, 1872. Reprinted in E. P. Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel': Perepiska, vospominaniia o khudozhnike* (Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1976), p. 23.

2.1 Mikhail Vrubel, *Angels' Lamentation*, 1884. Church of St Cyril, Kyiv.
Photograph © Ivan Krutoyarov, all rights reserved.

2.2 Mikhail Vrubel, *Annunciation*, 1884. Watercolour and oil paint, dimensions unknown.
Location unknown. Reproduced in Stepan Iaremich, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel', zhizn i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Knebel', 1911), p. 22. Photograph © General Research Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations, all rights reserved.

However, he found organised religion to be restrictive and oppressive and in the late 1880s began to express a profound doubt about the Christian faith. Instead, he increasingly came to believe that the free pursuit of one's artistic calling and individual creativity was the most direct route to spiritual attainment and fulfillment, famously stating towards the end of his life: "Art — this is our religion."[8] Although Vrubel had initially pursued the study of law at St Petersburg University, upon graduation he almost immediately enrolled as a full-time student at the Imperial Academy of Arts, where he trained for four years under the direction of Professor Pavel Chistiakov (1832–1919).

In early 1884, while still a student at the Academy, Vrubel was approached by the distinguished art historian and archaeologist, Adrian Prakhov, who at the time was looking for a young artist to help him carry out a large-scale restoration plan in the twelfth-century monastery church of St Cyril. In order to secure the commission, Vrubel was asked to produce a small work in the Byzantine manner. He painted an *Annunciation* scene (fig. 2.2), which unfortunately has not survived, except for a small black and white photograph that was originally reproduced in Iaremich's biography.[9] Based on the Byzantine iconographic type of the 'spinning Virgin', Vrubel's work demonstrates an intimate familiarity with medieval prototypes, such as the *Annunciation* mosaics in the eleventh-century St Sophia Church in Kyiv (fig. 2.3) or the twelfth-century Annunciation icon in the Monastery of St Catherine on Mount Sinai (fig. 2.4).[10]

As a student at the Imperial Academy of Arts, Vrubel would have had access to the Academy's Museum of Early Russian Art, which housed a vast collection of medieval Byzantine and Russian icons at the time of the artist's residency.[11] These included over one hundred and twenty twelfth-, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Byzantine icons, as well as several mosaic fragments that Petr Sevastianov had brought over from Mount Athos in 1860.[12] In addition, the Academy also possessed a large arsenal of copies and photographs of eleventh- and twelfth-century Byzantine icons, the mosaics of St Sophia in Constantinople, and Manuel Panselinos' thirteenth-century frescoes in Mount Athos, as well as copies of the icons and frescoes in the twelfth-century Betania and Gelati Monasteries in Georgia.

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8   Anna Vrubel, 'Reminiscences about the Artist', in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, p. 154. "Искусство — вот наша религия."

9   Iaremich, *Vrubel'*, p. 22.

10 The well-known Byzantinist, Nikodim Kondakov, published a photographic album in 1881 containing one hundred images of mosaics and miniatures from illuminated manuscripts in the collections of the St Catherine Monastery on Mount Sinai. See N. P. Kondakov, *Vues et antiquités du Sinai par M. le professeur Kondakoff et photographe J. Raoult* (Odessa: [s.n.], 1881). However, it remains unclear whether Vrubel would have had access to it. For a more detailed discussion of Kondakov's career and publications, see Chapter 8 of this volume.

11 For a history of the Academy's museum and its collection, see Iu. A. Piatnitskii, 'Muzei drevnerusskogo iskusstva Akademii khudozhestv', in *Vizantinovedenie v Ermitazhe*, ed. by V. S. Shandrovskaia (Leningrad: State Hermitage Museum, 1991), pp. 14–19.

12 For a detailed account of Sevastianov's expeditions to Mount Athos and his collection of Byzantine art, see Iu. A. Piatnitskii, 'P. I. Sevastianov i ego sobranie', in *ibid.*, pp. 19–24.

2.3 *The Virgin Mary*, 11th century. Mosaic. St Sophia Cathedral, Kyiv.
Photograph © Bridgeman Images, all rights reserved.

2.4 *Annunciation*, Late 12th century. Tempera and gold on panel, 63.1 x 42.2 x 3.2 cm. The Holy
Monastery of St Catherine, Sinai. Photograph © Bridgeman Images, all rights reserved.

Lastly, the Academy owned a Russian translation of Adolphe Didron and Paul Durand's famous iconographic manual of Byzantine art, the *Manuel d'iconographie chrétienne grecque et latine; traduit du manuscrit byzantin "Le Guide de la Peinture"* (Paris, 1845).[13] Purportedly compiled in the eighteenth century by Dionysius of Fourna, a monk from Mount Athos, the manual explained techniques of Byzantine painting and described in detail the various iconographies of different religious figures and scenes.[14]

Although it is now difficult to determine which specific work Vrubel had used as a model for his *Annunciation*, it is clear that he must have based it on an actual medieval prototype. A comparison between the twelfth-century Sinai *Annunciation* and Vrubel's version demonstrates how intuitively the artist had understood the formal and symbolic language of icons without any official training in icon painting. Rather than 'inhabiting' the pictorial space of the image, Vrubel's figures seem to float against an infinite, continuous background that signifies a sacred, symbolic, and timeless realm. Vrubel avoided any directional lighting or shadows in his *Annunciation*, and his elongation of the figures, the linear dynamism of their draperies, and the serpentine twisting of the angel all closely resemble the Byzantine prototype. Instead of altering the image along naturalistic lines with traditional modelling of the faces and the use of chiaroscuro, as was practised at the time by Academy-trained artists, Vrubel adhered much more closely to the formal language of the medieval icon. It is therefore not surprising that Vrubel's subsequent first-hand study of monumental medieval art in Kyiv allowed him to internalise the iconic mode of representation still further, and in a way that continued to shape his artwork throughout his career.

Many of Kyiv's medieval churches and monasteries had suffered considerably over the centuries, falling victim either to the Mongol invasions or to changing artistic tastes, which had resulted in a widespread whitewashing and overpainting of some of the earliest frescoes and mosaics. The St Cyril commission was thus part of a broader restoration project initiated in the 1870s and 1880s to renovate the ancient churches of Kyiv. As part of this commission, Vrubel was tasked with restoring close to one hundred and fifty fragmented figures. In a period of just seven months, with the help of student assistants from the Murashko School, Vrubel repainted large sections of severely damaged murals such as *The Annunciation*, *The Entry into Jerusalem*, and *The Dormition of the Virgin*, and created several wholly new compositions in place of the old ones that had perished. Indeed, the *Descent of the Holy Ghost (Pentecost)*, the *Angels' Lamentation* (fig. 2.1), a medallion *Head of Christ*, *Two Angels with Labara* (fig. 2.5), and the figure of *Moses* all seem to have been entirely Vrubel's own creations.

13 Adolphe Didron and Paul Durand, *Manuel d'iconographie chrétienne grecque et latine; traduit du manuscrit byzantin "Le Guide de la Peinture"* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1845). See Anna Kornilova, 'Iz istorii Ikonopisnogo klassa Akademii Khudozhestv', in *Problemy razvitiia zarubezhnogo i russkogo iskusstva: sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, ed. by Vera Razdol'skaia (St Petersburg: Institut Imeni I. E. Repina, 1995), pp. 73–77 (p. 76).

14 Dionisii Furnoagrafiot, *Erminiia ili Nastavlenie v zhivopisnom iskusstve, sostavlennoe iermonakhom i zhivopistsem Dionisiem Furnoagrafiotom, 1701–1733 god* (Kyiv: Tip. Kievopecherskoi Lavry, 1868). For a recent edition in English, see Paul Hetherington, ed., *The 'Painter's Manual' of Dionysius of Fourna: An English Translation [from the Greek] with Commentary of Cod. Gr. 708 in the Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library, Leningrad* (London: Sagittarius Press, 1974).

2.5 Mikhail Vrubel, *Two Angels with Labara*, 1884. Fresco. Church of St Cyril, Kyiv.
Detail. Photograph © Ivan Krutoyarov, all rights reserved.

2.6 *Angels. Last Judgment*. 12th century. Mosaic. Santa Maria Assunta Cathedral,
Torcello. Detail. Photograph © Bridgeman Images, all rights reserved.

Vrubel prepared for the commission by studying both the surviving medieval murals in St Cyril and the paintings and mosaics at the monastery of St Mikhail and the Cathedral of St Sophia. He also had access to Prakhov's large collection of drawings, sketches, photographs, and chromolithographs of medieval Byzantine and Russian art, which the historian had acquired during his travels throughout the Russian empire, Europe, the Middle East, and other formerly Byzantine territories.[15] Vrubel would spend many hours in Prakhov's house studying these images and making copies from them, which he would then incorporate into his designs for the restoration work at St Cyril. For example, Vrubel based his two large frescoes of *Two Angels with Labara* (1884) (located on the arch of the baptismal chapel) on the angels in the *Last Judgment* mosaic in the Santa Maria Assunta Cathedral in Torcello (fig. 2.6).[16]

Although Vrubel's composition is entirely his own original creation, he adopted many of the formal features of the medieval work, including the agitated fluttering of the draperies, the linear stylisation of the folds, and the dynamic movements and even the facial features of the angels. Similarly, both the iconography and the composition for the *Descent of the Holy Ghost* mural were inspired by a combination of both original and photographic sources. Vrubel's semi-circular arrangement of the disciples, as well as his stylised streams of divine light emanating from the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, all recall the *Pentecost* mosaic in the Cathedral of Monreale in Italy. However, the fluidity, linearity, and movements of the figures seem more akin to the *Pentecost* fresco in the Cathedral of St Sophia in Kyiv. Analogous to his first *Annunciation* painting, these frescoes make manifest how closely Vrubel adhered to the medieval prototypes, imitating their penchant for bright colour, flatness, pronounced outlining, and spatial ambiguity.

Upon completion of the restoration works in St Cyril, Prakhov asked Vrubel to restore four mosaic archangels in the cupola of the Cathedral of St Sophia. One of the angels had retained almost all of its original mosaic tesserae and served as a model for the other three. Vrubel's task involved the imitation of the mosaic tesserae in oil paint so that from below the restored angels would be impossible to differentiate from the original mosaic compositions.[17] This experience was undoubtedly a formative one for the artist, who, upon his return to work in other media, proceeded to adapt this technique as part of his own signature style. For example, in one of his most significant works, *Demon Seated* (fig. 2.7), which the artist began immediately after his sojourn in Kyiv, the plethora of tiny, block-like, impasto brushstrokes, particularly on the right-hand side of the painting (fig. 2.8), recall mosaic tesserae, and suggest depth and volume, while simultaneously emphasizing the flatness of the picture plane.

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15   Gusakova, *Vasnetsov*, p. 123.

16   There is some disagreement over the original source for these angels. Iaremich claims that Vrubel based the composition on photographs of the Torcello mosaics in Adrian Prakhov's collection. However, Nikolai Prakhov recounts that Vrubel produced the design after he had returned from his to trip to Italy, where he had seen the Torcello mosaics in situ. See Iaremich, *Vrubel'*, p. 54, and Nikolai Prakhov, *Stranitsy proshlogo: Ocherki-vospominaniia o khudozhnikakh* (Kyiv: Obrazotvorchogo-Mistetsva i Muzichnoi Literatury U.S.S.R., 1958), p. 284.

17   Letter from Mikhail Vrubel to Adrian Prakhov, Summer 1884. Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, p. 71.

2.7 Mikhail Vrubel, *Demon Seated*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 116 x 213.8 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mikhail_Vrubel_-_Демон_(сидящий)_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg
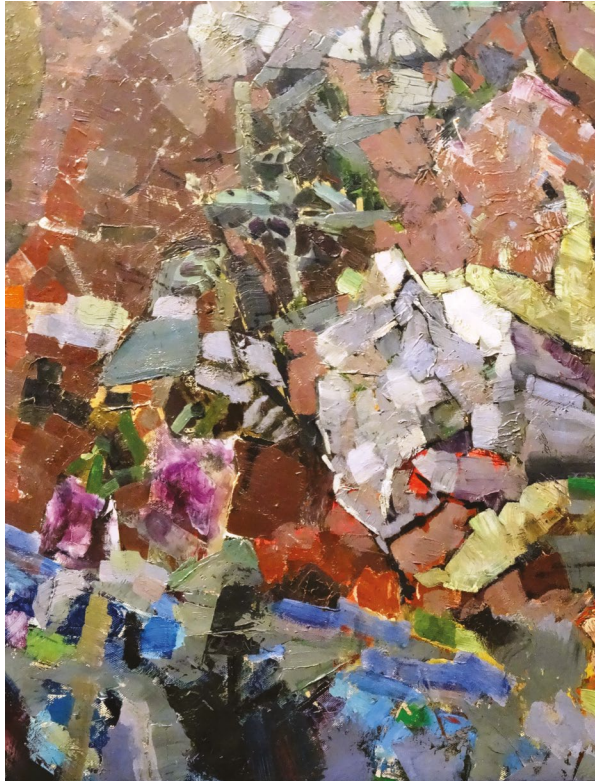
2.8 Mikhail Vrubel, *Demon Seated*, 1890. Detail. Oil on canvas, 116 x 213.8 cm.
Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph by Maria Taroutina (2017), public domain.

The monumental figure of Satan is depicted in the immediate foreground of the painting, occupying a compressed, almost claustrophobically shallow space with very little by way of perspectival recession. Although Vrubel included a diminutive mountain and sunset in the distant background, the large geometricised flowers on the right-hand side of the painting emphasise the flatness of the canvas, breaking down the impression of three-dimensional space. The disintegration of their legible forms approaches abstraction so closely that at first glance it is difficult to identify the indistinct angular shapes as flowers. By contrast, Vrubel's treatment of the Demon's torso and tensely clasped hands accentuates the heavy solidity of the figure. The Demon's body registers as a bulky, imposing form, reminiscent of Michelangelo's nude figures on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

In its masterly combination of pictorial flatness with depth and volumetric solidity, Vrubel's *Demon Seated* recalls the paintings of Paul Cézanne, and especially the latter's *Mont Sainte Victoire* series (1900–04). Much like Cézanne, Vrubel used flat, overlapping planes to create volume and space out of colouristic contrasts. His crystalline, textured brushstrokes in many ways resemble the colour patches and tectonic facture that

Cézanne had developed in his late works. In fact, in his book *Of Diverse Arts* (1962) the Constructivist artist Naum Gabo went so far as to assert that not only were Vrubel's radical formal innovations in *Demon Seated* akin to those of Cézanne, but that the former had, in fact, anticipated the latter by almost fifteen years in his formulation of a vanguard visual syntax.[18] In the illustration section of *Of Diverse Arts*, Gabo strategically juxtaposed one of Cézanne's *Mont Sainte Victoire* paintings from 1905 with a study that Vrubel had executed for *Demon Seated* in 1890–91 in order to demonstrate that the brushwork of the two artists was nearly identical, concluding that:

> Vrubel freed the arts of painting and sculpture from the academic and realist schemata. His genius is responsible for moulding the visual consciousness of our generation, which came after him […]. His influence on our visual consciousness was as decisive as Cézanne's. Even Cubism was not entirely a surprise to us.[19]

By contrast, the critic Pavel Muratov felt that Vrubel and Cézanne were two very different kinds of artists, both conceptually and stylistically.[20] According to Muratov, Cézanne was primarily interested in transcribing the 'mundane' realities of everyday provincial life and emphasizing their materiality and solidity. He "painted uncomplicated portraits, landscapes of his homeland and elementary, simple still-lifes".[21] Vrubel, on the other hand, had aspired towards capturing the immaterial, the supernatural, and the divine in pictorial form. His works were meant to be monumental and larger than life, at once reflecting novel ideological concepts and timeless, universal themes.[22] According to Muratov, these antithetical artistic goals also expressed themselves on the level of form. Indeed, a closer analysis of Cézanne's and Vrubel's brushwork reveals that despite superficial similarities — like the ones outlined by Gabo — there were nonetheless significant structural differences in their respective styles. Unlike Cézanne's reliance on a systematised grid and *passage*, which involved the seamless blending of intersecting and perpendicular planes into one another, Vrubel's brushstrokes tended to vary in size and direction, depending on their structural role in the image (fig. 2.8). As such, they depart from Cézanne's regularised and geometricised blocks of colour to function more like the individual tesserae in a mosaic composition. A few years after he had completed the St Cyril project, Vrubel explained to Iaremich that his fascination with pictorial flatness and the materiality of the painted surface had evolved out of his encounter with medieval Russo-Byzantine art, which had taught him to achieve "an ornamental distribution of forms in order to strengthen the flatness of the wall".[23] Moreover, as Aline Isdebsky-Pritchard has

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18 Naum Gabo, *Of Diverse Arts* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), pp. 168–69.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 155–56.

20 Pavel Muratov, 'Vrubel", *Moskovskii ezhenedel'nik*, 15 (10 April 1910), 45–50.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

22 *Ibid.*

23 Iaremich, *Vrubel'*, p. 52. "[…] при помощи орнаментального раположения форм усилить плоскость стены."

argued, "the near-impossibility of Vrubel having seen Cézanne's work […] when this manner became fully developed […] precludes his dependence on the French artist's work".[24] On his trips to Europe, Vrubel appears to have missed both the first and third Impressionist exhibitions (1874 and 1877) in which Cézanne had participated, and Cézanne's works did not enter Russian collections until 1904.[25] Accordingly, Vrubel seemed to have developed his peculiar modernist syntax simultaneously, but independently, of the French modernist master by incorporating the lessons he had learned from medieval representation into his own work.

Vrubel's modification of his own painterly style in response to his encounters with medieval art radically departed from the practice of many of his contemporaries and fellow Academicians, such as Viktor Vasnetsov and Mikhail Nesterov, who also worked on church commissions and restoration projects, but who tended to transform the iconic idiom into an academic style, rather than the other way around. Although Vasnetsov and Nesterov adopted the iconography of medieval frescoes and icons, their style principally remained that of naturalistic illusionism. Shedding what they considered to be the 'primitive' stylisations of medieval icons and frescoes, these artists saw themselves as modernising and improving the religious simplicity and naiveté of Orthodox imagery. Thus, for example, in Vasnetsov's painting of the *Holy Trinity* (1907) for the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Warsaw (fig. 2.9), God and Christ are depicted within a three-dimensional space, as evidenced by the naturalistic modelling of the faces, the foreshortening of the figures' bodies, and the play of light and shadows.

2.9 Viktor Vasnetsov, *Holy Trinity*, 1907. Preparatory sketch for the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Warsaw. Oil on canvas, 268 x 400 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph © Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Scala, all rights reserved.

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24   Isdebsky-Pritchard, *Art of Mikhail Vrubel,* p. 86.

25   *Ibid.*, p. 257 (note 51). For Russian collections of Modern French art, see: Beverly Whitney Kean, *French Painters, Russian Collectors: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996); Albert Kostenevich, *Impressionist Masterpieces and Other Important French Paintings Preserved by the State Hermitage Museum* (St Petersburg: Harry N. Abrams, 1995); *Morozov, Shchukin: the Collectors: Monet to Picasso: 120 Masterpieces from the Hermitage, St Petersburg, and the Pushkin Museum, Moscow* (exh. cat., Bonn: Bild-Kunst, 1993).

They are, as it were, emerging out of the heavenly realm into the human world through a ring of intertwined seraphim. Similarly, in his 1892 fresco of the *Virgin Mary with Christ Child* in the Cathedral of St Vladimir, Nesterov depicted the figures within an illusionistically rendered niche, complete with atmospheric background and perspectival recession. Instead of being depicted frontally, both the Virgin and Christ Child are rotated in space and do not return the viewer's gaze. Typical of narrative easel painting, their actions are circumscribed within the frame of the painting and do not engage the outside world as in the case of icons.[26] Vrubel, on the other hand, understood that iconic visuality was part of a single, holistic aesthetic and ideological system, which could not be altered without violating the very essence of the iconic image.

In the late 1880s and early 1890s the continuing prominence of the Academy, coupled with the new-found popularity of the Association of Travelling Art Exhibitions (*Peredvizhniki*), ensured that the general public, the Holy Synod, and the official artistic establishment all favoured a more naturalistic representational mode when it came to contemporary church art.[27] It is important to emphasise, however, that the Orthodox Church did not indiscriminately accept all realist representations of biblical subjects. For example, Ivan Kramskoi's *Christ in the Wilderness* (1872), Polenov's *Christ and the Adulteress* (1886), and Nikolai Ge's *What is Truth?* (1890) were all viewed as deeply problematic — if not outright blasphemous — from an ecclesiastical standpoint, because they reinterpreted the Christian narrative from historical, archaeological, secular, and subjective perspectives that were often at odds with established theological doctrine.[28] By contrast, although Vasnetsov replaced the hieratic qualities of Russo-Byzantine art with mimetic pictorial effects, he nonetheless closely adhered to officially approved Orthodox iconographies and compositions. Moreover, he repeatedly claimed that he was a "sincere Orthodox believer", who was genuinely committed to ensuring that his religious paintings "did not in any way contradict either the High Christian or the [Orthodox] Church ideal".[29] In other words, his works were 'new' and 'up-to-date' in form, but 'traditional' and 'timeless' in content, and could therefore be sacralised as modern iterations in the icon's long evolution from the Middle Ages to the present moment. One commentator of the period even went so far as to praise Vasnetsov's ability to "free" medieval iconic representations "from anatomical deformities, which gave the figures their hideous aspect".[30] He continued:

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26   For a detailed discussion of the cultural and conceptual role of the picture frame and its ever-changing functions in Russian art see Oleg Tarasov, *Framing Russian Art: From Early Icons to Malevich*, trans. by Robin Milner-Gulland and Antony Wood (London: Reaktion Books, 2011); for more on the frame in relation to the icon see Tarasov's chapter in this volume (Chapter 5, especially p. 116).

27   For a detailed discussion of this subject, see Sharp, *Russian Modernism*, pp. 238–53.

28   For a good overview of this topic, see Jefferson J. A. Gatrall, *The Real and the Sacred: Picturing Jesus in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2014), pp. 62–89.

29   Letter from Viktor Vasnetsov to Adrian Prakhov, Spring 1885. Reprinted in *Viktor Vasnetsov: pis'ma, novye materialy*, ed. by Liudmila Korotkina (St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo 'ARS', 2004), p. 58.

30   V. Svechnikov, 'Tvorchestvo V. M. Vasnetsova i ego znachenie dlia russkoi religioznoi zhivopisi', *Svetil'nik: religioznoe iskusstvo v proshlom i nastoiashchem*, 67 (Moscow, 1913), 3–19 (p. 5).

> The infantile art of our ancient icon-painters was, of course, powerless in managing this impossible task [of naturalistic representation], due to ignorance and ineptitude. In the drawings of Vasnetsov all of ancient antiquity attained new form and a new hue. And from here — his art connects contemporaneity with the centuries-old history and past of the people, the poetry of its infancy with the perfection of new art.[31]

Vasnetsov's paintings simultaneously upheld the authority of the Church and the Academy without deviating too much in the direction of the latter. Paradoxically, however, to the devout 'simple folk', who worshipped in the new revivalist churches, Vasnetsov's images did not register as 'icons'. Thus, the British writer Rosa Newmarch reported that when a group of "peasants" were asked how they liked the "splendid" new Cathedral of St Vladimir and the "wonderful pictures in it," they responded that they "like[d] the old icons best" because Vasnetsov's works had "too much life in them".[32]

Vrubel's religious artworks, on the other hand, were both aesthetically and theologically deviant. They violated the authority of the Academy and that of the Church on the level of style and iconography and were accordingly censured. The St Cyril frescoes were repeatedly criticised for being overly archaizing, and even anachronistic, since they did not reflect the most up-to-date, fashionable realist style, but instead appeared to hark back to an earlier, outmoded representational idiom. Vrubel's figures were deemed to be anatomically incorrect and poorly executed. They seemed to perversely and deliberately repeat the "hideousness" and "deformation" of the twelfth-century originals. Ironically, it was precisely the effective 'medievalism' of Vrubel's art that affronted nineteenth-century viewers. As the art historian and critic Vsevolod Dmitriev wrote in 1913, the aesthetic re-evaluation of medieval Russo-Byzantine art did not take place until the twentieth century, and only then were Vrubel's 'Byzantine' works fully appreciated by the artistic establishment and the general public alike:

> We are witnesses of and participants in a remarkable re-evaluation: ancient Russian icon-painting, till quite recently dead and superfluous for us, today attracts us with ever greater force, as a wellspring of living and immediate beauty. This re-evaluation, which has fundamentally transformed our tastes and our requirements [of art], has also extended to Vrubel […]. The mural paintings at St Cyril's, the studies for St Vladimir, and the late 'Byzantine' works of Vrubel, which used to appear as the prelude and conclusion to the more important Moscow period of the artist's activity, we now want to put forward as Vrubel's most fundamental, his most vital aspect.[33]

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31   *Ibid.*

32   Rosa Newmarch, *The Russian Arts* (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1916), p. 224.

33   Vsevolod Dmitriev, 'Zavety Vrubelia', *Apollon*, 5 (May 1913), 15–18 (p. 15), http://www.v-ivanov. it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon. "Мы — зрители и участники знаменательной переоценки: древнерусская иконопись, еще недавно бывшая *для нас* мертвой и ненужной, ныне все с большей и большей силой притягивает нас, как родник красоты живой и близкой. Эта переоценка, существенно изменившая наш вкус и требования, коснулась и Врубеля […]. Росписи Кирилловской церкви, эскизы для Владимирского собора последние «византийские» работы Врубеля, прежде понимаемые только как вступление и заключение к главному московскому периоду творчества художника, нам хочется выдвинуть вперед как основное, как самое жизненное во Врубеле."

However, in the 1880s this was not yet the case. Accordingly, when Prakhov invited Vrubel to submit designs for the interior decoration of the newly built St Vladimir Cathedral, they were promptly rejected by the jury, who deemed them to be too stylistically and iconographically unconventional to be included in the project. Instead, the commission was given to Vasnetsov, Nesterov, the brothers Pavel and Alexander Svedomsky, and the now largely forgotten Polish artist, Wilhelm Kotarbinsky, while Vrubel was invited to execute only a few small decorative ornaments on the interior columns of the cathedral. Retrospectively, it is not hard to see why the conservative jury found Vrubel's studies to be so problematic. In their compositional simplicity and modernist succinctness, Vrubel's unprecedented designs stood apart from the mainstream of Russian nineteenth-century church decoration. Unlike the St Cyril frescoes, where Vrubel adhered much more scrupulously to the medieval originals, the St Vladimir sketches betray a focused search for a stylistic and conceptual breakthrough. As in *Demon Seated*, in these works Vrubel employed medieval means to modernist ends.

Prakhov himself recognised the originality of Vrubel's proposed fresco cycle, observing that his "superb sketches" required a cathedral in an entirely different and "exceptional style".[34] For instance, in one version of the *Lamentation* (fig. 2.10), Vrubel depicted the seated Virgin against a low horizon, towering above the flat, horizontal body of Christ, which is virtually reduced to a single white line.

2.10 Mikhail Vrubel, *Lamentation I*, 1887. Sketch for a mural in the St Vladimir Cathedral, Kyiv. Pencil, watercolour, and whitewash on paper, 43.4 x 59.2 cm. State Museum of Russian Art, Kyiv. Photograph © Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Scala, all rights reserved.

2.11 Mikhail Vrubel, *Lamentation II*, 1887. Detail. Sketch for a mural in the St Vladimir Cathedral, Kyiv. Pencil, watercolour, and whitewash on paper, 43.4 x 59.2 cm. State Museum of Russian Art, Kyiv. Photograph © Fine Art Images/ Heritage Images/Scala, all rights reserved.

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34   N. A. Prakhov, 'Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel", reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, p. 187. "Превосходные эскизы показал мне сегодня в соборе Михаил Александрович, но для них надо построить собор совершенно в особенном стиле."

A diminutive cross is visible against the setting sun in the distant background, referencing the Crucifixion. Two cypress trees on the right-hand side of the image rhythmically repeat the vertical silhouette of the Virgin's body. The resolutely perpendicular placement of the Virgin in relation to the horizontal Christ echoes the configuration of the cross, signalling the underlying spiritual geometry of the composition. Although Vrubel did not portray Christ and the Virgin with traditional haloes, the setting sun on the horizon, strategically rendered just above Christ's head, metaphorically doubles as a luminous nimbus. Thus, instead of employing standard Orthodox iconography, Vrubel relied on purely compositional devices to signal the sacred nature of the depicted scene. Similarly, rather than emphatic gesturing and outward signs of emotion, typical of lamentation scenes, Vrubel depicted the Virgin with a stoic facial expression in a moment of quiet meditation, exemplifying a particularly 'modern' sensibility of interiority and controlled grief. The solid, vertical, upward thrust of the Virgin's body is striking in its reticent minimalism, while the entire scene is rendered with just a few, unmodulated strokes of colour within a flattened, shallow space.

In another variant of the *Lamentation* (fig. 2.11), Christ and the Virgin are situated indoors with two windows just above the Virgin's head dominating the entire design. Rather than occupying the centre of the image, Christ and the Virgin are again relegated to the bottom edge of the composition. In his treatment of the Virgin's garments and face, Vrubel began to explore the mosaic-like fragmentation of form into distinct colour patches, which he would develop more fully in his subsequent paintings *Demon Seated* and the *Portrait of Savva Mamontov.* The two windows, rendered as flat, white geometric planes against a monochromatic, dark background, have an almost proto-Suprematist quality. Composed of passages of negative space — brilliant white blank paper — they become the visual focal point of the composition. Their role as 'windows' suggests an opening into another spatial register, inviting the viewer to look through them, but simultaneously frustrating this desire with their flat opacity. Since Vrubel did not submit this particular work to the jury for the St Vladimir commission, these blank windows cannot simply be understood as architectural features in the cathedral, around which Vrubel structured his design. Instead, they seem to serve a purely pictorial and metaphorical function in the image. In their striking, white luminosity, they were perhaps intended to function symbolically as gateways into the holy realm, to which human beings do not have direct access except through the mediation of Christ and the Virgin, who are accordingly depicted in the immediate foreground of the image and closest to the viewer. Akin to the gold background of icons, these windows serve as a material reminder of the separation between this world and the one that lies beyond. In his choice of stark, rectangular forms, Vrubel may have even been drawing on the holy geometries of Orthodox iconography, where Christ was often depicted enthroned against a background of three large geometrical shapes: a red diamond, a blue-black

oval, and a red rectangle. The same visual effect was repeated by Vrubel in his design for the *Resurrection* (fig. 2.12), in which Christ is shown emerging out of a grave, framed by a stylised *mandorla* of simplified geometric shapes.

2.12 Mikhail Vrubel, *Resurrection*, 1887. Central panel of a triptych; side panels depict figures of angels. Sketch for a mural in the St Vladimir Cathedral, Kyiv.
Photograph © Bridgeman Images, all rights reserved.

Lastly, the visual impenetrability of the windows in the *Lamentation* scene may also suggest the essential unknowability of the realm beyond, signalling Vrubel's own existential doubts and long-term interest in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche.[35] Unlike Vasnetsov's fanciful starry night sky in the *Holy Trinity*, Vrubel's designs gesture towards a Nietzschean — and by extension, a quintessentially modern — attitude towards faith and religion, marked by doubt, ambiguity, self-questioning, and introspection. Needless to say, this stance was antithetical to official Church doctrine, which demanded that iconic representations affirm rather than question the

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35 For an in-depth study of Vrubel's sustained interest in Nietzsche, see *Aline Isdebsky-Pritchard*, 'Art for Philosophy's Sake: Vrubel Against "the Herd"', in *Nietzsche in Russia*, ed. by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 219–48.

metaphysical realities they depict. However, by the opening decade of the twentieth century, a new generation of artists and Symbolist poets and writers began publicly to endorse the extraordinary originality and compositional inventiveness of Vrubel's St Vladimir sketches, signalling a change of direction in Russian aesthetic tastes and spiritual sensibilities. To these younger viewers, Vrubel's searching, dialectical, 'free' approach to religious representation appeared to be more sincere, substantive, and resonant with modern reality. In addition, it struck them as being paradoxically closer to the spiritual ethos of the medieval prototypes, in contrast to what was perceived as Vasnetsov's and Nesterov's passive, mechanical imitation of ossified Orthodox dogma. Thus, writing in 1900, Alexandre Benois expressed his profound disappointment with the works of Vasnetsov and Nesterov in the St Vladimir Cathedral:

> [At the time of their creation] the St Vladimir frescoes aroused considerable pride among the Russian public as only the contemporaries of Raphael and Michelangelo might have been proud of these masters' creations in the Vatican […]. However, once I encountered the St Vladimir murals in situ, I abandoned all of my previous illusions. I was deeply saddened […] the problem was that [Vasnetsov] took more upon himself than he could manage! […] The falsehood inherent in the St Vladimir murals signified not the personal deception on the part of the artist, but rather the deception, deadly and terrible, of our entire spiritual culture.
>
> I was even more disappointed with the frescoes of my 'friend' Nesterov. His altarpiece of the Nativity betrayed both flagrantly bad taste and a sweet-and-flabby sensibility, which the artist tried to masquerade as something delicate and fragrant […]. However, after having seen this Nativity, I fully understood that Nesterov was irretrievably lost to genuine art.[36]

Only Vrubel received unconditional praise from Benois:

> I went […] to the St Cyril Church, specifically for the purpose of acquainting myself with Vrubel's works. I dedicated almost three hours to the close scrutiny of his frescoes and even if I did not leave the church with some kind of sense of indefinable joy, I was nonetheless amazed by the sheer technical mastery with which the very unusual 'local images' of the iconostasis were painted […] and by what I would call the 'inspired

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36　Alexandre Benois, *Moi vospominaniia*, Vols. IV, V (Moscow: Nauka, 1980), p. 275. "Владимирским собором русские люди той эпохи гордились так, как разве только современники Рафаэля и Микеланджело могли гордиться фресками обоих мастеров в Ватикане […]. Однако, увидав роспись Владимирского собора на месте, я простился с какими-либо иллюзиями. Я был глубоко огорчен […] беда была в том, что [Васнецов] взялся за задачу, которая была ему не по плечу! […] Фальшь, присущая 'стенописи' Владимирского собора, не личная ложь художника, а ложь, убийственная и кошмарная, всей нашей духовной культуры. Еще более я был огорчен во Владимирском соборе своим 'другом' Нестеровым. Его запрестольная картина, изображающая 'Рождество Христово', выдает и ужасающий дурной вкус и нечто сладковато-дряблое, что художник пытается выдать за нежно-благоухающее […]. Однако, после того, что я увидал это 'Рождество', я понял, что Нестеров безвозвратно потерян для подлинного искусства."

intelligence' with which [Vrubel] restored the Old Byzantine frescoes […] and created the entirely new ones […]. Everywhere a deep reverence towards antiquity is harmoniously combined with the creative outbursts of a free imagination.[37]

If Vrubel, instead of Vasnetsov, would have been able to execute on a monumental scale his ideas [for the Cathedral of St Vladimir] […] then probably […] we would have been the only place in the world in contemporary times, where on the walls of God's cathedral there would have appeared a truly living and truly inspired *logos*.[38]

Writing over two decades after Benois, the leftist art critic Nikolai Tarabukin went further, claiming that Vrubel was single-handedly responsible for bringing about an aesthetic re-evaluation of the iconic representational idiom in the twentieth century:

At the time that Vrubel began his works [in Kyiv], there were no archaeological discoveries of […] and scholarship on ancient [Russo-Byzantine] mural painting, which are accessible to us today. The turning point in attitudes towards the ancient past of Russian art occurred after Vrubel. In his oeuvre, Vrubel himself turned out to be a pioneer of Russo-Byzantine art, as a result of which the art of the past appeared to the gaze of the contemporary world in a totally different light.[39]

Tarabukin's assertion was, of course, inaccurate, given that scholars such as Nikodim Kondakov and Prakhov had already begun to publish their research on medieval Byzantine and Russian art and architecture as early as the 1870s and 1880s. However, as already mentioned, at that moment public taste was still largely rooted in a naturalistic tradition of painting, and it was not until the twentieth century that icons began to enjoy a much broader aesthetic appreciation. Consequently, just as Dmitriev had suggested a decade earlier, Tarabukin had not been entirely wrong in claiming that Vrubel's artistic consciousness and worldview already belonged to the twentieth rather than the nineteenth century.

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37 *Ibid.*, pp. 276–77. "Я побывал в […] Кирилловском монастыре, специально для того, чтоб ознакомиться в нем с работами Врубеля. Посвятил я этому обозрению часа три и если и не покинул собор в состоянии какого-то восторга, то все же я был поражен тем, с каким мастерством написаны очень своеобразные 'местные образа' в иконостасе […] и с каким, я бы сказал, 'вдохновенным остроумием' [Врубель] реставрировал древние фрески […] а местами заново сделал к ним добавления […]. Всюду пиетет к старине гармонично сочетается с порывами творчества свободной фантазии."

38 Alexandre Benois, 'Vrubel", *Mir Iskusstva*, 10–11 (1903), 175–82 (p. 179). "Но, если-бы Врубелю, вместо Васнецова, досталось воплотить в грандиозных размерах свои замыслы […] то, наверное… единственно у нас, в настоящее время и в целом мире, появились-бы на стенах Божьего храма истинно-живые, истинно-вдохновенные слова."

39 See Nikolai Tarabukin, *Vrubel'* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974), p. 135. "В то время, когда Врубель приступал к своим работам [в Киеве], не было тех реставрационных открытий […], ни тех исследований о древней стенописи, которые доступны ныне нам. Перелом во взглядах на прошлое русского жуства произошел после Врубеля. В своем творчестве Врубель сам оказался пионером наследия русско-византийского искусства, в результате чего былое предстало взору современности совершенно в ином виде."

Vrubel's exposure to medieval mosaics and frescoes in Kyiv not only influenced his oeuvre stylistically, but also made a lasting thematic impact on his art, prompting the artist to turn to uncanny subject matter and to explorations of the darker aspects of human psychology. In fact, in the course of the restoration works, Vrubel spent much of his time studying and sketching the mentally ill patients of a small psychiatric clinic that had been set up in some of the disused buildings of the former monastery, not far from the church. He found that the patients' physical expression of inner turmoil formed a useful parallel to the scenes of religious ecstasy that he was depicting in the St Cyril frescoes.[40] By contrast, during his student years at the Academy Vrubel had predominantly depicted literary, historical, and classical subject matter. It was only after his time in Kyiv that the artist devoted himself almost exclusively to supernatural themes. Even long after the completion of the St Cyril project, Vrubel continued to depict biblical and religious subjects, developing his own particular brand of Symbolism filled with supernatural and mythological beings, fairies, woodland creatures, angels, and demons. In this way, his encounter with the medieval Russo-Byzantine artistic tradition not only contributed to the evolution of his painterly style, but also to his conceptual and theoretical approach to art. In fact, after the rejection of his sketches from the St Vladimir project, Vrubel seemed to transfer his frustrated aspirations for monumental religious painting into his Demon series. In a telling letter to Vrubel's sister, the artist's father explained that Vrubel conceptualised the Demon not so much as an "evil spirit", but one "that is suffering and insulted, but nevertheless a spirit that is powerful […] [and] noble" — a characterisation of the Demon that Vrubel's subsequent biographers and critics would come to read as an avatar for the artist himself.[41]

Vrubel produced his first Demon sketches in 1885 while he was still in the process of restoring the Church of St Cyril. In his monograph on Vrubel, Tarabukin argued that there was a direct correlation between the Demon series and the St Cyril frescoes, even on the level of iconography. According to Tarabukin, the physiognomy of the St Cyril Virgin gradually evolved into that of the Demon, and he claimed that the latter became the antithesis of the former.[42] Indeed, a comparison between Vrubel's sketches of the Virgin's head and that of the *Demon* (figs. 2.13 and 2.14) reveals shared facial features such as the downward slant of the round, large, expressive eyes, the long, uneven ridge of the nose, the full plump lips, and even the tilt of the head.

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40 Dora Kogan, *M. A. Vrubel'* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), p. 72.
41 Letter from Aleksandr Vrubel to Anna Vrubel, 11 September 1886. Reprinted in Gomberg-Verzhbinskaia, *Vrubel'*, p. 118.
42 Tarabukin, *Vrubel'*, p. 21.

2.13 Mikhail Vrubel, *Study for the Virgin*, 1884. Pencil and gouache on paper, 43 x 32.3 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © Bridgeman Images, all rights reserved.

2.14 Mikhail Vrubel, *Head of Demon*, 1890. Watercolour on cardboard, 23 x 36 cm. State Museum of Russian Art, Kyiv. Photograph © Bridgeman Images, all rights reserved.

The Virgin's face was thus transformed into a slightly hardened and more virile visage of the Demon. By contrast, Iaremich thought that the facial features of Vrubel's *Moses*, rather than the Virgin, were directly translated into the early Demon works.[43] In either case, there seemed to be an explicit link between the iconographic types that Vrubel had developed for the St Cyril commission and that of the Demon. In the years 1887 to 1900 a distinct stylistic and thematic evolution occurred in Vrubel's work, wherein the figure of the Demon became an amalgamation of all of the artist's previous experiences with religious art and public monumental painting. The lines of demarcation between the angelic, the demonic, and the Christological thus became increasingly blurred in these years to the point of being wholly interchangeable.

For example, the iconographic and physiognomic type of the *Angel* (fig. 2.15), which Vrubel had initially developed for the St Vladimir project in 1887, was gradually transformed by the artist into the prototype for the Demon. In fact, subsequent scholars have variously labelled Vrubel's *Study of a Head* (fig. 2.16) as either the *Head of an Angel*, dated 1887, or alternatively the *Head of the Demon*, dated 1890.[44] Similarly, the same pencil drawing from 1904 has also been variously titled *The Demon* or *The Seraph* in different publications, indicating the slippage in fixed iconographic meaning.[45] Of course, given the fact that the Demon was himself an angel at one point, this iconographic continuity was certainly appropriate to the subject matter and the duality that was already implicit in the nature of the 'fallen' angel. It is therefore not surprising that the subjects overlap in Vrubel's oeuvre from the start of his artistic career until the end, becoming more prominent in his late paintings. For example, the largest of Vrubel's late paintings, *The Six-Winged Seraphim* of 1904, is closely related to his 1902 magnum opus, *Demon Cast Down* (fig. 2.17) both in facial type and the emphasis on the beautiful, coloured wings which envelop both figures.

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43   Iaremich, *Vrubel'*, p. 54.

44   Nina Dmitrieva dates the work to 1887 and calls it the *Head of an Angel* (see Dmitrieva, *Vrubel'*, p. 52). Petr Suzdalev also identifies this work as the *Head of an Angel*, but dates it to 1889 (see Petr Suzdalev, *Vrubel'* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1991), p. 158). Meanwhile Irina Shumanova and Evgeniia Iliukhina identify the same drawing as the *Head of the Demon* and date it to 1890 in Irina Shumanova and Evgeniia Iliukhina, 'Prorok i mechtatel": M. A. Vrubel' i V. E. Borisov-Musatov', *Nashe Nasledie*, 77 (2006), 140–57.

45   The drawing was titled *The Demon* in the journal *Apollon*, 5 (May 1913), pages not numbered, and *The Seraph* in the 1957 State Tretyakov Gallery Vrubel exhibition catalogue (*Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel': Vystavka Proizvedennii*, ed. by O. A. Zhivova (exh. cat., Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1957), p. 160) and the 1976 catalogue of the exhibition 'Le Symbolisme en Europe' (*Le Symbolisme en Europe: Exposition Rotterdam, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen* (exh. cat., Paris: Editions des Musées Nationaux), p. 240.)

2.15 Mikhail Vrubel, *Angel with a Candle*, 1887. Watercolour, pencil, and varnish on paper, 69 x 26 cm. State Museum of Russian Art, Kyiv. Photograph © Bridgeman Images, all rights reserved.
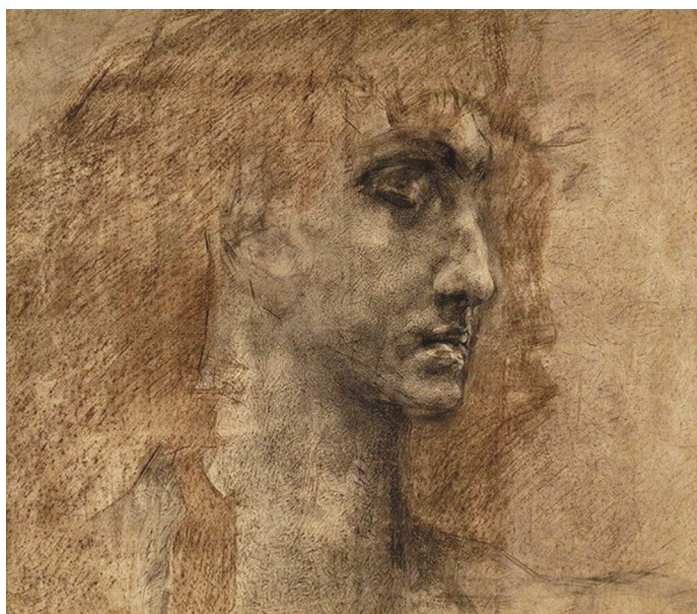
2.16 Mikhail Vrubel, *Head of an Angel*, 1887 or *Head of the Demon*, 1890. Charcoal and red crayon on paper, 41 x 68 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph © Bridgeman Images, all rights reserved.

However, *Demon Cast Down* also alludes to Christ's suffering and sacrifice by showing the demon wearing what looks like a crown of thorns on his head, a traditional symbol of Christ's Passion. Moreover, according to the reports of his friends, Vrubel was planning to exhibit his *Demon Cast Down* in Paris under the title *Icône*, clearly aligning this work with the spiritual and aesthetic realm of religious art.[46] Even on the level of form, Vrubel wanted *Demon Cast Down* to resemble an icon, and he had meticulously applied a metallic bronze powder to the demon's wings, which would catch the light, producing a glowing, reflective effect typical of an icon. The painter Konstantin Bogaevsky recalled that when he saw the painting on the first day of its display at the World of Art exhibition in 1902:

> It produced a strong impression on me, which I can compare to no other. It glowed as if it were made of precious gems, so that everything around it seemed grey and unsubstantial [...]. Vrubel's 'Demon' has darkened severely, the colours which once shone on the canvas have paled; the bronze powder which was used for the peacock feathers has become green [...].[47]

References to Christ have also been read into Vrubel's *Demon Seated*, whose intense self-reflection, clasped hands, and poignant isolation in an empty landscape have often been compared to Ivan Kramskoi's painting *Christ in the Wilderness* (1872), which shows an emaciated and haggard-looking Christ, deep in thought and contemplating His onerous fate in a rocky, desert setting.[48] In his later years, Vrubel claimed to greatly admire this work, as well as Nikolai Ge's *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* (1888) because of the latter's 'demonic' qualities.[49] Vrubel's unconventional merging of the conceptual and formal boundaries between Christ and Satan, the angelic and the demonic, the profane and the iconic, and damnation and redemption reflects a particularly modern, *fin-de-siècle* mentality, characterised by a feeling of alienation from the Christian experience and a sense of the disintegration of previously fixed and stable identities and institutions, including those of conventional morality and the religious establishment.

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46   Janet Kennedy, 'Lermontov's Legacy: Mikhail Vrubel's Seated Demon and Demon Downcast', *Transactions of the Association of Russian-American Scholars in the US*, Vol. 15: On Russian Art (New York: Association of Russian-American Scholars in the USA, 1982), 163–84 (p. 176).

47   Letter from Konstantin Bogaevskii to Sergei Durylin, 12 January 1941. Quoted in Sergei Durylin, 'Vrubel' i Lermontov', *Literaturnoe Nasledstvo*, 45–46 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1948), 541–622 (p. 594). "Впечатление она произвела на меня большое, ни с чем несравнимое. Она сияла точно драгоценными каменьями, и все остальное на выставке рядом с нею казалось таким серым и незначительным [...]. 'Демон' Врубеля сильно почернел, сияющие когда-то краски на холсте потухли; бронзовый порошок, который был вкраплен в павлиньи перья позеленел [...]."

48   Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel*, p. 100; Mikhail Allenov, *Mikhail Vrubel'* (Moscow: Slovo, 1996), p. 87.

49   Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel*, p. 97.
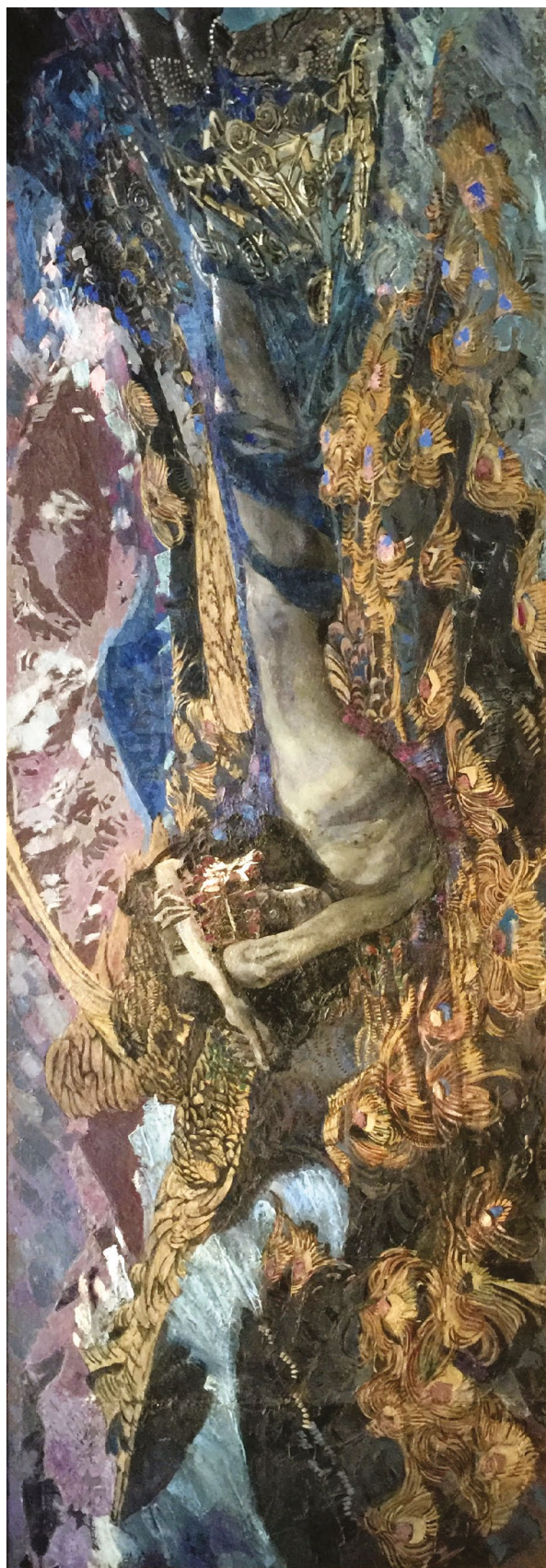
2.17 Mikhail Vrubel, *Demon Cast Down*, 1902. Oil on canvas, 139 x 387 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vrubel_Fallen_Demon.jpg

In addition, it was precisely in the years that Vrubel first began to work on his Demon in the mid-1880s that he also produced a series of paintings illustrating Christ's Passion, which he subsequently destroyed leaving only a charcoal sketch of *Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane* (1888). It was at this moment that Vrubel first experienced something of a personal religious crisis. Writing to his sister Anna in December 1887, he complained that while he was working on his paintings of Christ "with all his might" he began to feel a profound sense of malaise towards his Christian identity, an emotion that continued to plague him until the end of his life and especially during his illness.[50] Given Vrubel's interest in the writings of Nietzsche, it would seem that in his conception of Christ, the demon, and the figure of the prophet, Vrubel envisioned a heroic individual — even a martyr — whose rebellion against the conventional morality and dominant trends of his times seemed to mirror Vrubel's own artistic struggles. From his university years, the artist had rejected mainstream religiosity and especially its formulation in the works and theories of Leo Tolstoy, which Vrubel claimed resulted in the oppression of the human spirit and the creative impulse. Whether or not Vrubel saw himself in prophetic terms as an avant-garde martyr to conservative artistic tastes is unclear, but he was certainly understood as such by many of his contemporaries, such as Aleksandr Blok, Benois, and Muratov. Both of Blok's articles, 'To the Memory of Vrubel' and 'On the Present State of Russian Symbolism', imply the fusion of self-sacrifice and prophetic vision as the condition for Vrubel's art; the same idea is expressed by Muratov in his essay, 'About High Art'.[51] Similarly, in his 1910 article on Vrubel for the journal *Speech* (*Rech'*), Benois concluded that "Vrubel was more than just an artist — he was a prophet, a seer, a demon".[52]

Vrubel's dedication to the prophetic, the visionary, and the iconic reached its apogee in the years leading up to his premature death in 1910, and almost all of his major late works exclusively deal with Biblical subjects and the supernatural. In the years 1904 to 1905 he painted *The Six-winged Seraphim* (1904), *Angel with a Sword* (1904), the *Head of the Prophet* (1904–05), the *Prophet* (1904–05), *Head of John the Baptist* (1905), and *The Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel* (1906), among others. In many ways, this final cycle of religious works can be interpreted as a symbolic summation or culmination of the central stylistic and thematic preoccupations that characterised Vrubel's entire career. For example, in its iconic frontality, pronounced linearity, and vivid palette, the watercolour of the *Head of John the Baptist* (fig. 2.18) again recalls the artist's St Cyril murals, such as his fresco of *Moses* and the *Head of Christ*.

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50   *Ibid.*, p. 77.
51   Aleksandr Blok, 'Pamiati Vrubel'ia', *Iskusstvo i pechatnoe delo*, 8–9 (1910), 307–09; 'O sovremennom sostoianii russkogo simvolisma', *Apollon*, 8 (1910), 21–30, http://www.v-ivanov.it/issledovaniya_i_ materialy/apollon; Pavel Muratov, 'O vysokom khudozhestve', *Zolotoe runo*, 12 (1901), 75–84.
52   Alexandre Benois, 'Vrubel", *Rech'*, 91 (April, 1910). Reprinted in *Aleksandr Nikolaevich Benua: Khudozhestvennye Pis'ma, 1908–1917, Gazeta 'Rech''. Vol. I: 1908–1910*, ed. by Iu. N. Podkopaeva, *et al.* (St Petersburg: Sad Iskusstv, 2006), pp. 409–11 (p. 411).

2.18 Mikhail Vrubel, *Head of John the Baptist*, 1905. Watercolour and pencil on paper,
21.3 x 17.6 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Reproduced in *Zolotoe runo*, 1906,
1, Colour inset. Photograph by Maria Taroutina (2017), public domain.

Similarly, *The Six-winged Seraphim*, also known as *Azrael* or the *Angel of Death* (fig. 2.19), harks back to Vrubel's *Demon* paintings in its striking grandeur, monumentality, and ambiguous duality. In terms of iconography, *The Six-winged Seraphim* closely resembles the *Demon Seated* with his long black hair, powerful neck, blue-grey complexion, hollow eyes, and large peacock wings. Just like Vrubel's Demon, Azrael is an ambiguous, conflicted figure. Crowned with a lustrous diadem and holding a glowing red censer in his left hand, the angel is the source of heavenly light and salvation on the one hand. However, on the other hand, he is simultaneously the harbinger of death, wielding a large, ominous dagger in his right hand, and signifying suffering and destructive intent. Just like the Demon, who was once an angel, Azrael appears as a liminal figure who stands on the threshold of heaven and hell, embodying both the angelic and the demonic, or redemption and damnation. On a formal level, *The Six-winged Seraphim* combines many of the techniques that Vrubel first used in *Demon Seated* and *Demon Cast Down.* Vrubel's modelling of form on the angel's face and neck repeats the interlocking, contrasting colour patches that he used to build up the bulky body of *Demon Seated.* In their regularity and geometricity, these blocks of paint resemble mosaic tesserae even more than in *Demon Seated* and appear to have been applied with a palette knife, rather than a paintbrush (fig. 2.20).

2.19 Mikhail Vrubel, *The Six-winged Seraphim (Azrael)*, 1904. Oil on canvas, 131 x 155 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph © Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Scala, all rights reserved.

2.20 Mikhail Vrubel, *The Six-winged Seraphim (Azrael)*, 1904. Detail. Oil on canvas, 131 x 155 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph by Maria Taroutina (2017), public domain.

Meanwhile, the expressive swirl of crystalline brushstrokes on the angel's wings and garments recalls the fragmented, chaotic mass of peacock feathers in *Demon Cast Down.* Measuring 131 by 155 cm., this work is one of the largest of Vrubel's late paintings — his penultimate, poignant attempt at monumental religious art.

The Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel (fig. 2.21) is considered to be Vrubel's last work and approaches near abstraction in its radical dissolution of form. Executed on cardboard in mixed media — charcoal, watercolour, and gouache — it depicts a heavenly vision as described in the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel. In the bottom right-hand corner of the image, the face of a bearded man — presumably Ezekiel — is depicted looking up at a tall, fearsome angel who holds a downward pointing sword in his right hand. Next to the angel is another floating masculine face, but one that lacks a clearly identifiable body. The pronounced spatial ambiguity of this work is produced by a multiplicity of layered, shifting fragments of form that splinter into infinite depths and yet insist on returning to the surface of the picture plane. An explosion of angular, faceted shapes destabilises the figure-to-ground relationship so that it becomes difficult to tell where one form projects forward and another recedes into the background, producing a dynamic all-over effect. The only stable visual anchor in the whole composition is the angel's dark head in the central, upper register of the image. Otherwise, the intermingling of segments of wings, limbs, and dissolving faces creates a complicated, disorienting web of form that approaches abstraction more closely than in any other of Vrubel's late works.

2.21 Mikhail Vrubel, *The Vision of the Prophet Ekeziel*, 1905. Charcoal, watercolour, and gouache on cardboard. 102.3 x 55.1 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph © Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Scala, all rights reserved.

In fact, it is as though Vrubel's initial experimentation with the 'abstract' qualities of Russo-Byzantine art in the Church of St Cyril had come full circle and had reached its most logical conclusion both in terms of style and subject matter, heralding a new era in Russian art. Adrian Prakhov's son, Nikolai, went so far as to read the beginnings of Rayonism — an early abstract art movement inaugurated by Mikhail Larionov in around 1913 — in the fragmented, energetic, linear shards of *The Vision of the Prophet Ezekiel*. Indeed, Larionov himself claimed that Vrubel exerted more influence on him than Cézanne.[53] As a number of scholars have written, many members of the younger generation of artists passed through Kyiv in the early 1900s and were deeply affected by their encounters with Vrubel's St Cyril frescoes. Liubov Popova's visit to the church in 1909 left her "vanquished" by Vrubel's "incinerating" talent.[54] Similarly, Aleksandr Rodchenko asserted that in the early 1910s he "painted like Vrubel", while Vladimir Tatlin prized and avidly collected Vrubel's artwork.[55] Other budding avant-garde talents who had encountered Vrubel's work in Kyiv in the early 1900s include Natalia

53   Isdebsky-Pritchard, *Art of Mikhail Vrubel*, p. 88.
54   Dmitry Sarabianov and Natalia Adaskina, *Popova* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990), p. 14.
55   German Karginov, *Rodchenko* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), p. 10; Liubov' Rudneva, 'Vladimir Tatlin — Tridtsatye gody', in *Vladimir Tatlin: Leben, Werk, Wirkung: ein internationales Symposium*, ed. by Jürgen Harten (Cologne: Dumont, 1993), pp. 459–63 (p. 462).

Goncharova, Aleksandra Ekster, Aleksandr Archipenko, David Burliuk, and Kazimir Malevich, among others.

Yet, whether or not Vrubel's religious works contributed to the advent of abstraction in Russia in the new century is almost impossible to ascertain with any certainty. However, what is clear is that Vrubel's radical rewriting of the Russo-Byzantine artistic idiom, as well as his combination of formal innovation with visionary transcendentalism, paved the way for artists such as Malevich and Kandinsky, for whom spirituality and abstraction came to represent two sides of the same modernist coin. Dmitriev summed it up best, describing Vrubel as:

> An artist who managed to raise above the heads of his contemporaries the future 'necessity' of art […] already perceived his significance before and more astutely than anyone else. […] Vrubel, in the last years of his life, had already arrived at a conception of art, which we are only now beginning to approach. Consequently, our reappraisal is not the result of the fashion of the day. We are merely trying to follow the path that Vrubel had indicated to us.[56]

As paradoxical as it may sound, by embracing the artistic traditions of the past, Mikhail Vrubel was able to anticipate many of the formal and conceptual innovations of the future. Moreover, in their brooding, unorthodox nature, his apocryphal paintings epitomised the modern move away from institutionalised religion towards new spiritual and philosophical possibilities that would be subsequently embraced by a younger generation of writers and thinkers such as Blok, Mikhail Kuzmin, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Zinaida Gippius, and Mikhail Bulgakov. Thus, speaking at Vrubel's funeral in 1910, Blok poetically asserted that in his art and life Vrubel had followed "the sounds of heaven" instead of the "boring songs of earth" — sounds that had inspired the artist to produce his iconic Demon — a "symbol of the age".[57]

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56 Dmitriev, 'Zavety Vrubel'ia', p. 15. "Художник, провидящий через головы современников будущее 'нужное' в искусстве […] он и раньше всех, и верней всех, осознал свое значение. […] Врубель в последние годы жизни подошел к тому же толкованию смысла искусства, к которому ныне подходим мы. Таким образом наша переоценка — не результат моды дня. Мы лишь пытаемся следовать по пути, указанному самим Врубелем."

57 Blok, 'Pamiati Vrubelia', p. 308.

3. 'The Loving Labourer through Space and Time': Aleksandra Pogosskaia, Theosophy, and Russian Arts and Crafts, c. 1900–1917[1]

Louise Hardiman

> Artists of the present time heatedly strive to communicate the essence of nature… [because] everything in us impels us toward nature: our spiritual consciousness, the demands of our aesthetic sensibilities, even our very bodies.
>
> Nicholas Roerich[2]

A fascination with esoteric spirituality and the occult among artistic communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a worldwide phenomenon, which resonated strongly within the outward-looking, innovative cultural milieu of the Russian Silver Age.[3] Though 'modernising' forces in Russian art began with

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1   I would like to express my thanks to Sarah Victoria Turner for her comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

2   Nicholas Roerich, 'Toward Nature' (1901), in N. K. Rerikh, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Sytin, 1914), trans. by John McCannon, https://isfp.co.uk/russian_thinkers/nikolay_roerich.html

3   The epithet 'Silver Age' was given to the period from the late 1890s until the late 1910s (see John E. Bowlt, *Moscow and St Petersburg in Russia's Silver Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2008), p. 9). At the time of writing, the history of the dialogue between esoteric movements (unconventional religions) and artistic modernism is the subject of considerable scholarly attention. For example, the international research project 'Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, Modernism and the Arts, c. 1875–1960' aims to foster research and networking specifically with regard to the influence of the Theosophical movement (https://www.york.ac.uk/history-of-art/enchanted-modernities/). Recent publications on the subject of esotericism and its cultural ramifications during the rise of modernism include: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult*, ed. by Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012); Jenny McFarlane, *Concerning the Spiritual: The Influence of the Theosophical Society on Australian Artists, 1890–1934* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publ., 2012); Caroline Maclean, *The Vogue for Russia: Modernism and the Unseen in Britain, 1900–1930* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). In relation to Russia and the former Soviet Union,

the resignation of fourteen students from the Imperial Academy of Arts in 1863, the shift towards finding spiritual inspiration beyond the conventions of Orthodoxy only made itself felt some three decades later, as the century drew to a close. It was evident in the turn towards Symbolism in the 1890s, a movement in which notions of spirituality became more abstract: this was a quest for life's intangible essence, an exploration of the immaterial, as opposed to material, world. For the avant-garde artists who followed, the growing interest in non-mainstream spirituality became ever more influential.[4] Yet, within this evolving redefinition of the spiritual, the so-called 'neo-national' movement — a late nineteenth-century movement in art, craft, and music that played a central role in the history of modernism — has been less explored. The point of departure for this chapter is the Talashkino artists' colony founded by Princess Maria Tenisheva (1858–1928) (fig. 3.1), where the influence of unconventional spirituality began to emerge in the early 1900s. The arrival of Nicholas Roerich [Nikolai Rerikh] (1874–1947) (fig. 3.2), an artist who would become one of Tenisheva's closest collaborators, heralded a shift from exploring a national, pagan past to seeking a universal mysticism.[5]

A little-known figure linking Roerich, Tenisheva, and unconventional religion within the neo-national movement is the Russian émigré, Aleksandra Loginovna Pogosskaia (1848–1931). This chapter explores Pogosskaia's campaign to place the development and production of Arts and Crafts (primarily, but not only, Russian) within the cultures of Theosophy.[6]

There is some logic to this seemingly unusual pairing. Fundamentally, both movements had universalist aims and aspirations; both had global reach and sought

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publications on this subject include: *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) and *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimension*, ed. by Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemeister, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012).

4   Bowlt has written extensively on this phenomenon. See, for example: John E. Bowlt, 'Esoteric Culture and Russian Society', in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, ed. by Maurice Tuchman (exh. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA: Abbeville Press, 1986), pp. 165–82; John E. Bowlt, 'Russkoe obshchestvo i ezoterism', in *Malevich. Klassicheskii avangard*, ed. by T. Kotovish, Vol. 3 (1997), 69–73; John E. Bowlt, 'V. Kandinsky i teosofiia', in *Mnogogrannyi mir Kandinskogo*, ed. by N. Avtonomova, *et al*. (Moscow: Nauka, 1998), pp. 30–42. Groundbreaking exhibitions on the subject of the spiritual in art also drew greater attention to this topic; see, for example: Tuchman, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*; *Okkultismus und Avantgarde: von Munch bis Mondrian, 1900–1915*, ed. by Veit Loers (Frankfurt: Edition Tertium, 1998).

5   For a detailed account of the neo-national (and *kustar*) movements in English, see Chapter 4, 'The Neo-Russian Style', in Evgenia Kirichenko, *Russian Design and the Fine Arts: 1750–1917* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), pp. 135–273, and Wendy R. Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

6   I use the western art-historical term 'Arts and Crafts' here as a descriptive term for neo-national art and the revival of peasant industries ('*kustar*' art) in Russia. Certainly, the Russian neo-national movement can be positioned as an analogue to other so-called 'Arts and Crafts' movements around the world, as many scholars have noted; yet there are numerous differences — indeed, it was not described as such by Russian scholars until very recently (Soviet and earlier Russian scholarship has tended to focus on broader notions of 'national romanticism' and 'art nouveau').

3.1 Ilia Repin, *Portrait of Maria Tenisheva* (1898). Charcoal on canvas. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia. org/wiki/File:Maria_Tenisheva_by_I.Repin_(1898,_GTG).jpg
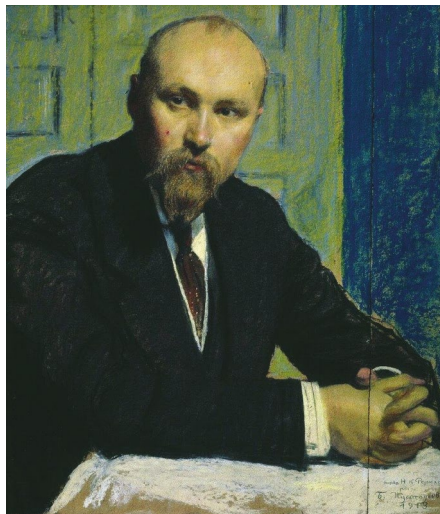
3.2 Boris Kustodiev, *Portrait of Nicholas Roerich* (1913). Pastel on cardboard, 60 x 52.5 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:N.Roerich_by_B.Kustodiev_(1913).jpg

to alter public opinion, fighting an ever increasing shift towards materialism and a growing spiritual deficit. Practically and intellectually there were many synergies. Thus my aim here is not only to extend debate on the spiritual dimensions of Russian artistic modernism but also to bring fresh insight to the neo-national movement and, specifically, its international reach. The cross-cultural and supra-national aspects of modernism, as well as cosmopolitanism within the Arts and Crafts movement, have received much scholarly attention in recent years; this chapter engages with the question of how esoteric spirituality was a route for cross-cultural artistic interchange in the modernist and Arts and Crafts contexts.[7]

Unconventional Spirituality and the Neo-National Movement

The career of Pogosskaia and her turn to Theosophy set her apart from the trends of the broader neo-national movement, especially in its earlier years. As has been well documented, the movement was characterised by a return to national traditions in subject-matter and style in the arts; its starting point was the artists' circle established by Savva Mamontov and his wife Elizaveta in the early 1870s at Abramtsevo, their picturesque country estate in the northern environs of Moscow. With its members' interest in such modernist concerns as form, idea, and medium, Abramtsevo has gained a reputation as the 'cradle' of the Russian avant-garde.[8] However, with regard to spiritual influences, it was conservative. Underpinning the tension between the modern, the national, and the spiritual were the site's Slavophile and Orthodox associations, which, before its acquisition by Mamontov, had been the home of the Aksakov family from the early 1840s. As a result, subsequent artistic developments were deeply imbued with these traditions; in the words of Peter Stupples, this was a space that was not only "uniquely positioned within the heartland of Russian Orthodoxy", but one which, under Mamontov, became an "Orthodox and Slavic structural social space".[9] Members of the circle were inspired by the ancient church architecture of Novgorod and Yaroslavl for their most important collaborative venture — the design and building of a new church on the estate (*Church of the Saviour Not Made by Hands* (1881–82)) (fig. 1.3). Though artists took liberties with Orthodox norms (such as the

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7   See, for example, Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (London: Phaidon, 2006). The international research network 'Internationalism and Cultural Exchange, 1870–1920' has also explored a number of these themes: https://iceresearchnetwork.wordpress.com

8   Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863–1922* (second edition, revised and enlarged by Marian Burleigh-Motley) (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), p. 9. However, in her prescient comments in a journal article published at around the *fin de siècle*, the British art journalist Netta Peacock wrote of the "new movement", the future of which "lies in the fact that it deals more with colour than it does with line, and, with rare exceptions, deals with simple subjects, simply treated" (Netta Peacock, 'The New Movement in Decorative Art', *International Studio*, 13 (May 1901), 268–76 (p. 268)).

9   Peter Stupples, 'Abramtsevo: Resisting and Accepting Cultural Translation', *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 45, 1 (2011), 71–90 (p. 76). For a detailed examination of the spiritual dimensions of the Abramtsevo circle, see Inge Wierda, 'Abramtsevo: Multiple Cultural Expressions of a Russian Folk and Religious Identity' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2008).

rearrangement of the iconostasis, as Oleg Tarasov has examined in detail) and with style (for example, Ilia Repin's starkly realistic depiction of Christ in his icon of the Saviour), their approach was largely conventional in its approach to iconography.[10] In short, to find signs of a shift beyond mainstream spiritual traditions in the neo-national movement we must move to Talashkino, the second of its principal sites.

Founded by Tenisheva in the late 1890s, the colony at Talashkino was a centre for the revival of national art, whose aims — like those of the group at Abramtsevo — resonate with those of the international Arts and Crafts movement. The country estate near Smolensk hosted visiting artists and encouraged artistic communality and creative enterprise, with a focus not only on painting but also sculpture, decorative art, and architecture. Local peasant communities were trained to produce decorative art to the designs of professional artists (the revived '*kustar* industries', which Wendy Salmond has documented in detail).[11] These were philanthropic initiatives, designed to give economic support to declining cottage industries with the help of professionally trained artists.

Like their Abramtsevo counterparts, Talashkino artists concerned themselves with the exploration of traditions drawn from folk art, and themes drawn from myth and legend featured heavily in their art. But the colony's spiritual direction was largely driven by Tenisheva herself, and for several years of its activity her closest colleague was the spiritually experimental Roerich. Whether Tenisheva shifted towards a more esoteric approach due to his arrival on the scene, or vice versa, is unclear. His unconventional spirituality has been well documented, as by Soviet times it became thoroughly idiosyncratic and he eventually founded his own sect.[12] Yet Tenisheva is thought to have sparked his interest in the past roots of ornamental traditions and the migration of peoples, rather than the other way around.[13] These ideas certainly appear consistent with Theosophical teachings: for example, the idea of a historical lineage of symbols and signs concurs with the principle advocated by Helena Blavatsky (1831–91) in *The Secret Doctrine*, of 'accumulated Wisdom of the Ages'; moreover, Blavatsky and some other theosophists believed in the migration of peoples over generations from the two ancient (mythic) continents of Atlantis and Lemuria.[14] Thus Tenisheva may have been an early influence upon Roerich's spiritual path — and perhaps an adherent of Theosophy herself — though there is no firm evidence as yet. A potentially important figure here is Princess Sviatopolk-Chetvertinskaia, the previous owner of the Talashkino estate who became a lifelong friend and companion to Tenisheva — allegedly Sviatopolk-Chetvertinskaia was a Theosophist.

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10   See Oleg Tarasov, *Framing Russian Art: From Early Icons to Malevich*, trans. by Robin Milner-Gulland and Antony Wood (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), pp. 105–24.

11   See Salmond, *Arts and Crafts*.

12   For a biography of Roerich, see Alexandre Andreyev, *The Myth of the Masters Revived: The Occult Lives of Nikolai and Elena Rerikh*, Eurasian Studies library, Vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

13   Anita Stasulane, *Theosophy and Culture: Nicholas Rerikh* (Rome: Editrice Ponteficia, Universita Gregoriana, 2005), pp. 156–57.

14   *Ibid.* Blavatsky put forward the theory that all peoples stemmed from seven 'root' nations, the most well-known (now notorious) of which was the 'Aryan' (Indo-European) race.

What is clear is that Tenisheva and Roerich had a shared vision that the true source of artistic inspiration lay in antiquity, and their interests were developing over a similar period. Roerich first visited Tenisheva in 1903, and they saw one another for the last time in 1914.[15] Each revered the other: in a flattering tribute in Tenisheva's publication *Enamel and Inlaid Work* (*Emal' i inkrustatsiia*), Roerich wrote of the princess's "tireless activity, fearlessness, thirst for knowledge, tolerance, and capacity for inspired creativity".[16] Likewise, Tenisheva eulogised in her memoirs that: "of all the Russian artists I met in my life, [Roerich] was the only one with whom I could talk […]. Our relationship is brotherhood".[17] Interesting here is her use of the word 'brotherhood', with its connotations of shared belief systems and of fraternity — ideas which were common to both the Arts and Crafts and Theosophist projects.

Tenisheva's belief that antiquity was of the greatest importance for contemporary artistic practice led her to build a substantial collection of pre-Christian art and artefacts, and she also incorporated ideas and symbols drawn from ancient traditions in her own art and crafts.[18] Her collection was later donated to the Moscow Archaeological Society, though it remained in the city of Smolensk in the 'Museum of Russian Antiquity' (fig. 3.3) which she had commissioned, using her own funds, to house it (Muzei 'Russkaia Starina', opened in 1905).[19]

Whether Tenisheva's interest in pagan art was simply for 'art's sake' or revealed something about her spirituality is difficult to discern. Though Roerich's philosophical exploration of esoteric belief systems is clearly evident from his writings, the source most likely to reveal Tenisheva's stance — her memoirs — gives no clues. If something akin to Roerich's unconventionality can be detected, it is in the strange, emblem-like symbols and hints of eastern ornamental tradition in some of her embroidery designs, an observation that supports Larisa Zhuravleva's claim that Tenisheva was fascinated by the east.[20] Zhuravleva's source may have been a comment from Roerich himself, who wrote that Tenisheva had been occupied with "the problems of artistic legacies, expressed in the traditions and ornaments of the Far East".[21] But such assessments are also consistent with an interest in antiquity and the roots of ornament; concerns which are again common to both Arts and Crafts and Theosophy.

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15 L. S. Zhuravleva, *Talashkino: Ocherk-putevoditel'* (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1989), p. 138.

16 N. K. Rerikh, 'Pamiati M.K. Tenishevoi', first published in M. K. Tenisheva, *Emal' i inkrustatsiia* (Prague, 1930), in N. K. Rerikh, *Iz literaturnogo naslediia* (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1974)), http://lib.icr.su/node/599. "Неутомимость, бесстрашие, жажда знания, терпимость и способность к озаренному труду — вот качества этих искателей правды."

17 M. K. Tenisheva, 'Sviatye minuty' in *Rerikh v Rossii* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi tsentr Rerikhov, 1993), p. 69, cited in Stasulane, p. 11. (The translation here is Stasulane's).

18 For more on the significance of 'antiquity' at Talashkino, see Katia Dianina, 'An Island of Antiquity: The Double Life of Talashkino in Russia and Beyond', in *Rites of Place: Public Commemoration in Russia and Eastern Europe,* ed. by Julie Buckler and Emily D. Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), pp. 133–56.

19 On the history of the Museum of Russian Antiquity, see V. I. Skleenova, *Istoriia Muzeia Russkaia Starina* (Smolensk: Svitok, 2012).

20 Zhuravleva, *Talashkino*, p. 148.

21 "[…] проблемы наследия искусства, выраженные в традициях и орнаментах далекого Востока." (Rerikh, 'Pamiati').

3.3 Collection of Maria Tenisheva in the Museum of Russian Antiquity in Smolensk (Muzei 'Russkaia Starina'). Photograph. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Princess_Tenisheva_Museum_in_Smolensk.jpg

3.4 The Church of the Holy Spirit, Flenovo. Designed by Nicholas Roerich. c. 1907. Photograph © Smolensk State Museum-Reserve, all rights reserved.

Tenisheva strongly approved of Roerich's art, giving pride of place to his paintings in the displays of art and artefacts from Talashkino that she curated for prominent venues in Paris (1907) and London (1908).[22] When, in 1908, Tenisheva returned to Talashkino, it was Roerich that she appointed to design the interior decoration of the church on the Flenovo estate (fig. 3.4). Construction had begun in 1900, the result of a joint project between Ivan Barshchevsky, Sergei Maliutin, and Tenisheva (fig. 3.5), but had been put on hold when Tenisheva fled to Europe as a result of insurrection at the colony.[23]

After the initiative was handed over to Roerich, Tenisheva and he were sole collaborators. Roerich recalls that they agreed jointly upon the name and also the iconography for the interior: "[We] decided to call this the Church of the Spirit [*Khram dukha*]. Moreover, a central place had to be given to the image of the Mother of the World".[24] These decisions indicate the unconventional nature of the designs. For the exterior, Roerich adapted Maliutin's original idea for a large mosaic of the head of Christ above the main entrance. His scheme for the interior was more radical: a large fresco for the dome and wall above the altar space inside which he called 'The Queen of Heaven at the River of Life' ('*Tsaritsa nebesnaia na beregu reki Zhizni*') (fig. 3.6). The subject was esoteric, apparently drawn from theosophical texts, though the inclusion of haloed seraphim and cherubim surrounding the Queen incorporated elements of Christian iconography (figs. 3.7 and 3.8).[25] The Queen herself, according to a comment by the artist's wife, Elena Roerich, was modelled on the Indian goddess Kali, a female counterpart of Shiva.[26]

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22 On Tenisheva's exhibitions in Paris and London, see Louise Hardiman, '"Infantine Smudges of Paint… Infantine Rudeness of Soul": British Reception of Russian Art at the Exhibitions of the Allied Artists' Association, 1908–1911' in *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture*, ed. by Anthony G. Cross (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012), pp. 133–47, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0022

23 Zhuravleva, *Talashkino*, pp. 20, 147. The architectural design was drawn from Sergei Maliutin's sketches.

24 *Ibid.* "Мы решили назвать этот храм — Храмом Духа. Причем центральное место в нем должно было занимать изображение Матери Мира."

25 For images of the church, see: M. K. Tenisheva, *Khram Sviatogo Dukha v Talashkine* (Paris: Russkoe Istorikogenealogicheskoe obshchestvo vo Frantsii, 1938). For Roerich's description of the fresco, see N. K. Rerikh, 'Tsaritsa Nebesnaia', in his *Sobranie sochenenii. Kniga pervaia* (Moscow: Izd-vo. I. D. Sytin, 1914). An image can also be viewed online: Nikolai Rerikh [Nicholas Roerich], 'Tsaritsa Nebesnaia' in *O Vechnom…* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1991), http://n-k-roerich.ru/books/item/f00/s00/z0000004/st152.shtml.

26 Andreyev, *The Myth of the Masters Revived*, p. 29. Andreyev also comments that during the pre-War period, Roerich and his wife Elena became increasingly interested in Theosophy and were exploring eastern religions too (p. 26). At this time, Roerich also worked on interior designs for a Buddhist temple in St Petersburg commissioned by a Buryat Lama, Agvan Dorzhiev (on the temple, see Alexandre Andreyev, *Khram buddy v Severnoi stolitse*, second edition (St Petersburg: Nartang, 2012). The extent of Elena Roerich's influence upon the spiritual turn of her husband's art has been the subject of debate. The couple met in 1899, a few years before Roerich met Tenisheva, and Elena accompanied Roerich on his archaeological expeditions in the early 1900s. From around the 1910s the couple developed a shared interest in esoteric spirituality in its various guises, but it is not known whether Elena directly influenced Roerich's ideas for the Talashkino church. After moving to London in 1919 both Elena and Nikolai would become members of the Theosophical Society, and both would publish esoteric texts (for example, in the 1930s Elena translated two volumes of Helena Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* into Russian). The spiritual sect, Agni Yoga, founded in 1920, was their joint project.

3.5 Sergei Maliutin, 'Project for a Church at Flenovo' (1901). Watercolour, whitening and pencil on carton. Photograph © Smolensk State Museum-Reserve, all rights reserved.

3.6 Nicholas Roerich, *The Queen of Heaven at the River of Life*. Fresco. Church of the Holy Spirit, Flenovo. Reproduced in *Iskusstvo*, 1911. Photograph in the public domain. The New York Public Library Digital Collections, http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/ items/510d47df-97c5-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99
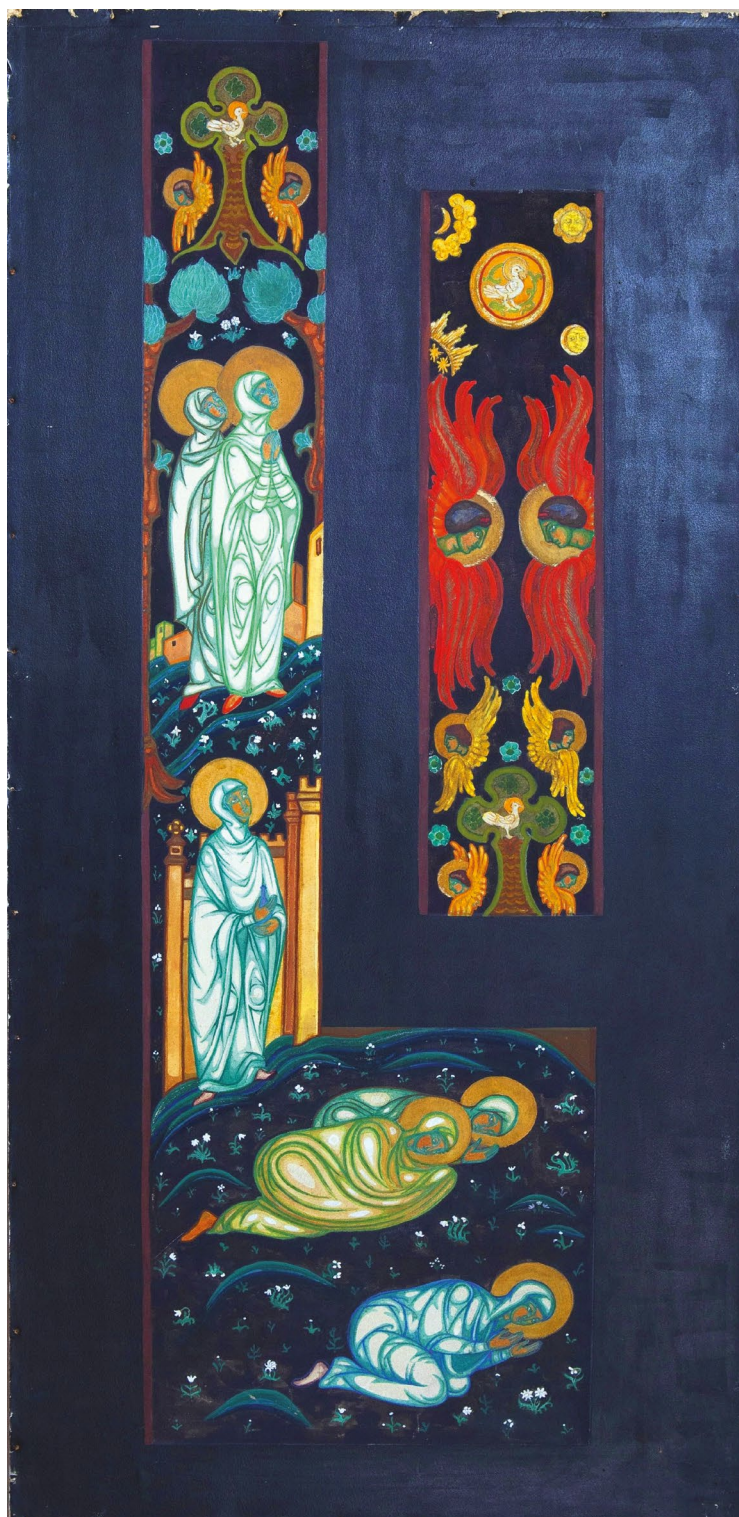
3.7 Nicholas Roerich, *Sacred Wives. Seraphim. Sketch for the altar design of the Church of the Holy Spirit at Flenovo*, 1909–10. Paper on cardboard, tempera. 105 x 49 cm. Photograph

3.8 Nicholas Roerich, *Throne of the Invisible God. Sketch for the altar design of the Church of the Holy Spirit at Flenovo*, 1909. Paper on cardboard, tempera. 58 x 91 cm.

Unfortunately a detailed examination of the paintings is now limited to what can be discerned from photographs, as the interiors were damaged during the Second World War (the church itself still stands, and has recently benefited from a new roof). The fresco was intended, according to Roerich, to be a "synthesis of all iconographic representations", which he said had brought Tenisheva "lively joy", seemingly confirming that this had been a joint idea.[27] The designs were sufficiently distinct from Orthodox convention to result in the church never being consecrated.

Pogosskaia: A Brief Biography

The part which Pogosskaia played in Tenisheva's enterprise dates from the earlier period of Talashkino's history, before Roerich's sustained involvement; in around 1902 she was appointed to the post of commercial manager for an outlet in Moscow called 'The Source' (*Rodnik*), selling Talashkino artefacts in Russia and abroad.[28] As the Princess found out at their first meeting, Pogosskaia already had an established career in Britain and the United States promoting Russian arts and crafts, and offered a deep knowledge of peasant culture as well as overseas experience. Her daughter, Anna, was also hired by Tenisheva, to run a dyeing workshop sited in the striking *teremok* building designed by the colony's artistic director Maliutin. Here, Anna shaped the production of the colony's textiles and embroideries, but an allegation of fraud concerning the two Pogosskaias led to a dispute with the Princess and their swift departure from the colony after only a few months.[29]

It is not known whether Pogosskaia played any part in shaping the spiritual interests of Tenisheva; this seems unlikely. She herself became a member of the Theosophical Society only in 1909, some six years after her association with Talashkino. Perhaps something can be made of Pogosskaia's appreciation of the symbolism in embroidery or her promotion of vegetable dyes as the source of the truest forms of colour — aspects of the ancient traditions of peasant art which not only interested Pogosskaia but would become influential in the later writings of Kandinsky and others (Pogosskaia too would emphasise these in writings of the 1910s, when, in later life, she sought to document her knowledge and experience).[30] However, there is no suggestion that, at this stage, she gave these practices spiritual, or for that matter Theosophical, significance.

Beyond her links to Talashkino, the role of Pogosskaia in the neo-national movement has not yet been documented. However, as both a practitioner and a

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27   Rerikh, 'Pamiati'. "Все мысли о синтезе всех иконографических представлений доставляли М. К. [Tenisheva] живейшую радость."

28   See Jesco Oser, '"Rodnik": A Source of Inspiration', *Experiment: A Journal of Russian Culture*, 18, 1 (2012), 61–88, https://doi.org/10.1163/221173012X643053

29   Mariia K. Tenisheva, *Vpechatleniia moei zhizni* (Paris: Russkoe Istorikogenealicheskoe obshchestvo vo Frantsii, 1933), pp. 255–56 and 340–42.

30   See A. L. Pogosky, 'The Significance of Embroidery', *The Path. A Theosophical Monthly*, 3 (December 1912), 221–28; A. L. Pogosky, 'Crafts', *The Path. A Theosophical Monthly*, 3 (December 1912), 375–78.

promoter of Russian arts and crafts, working mainly abroad, she did much to foster western interest in Russian decorative art of the *fin de siècle*.[31] In her own practice, she specialised in embroidery, book binding, and poker work ('pyrography') — a form of burnt decoration on wood that she had learned from village communities during her youth. According to one brief published account of Pogosskaia's life, her emigration to the United States, and later to Britain and Ireland, was initially sparked by the revolutionary connections of her brothers.[32] She was ceaselessly itinerant — the patchy historical traces of her movements show that from the early 1880s she moved between Florida, New York, London, and Belfast.[33] She claimed to have befriended William Morris while in London, and, although no concrete proof of a relationship has yet been traced, her work was shown at the second exhibition of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1889, and she may have met Morris in this context.[34] She was certainly, at the very least, a spectator at Morris's lectures and a disciple of his teachings, as comments she made in 1913 suggest:

> The inspiring words of W Morris […] still rang in my ears, still spurred me to activity and made me hopeful and convinced that the beauty I seek for my satisfaction will serve all who are on the way to progress, however unfavourable the present circumstances may appear.[35]

Long before her role at *Rodnik*, Pogosskaia's first experience of selling Russian handicrafts was in New York in the early 1890s. She was shop manager for a retail outlet founded by Princess Maria N. Shakhovskaia on 130 East 23rd Street — the 'Russian Cottage Industries'. Set up to capitalise on interest in Russian arts and crafts after the Chicago World's Fair of 1893, the store mainly sold embroideries and laces.[36] Pogosskaia moved to Britain a few years later, to found her own business upon similar principles, and a near-identical name — 'Russian Peasant Industries'. Initially, she

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31 Pogosskaia has been briefly discussed in the literature, though she was referred to as 'Anna'. This may have been a nickname, or there may have been some confusion in earlier accounts between Aleksandra and Anna, her daughter, who was also involved in Arts and Crafts projects (most notably, Talashkino). See Rosalind P. Blakesley, 'The Venerable Artist's Fiery Speeches Ringing in my Soul: The Artistic Impact of William Morris and his Circle in Nineteenth-Century Russia', in *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Grace Brockington (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 79–105; Wendy R. Salmond, *Arts and Crafts*.

32 One of her brothers was Aleksandr Linev, an associate of the 'Land and Freedom' movement (*Zeml'ia i Vol'ia*), who emigrated to the United States; another perished in exile in Siberia. See also: K. Pissarev, 'Alexandra Pogosky: A Biographical Sketch and an Appreciation', *The Theosophist*, XLVI (1925), 660–67, http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/theosophist/theosophist_v46_n1-n12_oct_1924-sep_1925.pdf

33 For more on Pogosskaia, see 'Exotica for the Edwardians: Aleksandra Pogosskaia and the Russian Peasant Industries' in Louise Hardiman, 'The Firebird's Flight: Russian Arts and Crafts in Britain, 1870–1917' (unpublished PhD thesis, 2014), pp. 143–84.

34 'No. 593, Stool in Burnt Wood by Mrs A. L. Korvin Pogosky', *Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society: Catalogue of the Second Exhibition* (London: Chiswick Press, 1889).

35 A. L. Pogosky, *Fellowship in Work* (London: C. W. Daniel, 1913), p. 86.

36 *Fibre and Fabric: A Record of American Textile Industries in the Cotton and Woollen Trade*, 20 (1894), 1240. Shakhovskaia is known in western sources as 'Princess Marie Schahovskoy'.

based herself in Edinburgh, having had a studio there a decade or so earlier. By 1900, she had a successful import-export business selling *kustar* art and artefacts, including embroideries, textiles, furniture, toys, and illustrated books of Russian folk tales. Besides her retail outlets, she organised exhibition and sale events, travelling around the towns of England and Scotland.[37] A surviving publicity brochure shows an older woman, probably Pogosskaia (on the left of the photograph), and a younger woman (on the right), probably her daughter Helena who ran the business with her.[38] With the help of Pogosskaia's children, Russian Peasant Industries continued in business until at least 1921, when Pogosskaia's son Logan exhibited at the Exhibition of Russian Arts and Crafts at the Whitechapel Gallery.[39] By then, Pogosskaia had spent several years in Adyar in pursuit of her Theosophical interests; in her final years she returned to Russia, where she died at a Theosophical commune in Kaluga.

Theosophy and Russian Arts and Crafts

Over the decades of the Russian Peasant Industries' existence, Pogosskaia's commercial success enabled her to establish stores in the most fashionable of London locations; her most prominent shop front was on Bond Street, not far from the renowned Fabergé depot. However, by the pre-War years, her Ruskinian ideal of promoting beauty in manual labour and tenacious approach to commerce shifted to a broader, spiritually-oriented philosophy that found its natural home within the Theosophical movement. Founded in the United States in 1875 by Blavatsky, Henry Olcott, and William Judge, the Theosophical Society gained a considerable following in Britain and Europe in the late nineteenth century, especially among artists and writers. As Maria Carlson writes, Theosophy — 'divine wisdom' (Greek: *theos*, *sophia*) — was "the most intellectually important of the fashionable occult trends of the late nineteenth century".[40] Drawing upon such other esoteric belief systems as Alchemy, Rosicrucianism, and Kabbalism, Theosophists regard themselves as part of an inner circle ('esoteric') of initiates possessing secret knowledge or hidden ('occult') truths. Like Madame Blavatsky — as she came to be known — initiates claim true knowledge of the divine and natural worlds, and, in particular, all that is 'unexplained'. Though theosophical ideas had

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37 Pogosskaia describes her business in detail in A. L. Pogosky, *Revival of Village Industries in Russia* (London and Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1918).

38 'The Russian Peasant Industries', John Johnson Collection: An Archive of Printed Ephemera (ProQuest), The Bodleian Library, Oxford.

39 *An Exhibition of Russian Arts and Crafts at the Whitechapel Galleries* (exh. cat., The Whitechapel Galleries, London, 1921).

40 Maria Carlson, 'Fashionable Occultism: Spiritualism, Theosophy, Freemasonry and Hermetism in Fin-de-siècle Russia' in Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, pp. 135–52 (p. 136). For a history of the theosophical movement in Russia, see Maria Carlson, *"No Religion Higher than Truth": A History of the Theosophical Movement in Russia, 1875–1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). For its influence on *fin-de-siècle* Russian art, see Maria Carlson, 'Fashionable Occultism: The Theosophical World of Silver Age Russia', *Quest; Journal of the Theosophical Society in America*, 99, 2 (Spring 2011), 50–57, https://www.theosophical.org/publications/quest-magazine/2301

appeared in philosophical texts over centuries past, the launch of the Society was, in modern parlance, a 'rebranding', accompanied by Blavatsky's own publications. This was not a religion, she maintained, but simply 'divine knowledge', an idea that was encapsulated in her motto: "there is no religion higher than truth".

Pogosskaia may have been introduced to the movement by Annie Besant (1847–1933), leader of the Theosophical Society in Britain after Blavatsky's death — the two women shared the connection with Morris and Victorian socialist circles.[41] In moving from socialism to Theosophy, Pogosskaia's desire for social change became not only 'universalist', but spiritualist and esoteric. She joined the movement after attending the Theosophical Summer School in Norfolk in the summer of 1909; it was reported that she "spoke of remarkable paintings she had seen executed by an artist possessing clairvoyant vision" and that she "brought […] the spirit of Russia — a link with H. P. B. [Helena Petrovna Blavatsky]".[42] This suggests that Pogosskaia had a strong interest in spiritualism even before she joined the movement, and this would remain central to her engagement with Theosophy. Charles William Leadbetter, the famed spiritualist and Theosophist, recounted an occasion in which she had joined a group exploring psychic presences of the deceased in photographs along with Dr James Coates, an authority on the subject.[43] More importantly, Pogosskaia was to make a unique contribution to occult literature in 1912, publishing a translation of P. D. Ouspensky's *The Symbolism of the Tarot: The Philosophy of the Occult in Pictures and Numbers* (1912). It remains the definitive edition.[44]

Like Roerich and Kandinsky, the initial motive for Pogosskaia to explore esoteric spirituality may have been an interest in peasant culture and the ancient pagan belief systems of the peasantry.[45] She later wrote of her many years of experience of village

41   The timing is a matter for speculation — for example, Besant and Pogosskaia may also have met at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, where Pogosskaia exhibited her handicrafts and Besant was also present, as the Theosophical Society's representative.

42   Crispian Villeneuve, *Rudolf Steiner in Britain: A Documentation of His Ten Visits, Vol. 1* (London: Temple Lodge Publishing, 2011), p. 214.

43   Charles William Leadbeater, *Spiritualism and Theosophy* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1928), http://www.anandgholap.net/CWL_Spiritualism_And_Theosophy.htm

44   P. D. Ouspensky, *The Symbolism of the Tarot: The Philosophy of the Occult in Pictures and Numbers*, trans. by A. L. Pogossky (St. Petersburg: Trood Printing and Publishing Co, 1913).

45   On Kandinsky and esotericism, see: Sixten Ringbom, 'Art in "The Epoch of the Great Spiritual": Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1966), 386–418, https://doi.org/10.2307/750725, and Sixten Ringbom, *The Sounding Cosmos. A Study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Paintings* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1970); Rose-Carol Washton, 'Vasily Kandinsky, 1909–1913: Painting and Theory' (unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University, 1968); Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); John Bowlt and Rose-Carol Washton Long, *The Life of Vasily Kandinsky in Russian Art: A Study of 'On the Spiritual in Art'* (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1980). On Roerich, see: Alexandre Andreev, *The Myth of the Masters Revived: The Occult Lives of Nikolai and Elena Rerikh*, *Eurasian Studies Library, Vol. 4* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); *Rerikhi: Mify i fakty. Sbornik statei*, ed. by Aleksandr I. Andreev and Dany Savelli (St Petersburg: Nestor-Istoria Publishers, 2011); Jacqueline Decter, *Nicholas Rerikh: The Life and Art of a Russian Master* (Rochester, VT: Park Street Press, 1989); Stasulane, *Theosophy and Culture: Nicholas Rerikh*.

life, and would certainly have known the *dvoeverie* (the double belief system held by peasants, reflecting both pre-Christian traditions and Orthodox Christianity). Sorcery and other forms of magic assumed high importance in Russian folk belief; as Linda Ivanits notes in her seminal study of the subject: "no body of superstitions […] exerted a greater influence on the psyche of the Russian peasant than that surrounding sorcery".[46] In this light, Pogosskaia's interest in magic and the occult seem a natural consequence of a deep understanding of folk culture.

Still, the connection between Pogosskaia's artistic interests, her Theosophy, and her occultism merits closer examination. Despite its modern day associations with astrology and fortune telling, the text of *The Symbolism of the Tarot* is laden with pagan and pantheistic imagery, signifying its deeper cultural resonances. The occult tradition lay very much within the framework of Theosophical teaching, and Pogosskaia's writings after joining the movement show an acceptance of the concepts of masters and initiates, ancient truths, esoteric texts, and symbols. From the 1910s onwards she used Theosophy as a means to support her international campaign to promote Russian Arts and Crafts, making use of pantheistic imagery in her publications. In her translation of *The Symbolism of the Tarot*, we read, for example, of the Goddess: "I felt the breath of the Spring […]. Rivulets murmured, the grasses whispered, innumerable birds sang in choruses and bees hummed; everywhere I felt the breathing of a joyful, living nature".[47] In 1911, she used similar language in her article proposing an 'International Union of Arts and Crafts'. Here, a description of the peasant home, in a text aimed at celebrating peasant values, became a paean to a universal life force: "man was surrounded by symbols of Isis; he read a meaning into the lofty trees and the mysterious flowers […]; he heard from his cradle of unseen forces of Nature, of mysterious beings […]".[48]

In her writings on Arts and Crafts Pogosskaia invoked the idea that ancient wisdom and myth were both precursor to, and a still-living tradition for, peasant communities and their folk art and culture; she claimed, for example, that there "was a constant union and intermixing of real life with legends of ancient time; it was the Russian Frost born from the prehistoric eastern cradle".[49] The emphasis in these texts was on the omnipotence of the natural world, the evocation of a pantheistic belief system consistent with the paganism of Russian folk belief. The notion of 'Ancient Wisdom' — that which underpins all religions — was central to Theosophy. For Pogosskaia, peasant textiles and embroidery were the source of symbols with long-held meanings; as scholars of Russian folk art have since acknowledged, a greater

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46   Linda J. Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* (New York: M. E. Sharpe Inc., 1989), p. 83.

47   P. D. Ouspensky, *The Symbolism of the Tarot: Philosophy of Occultism in Pictures and Numbers,* trans. by A. L. Pogossky (St Petersburg: The Trood Printing and Publishing Co., 1913), p. 31.

48   A. L. Pogosky, *The International Union of Arts and Crafts. Part 1* (Adyar Pamphlets, 79. Reprinted from *The Theosophist*, Vol. 32 (1911)) (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1917), https://www.levir.com.br/theosophy/ArtsCrafts1.htm

49   A. L. Pogosky, *The International Union of Arts and Crafts. Part 1.* Presumably here Pogosskaia is referring to the legendary figure of 'Father Frost' (*ded moroz*) from Russian folklore.

number of ornamental motifs found in carving and textile designs are derived from ancient pagan symbols, for example, the 'tree of life' and representations of goddesses in embroidered ritual cloths.[50] As Mary B. Kelly has identified, such images have transcendental meanings, drawn from concepts of esoteric spirituality:

> When a goddess [in embroidery] is holding a tree, she is identified with the journey to the spirit world or to the world of the sky deities. The tree, its roots in the earth but its topmost branches in the heavens is the link between heaven and earth. […] The figure of the goddess has similar meaning; her feet planted firmly on earth, while her head and arms reach to the sky. Both symbols transcend worlds.[51]

The other key tenet of the Theosophical movement which appears to have attracted Pogosskaia was its mission to form a "universal brotherhood of humanity", an idea which she applied directly to the context of Arts and Crafts practice.[52] At heart a socialist and a humanitarian, she saw communal artistic activity as the means for peasants to become self-supporting and thus alleviate some of the hardships caused by the famines of recent years. Under the auspices of the Theosophical movement, she founded a new organisation, 'The International Fellowship of Workers', which she launched at the International Theosophical Summer School held by Rudolf Steiner at Swanwick, Derbyshire, in August 1911.[53] As if to illustrate by example the productive potential of the craft industries, she also staged an exhibition of "national and traditional handicrafts, chiefly Russian" for the benefit of attendees.[54]

In joining the Theosophical Society, it would seem that Pogosskaia found a community of like-minded ideologues and a new philosophy of life. In 1913, she set

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50   V. S. Voronov, *Krest'ianskoe iskusstvo* (reprint, ed. by T. M. Razina and L. I. S'iontkovskaia-Voronova) (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924); V. V. Stasov, *Russkii narodnyi ornament. Vypusk pervyi. Shit'e, tkani, kruzheva* (St Petersburg: Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1872); also see Anthony Netting, 'Images and Ideas in Russian Peasant Art', *Slavic Review*, 35, 1 (March 1976), 48–68, https://doi.org/10.2307/2494820

51   Mary B. Kelly has written extensively on the use of pre-Christian imagery in embroidery. See, for example, Mary B. Kelly, 'Käspaikka — esihistoriallisen symboliperinnon kantaja' ('Käspaikka: A treasured legacy of symbols from pre-history'), in *Käspaikka Muistiliina, Käspaikka–Memory Cloths*, ed. by Leena Säppi and Lauri Oino (Helsinki: Maahenki Oy, 2010), 9–37, and Mary B. Kelly, 'The Ritual Fabrics of Russian Village Women' in *Russia–Women–Culture*, ed. by Helena Goscilo and Beth Holmgren (Bloomington, IA: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 152–76.

52   In a circular of 1878, the mission of the Theosophical Society was distilled into three key tenets, of which this was one. Mary K. Neff, *Personal Memoirs of H. P. Blavatsky* (London: Rider, 1937), pp. 260–61, cited in *Helena Blavatsky*, ed. by Charles Goodrick-Clarke (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2004), p. 11 (note 22).

53   Villeneuve, *Rudolf Steiner*, p. 284. According to one scholar, the President of the Fellowship was Walter Crane (see Mark Bevir, 'Annie Besant's Quest for Truth: Christianity, Secularism and New Age Thought', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 50 (1999), 215–39)). Bevir writes: "numerous socialists joined the International Fellowship of Workers, an organisation affiliated to the Theosophical Society, with Walter Crane as its president". This adds weight to the theory that Pogosskaia's connections to leading figures of the English Arts and Crafts and Socialist movements had endured over a long period, from the 1880s, when she met Morris, to the 1910s. However, I have found no other evidence of Crane's involvement in Pogosskaia's organisation, and more research is needed to establish whether such influential links as these existed between Theosophical and Arts and Crafts circles.

54   *Ibid*.

out the principles of her new arts and crafts organisation in a polemical tract, *Fellowship in Work* (also published in Russian under the title *IdeAly truda kak osnova shchastlivoi zhizni'* — 'The Ideals of Labour as the Basis for a Happy Life').[55] It opens with a short manifesto:

> This Fellowship declares that all true work is an expression of Love, and therefore seeks:
>
> 1st. To bring about a recognition of this fact, and to develop by every means all work that promotes a perfect, harmonious human life.
>
> 2nd. To encourage and support each country's national and traditional handicrafts by stimulating and reviving the inherent skill of the workers themselves.
>
> 3rd. To afford opportunities, by exhibitions, conferences, literature, and other suitable means, for bringing together from all countries of the world examples of work which are impressed with the identity of the worker and are a true expression of beauty.[56]

Pogosskaia uses a citation from Walt Whitman's poem cycle, *Leaves of Grass*,[57] as the epigraph to begin *Fellowship in Work*:

> Ah, little recks the labourer,
> How near his work is holding him to God,
> The loving Labourer through space and time
>
> After all, not to create only, or to found only,
> But to bring, perhaps from afar, what is already founded,
> To give it our own identity, average, limitless, free,
> To fill the gross, the torpid bulk, with vital religious fire […].[58]

The chosen lines are from 'Song of the Exposition', first recited by Whitman at the opening of an industrial fair in New York City in September 1870.[59] With its emphasis on the superiority of labour and its divine nature, the text was a perfect fit for Pogosskaia to illustrate her philosophy. These words also seemed uncannily to reflect her own journey through the art world of the long nineteenth century, for she was well-versed in the international exhibition circuit both as exhibitor and promoter. Whitman's celebration of the worker is consistent with Arts and Crafts ideology, and couched in spiritual terms: not only in his reference to the 'God-liness' of work that harks back to John Ruskin, spiritual father of the English movement, but also in the reference to universal space and time. Prescient of the concerns of artists of the early twentieth century, the poetic notion of the "loving labourer through space and time"

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55   A. L. Pogosky, *Fellowship in Work* (London: C. W. Daniel, 1913) and A. L. Pogosskaia, *Idealy truda kak osnova shchastlivoi zhizni* (Kaluga: Lotos, 1913).

56   *Ibid*., p. 38 (cited and translated by Salmond, p. 243, note 60).

57   'Leaves of Grass' was the title poem in the collection of the same name published in 1855 and republished on several occasions up to a final edition, of 1891–92.

58   Pogosky, 'Fellowship in Work'.

59   It was later applied to the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition.

resonates with pagan beliefs, occult religion, and the turn to multi-dimensionality that would soon come in Einsteinian physics.[60]

Pogosskaia's well-established business exporting Russian peasant craft resonated with the poet's exhortation "to bring from afar, what is already founded", and her spiritually motivated approach certainly brought the idea of "vital religious fire". But this was also about the ideal model for the spiritually inspired Arts and Crafts worker, which Pogosskaia identified in the Russian peasant. The Fellowship encouraged the international production of "examples of work which are impressed with the identity of the worker and are a true expression of beauty". The idea falls across several strands of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century thought. Protecting the interests of peasant workers using such socialist concepts as the collective strength of workers through union had long been evident in Pogosskaia's work before she found Theosophy — in the 1890s she had led an organisation in St Petersburg called the 'Society in Aid of Manual Labour'.

Moreover, there are numerous examples of similar initiatives by others involved in the English Arts and Crafts movement, not least in the various guilds and societies founded to harness the collective power of craft workers. For example, similar-sounding aims to those of Pogosskaia's Fellowship and Union were set out by the Peasant Arts Society founded in Haslemere in 1894.[61] Its stated mission repeated a fundamental tenet of the Arts and Crafts movement: "the real revival of Art depends to some extent on making a great many things by hand, which at present are made by machines".[62] But, as with Pogosskaia's organisation, there was also a spiritual component: its successor, the 'Peasant Arts Fellowship' (launched in 1911) championed "the spiritual […] necessity for the restoration of simple country life and crafts".[63] Its founder, Godfrey Blount, continued with the 'New Crusade', with pamphlets containing such strident adhortations as to "faithfully carry our Standard of the Spirit into the fight against materialism".[64] Yet, with her stated goal of achieving a worldwide workers community, Pogosskaia's principles were more universalist, and her grand ambitions made her English antecedents sound rather parochial.

It is possible that the value that Pogosskaia placed in shared labour reflected a feminine sense of collaborative endeavour, based on principles she had seen in village

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60   On the avant-garde and the fourth dimension, see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983; second edition, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

61   The Peasant Arts Fellowship also had a depot in London to sell the handicrafts they produced from cottage industries such as weaving and tapestry making. They also sold other handicrafts, including for example, "Russian pillow lace" (though there is no evidence of their source for this).

62   *The Peasant Art Society* (Haslemere and London: n.p; n.d.). This leaflet was published to coincide with the opening of the depot.

63   The Peasant Arts Fellowship also had a depot in London to sell the craft works they produced from cottage industries such as weaving and tapestry making. Among the handmade items, the fellowship sold 'Russian pillow lace' (though there is no evidence of the source for this).

64   *'On Fellowship'. The Fellowship of the New Crusade* (Pamphlet) (London, 1901).

communities; her international experience, such as her participation in the Woman's Building at the Chicago Universal Exposition in 1893, must have strengthened her perception of the benefits to be gained from female networks, for sharing ideas and also as a means of production. This was, perhaps, a 'sisterhood', an intentional reworking of the brotherhood ideals she knew from the Arts and Crafts movement. Yet another lens through which to view her project is that of socialism. Though invoking the concept of the guild, Pogosskaia's ideas on groups of collective workers, as set out in a chapter on industrial colonies, bear closer resemblance to the 'commune'. In the Russian context, the idea of a group of craft workers working for mutual benefit harks back to the utopianism of Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–89), and closely mirrors the plotlines of his seminal allegory of 1863, *What is to be Done?* (*Chto delat'?*), in which a group of needleworkers become self-supporting.[65] Pogosskaia's comment that work should be "an expression of love" evoked the philosophy of Chernyshevsky, who had maintained that love and labour were complementary.[66] Moreover, her approach seems consistent with the Chernyshevskyian model of the "new woman". If the role of the educated Russian of the 1860s had been to engineer social change — in the manner of Chernyshevsky's "new people" — Pogosskaia was acting as an ideal citizen in the new society, informing others of her utopian philosophy. Indeed, by 1913, when her Fellowship was announced, the reshaping of the labour force along cooperative principles was established communist theory. In sum, it seems that Pogosskaia's prior history of association with Russian revolutionaries and British socialists continued to shape her approach.

Pogosskaia wrote articles for Theosophical publications with themes such as 'The Significance of Embroidery' (foreshadowing Soviet scholarship on the ancient Russian symbolism embodied in folk art), 'On Crafts', 'Work is Love', 'The Reconstruction of Russian Handicrafts', and 'Russian Peasant Industries'.[67] The contents of these texts frequently overlapped, reprising concepts which Pogosskaia had explained in *Fellowship in Work*. In two articles of 1917, Pogosskaia relaunched her society as The International Union of Arts and Crafts, describing it as a centre for the international exchange of ideas about crafts, and a 'source of inspiration and study'.[68] Published as

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65   On Vera Pavlovna's dressmaking shop, see *Chto delat'*, pp. 188–99.

66   Michael R. Katz and William G. Wagner, 'Introduction' in N. G. Chernyshevsky, *What is to be Done?*, ed. by William G. Wagner, trans. by Michael R. Katz (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 1–36 (p. 24). A. L. Pogosky, 'Work is Love', *The Theosophist*, 23, 9 (June 1912), 364–80, http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/theosophist/theosophist_v33_n1-n12_oct_1911-sep_1912.pdf

67   A. L. Pogosky, 'The Significance of Embroidery', *The Path. A Theosophical Monthly*, 3 (December 1912), 221–28; A. L. Pogosky, 'Crafts', *The Path. A Theosophical Monthly*, 3 (December 1912), 375–78; A. L. Pogosky, 'Brotherhood: The Reconstruction of Russian Handicrafts', *The Theosophist*, 39 (April 1918), 9–23, http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/theosophist/theosophist_v39_n1-n12_oct_1917-sep_1918.pdf

68   See A. L. Pogosky, *The International Union of Arts and Crafts. Part 1*, and A. L. Pogosky, *The International Union of Arts and Crafts. Part 2* (Adyar Pamphlets, 80) (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1917), https://www.levir.com.br/theosophy/ArtsCrafts2.htm

they mostly were, as Theosophical pamphlets, the audience for these schemes was necessarily limited, and, as a result, they seem to have been of minor influence. The International Union continued to exist for some years after Pogosskaia's death in 1921, under a new name: 'The International Fellowship of Arts and Crafts'; however, little is known about its later history. Suffice it to mention only that the project appears to have been accorded an important status within the Theosophical movement, for during this period the presidency of the Fellowship was held by two of the movement's most senior figures: Charles Webster Leadbetter (1921–23) and C. Jinarājadasā (1923–27).[69]

Conclusion

Within the Theosophical movement, Pogosskaia saw her promotion of peasant art as part of a wider religious campaign — one seeking to integrate human artistic endeavour with spiritualist philosophy. However, consistent with the international reach and universalist aspirations of the Theosophists, her aims were more ambitious than those of comparable English movements. Pogosskaia was not alone in incorporating the esoteric theories of Theosophy into her artistic credo; the works of Ouspensky — especially those related to the 'fourth dimension' — were popular among Russian avant-garde artists, including Kazimir Malevich and Natalia Goncharova, and explorations into the 'non-material' world were common. Indeed, though a more detailed discussion is beyond the scope of this chapter, the key figure in this group is Vasily Kandinsky, not only for the role played by Theosophy in relation to his landmark text *On the Spiritual in Art* (1910–12), but also for the presence of Theosophical content in his works.[70] Pogosskaia herself once remarked that she was seen as a "crank"; however, as one reviewer of her business activities insightfully commented: "hers is the work of no sentimental visionary: you cannot keep a shop in Bond Street for long without a sound business basis".[71] She had used the 'exhibition and sale' event promoted by the Home Arts and Industries and other groups associated with the wider nineteenth-century craft revival to great commercial effect. In short, her search for meaning perhaps was more a reflection of the anxieties of her time — the loss of the pre-industrial age. Thus the campaign to promote Russian arts and crafts was not only about marketing

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69 A report in *The Glasgow Herald* mentions an exhibition of some 293 works of 'arts and crafts' in London, organised under the auspices of the 'International Fellowship of Arts and Crafts' and 'the first exhibition of its kind organised by the Fellowship'; the year coincides with Jinarājadasā's tenure but the organiser is not mentioned (see 'Arts and Crafts Exhibition', *The Glasgow Herald* (1 June 1925)). C. Jinarājadasā was later elected president of the Theosophical Society.

70 Kandinsky's links to Theosophy have long been a subject of debate. See, for example, Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press) and Marian Burleigh-Motley, 'Kandinsky's Sketch for "Composition II," 1909–1910: A Theosophical Reading', in *From Realism to the Silver Age: New Studies in Russian Artistic Culture. Essays in Honor of Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier*, ed. by Rosalind P. Blakesley and Margaret Samu (De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), pp. 189–200.

71 Pogosky, *Revival of Village Industries*, p. 2; Moiret, p. 7.

products that showcased national identity so as to increase exports. It was about collective endeavour for the benefit of humanity, and a fight against materialism. Though she was successful, her call for others to act similarly had no lasting influence, and her proselytising literature faded into history. Her humanitarian project ended up as a religious crusade to promote art as the product of a unifying life force. However, like Roerich, her visionary and mystic compatriot who was once nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, Pogosskaia's goal went beyond her aesthetic agenda — it was to bring nations together in the search for common human and spiritual understanding.

4. Kazimir Malevich, Symbolism, and Ecclesiastic Orthodoxy

Myroslava M. Mudrak

The abstract, non-objective Suprematist paintings of Kazimir Malevich serve as prime examples of spirituality in Russian modernist art. There is no greater testament to this fact than the symbolic placement of *Black Square* (fig. 5.2) at the launch of Suprematism at the 0.10 Exhibition in 1915 at the Dobychina Gallery in Petrograd (fig. 5.3). Malevich positioned the painting in the corner of one of the rooms of the gallery, close to the ceiling, deliberately emulating the common practice among the Orthodox faithful to place family icons, often festooned with hand-embroidered towels, in the revered 'beautiful corner' (*krasnyi ugol*) of their home. It would seem that Malevich's dramatic (and symbolic) gesture flowed logically from his brush with Neoprimivitism — a movement that took inspiration from peasant life, which the artist observed keenly, including the peasantry's outward expressions of faith. As a paradigm of the essentialised image, the icon, no doubt, lay at the core of Suprematism.

Yet Malevich's understanding of the icon would signal an artistic trajectory that predated Neoprimivitism and went beyond the mere appropriation of its pictorial mechanisms. Unlike fellow Neoprimivitists Natalia Goncharova and Vladimir Tatlin, who adopted the icon's linearity, pliated geometric forms, and rhythmic values, and interpreted them to purely formalist ends, Malevich set out to establish a higher purpose for his painting that occasioned spiritual engagement of the kind rooted in his first exposure to Symbolism. The main thesis of this chapter, therefore, is that Malevich's exploration of the supreme by means of simple forms rendered on a flat surface (like the image of a black square on a white background) originated during this earlier period when Malevich and the Symbolists favoured fresco. By contrast, the Neoprimivitists' preoccupation with the icon would only come into prominence

several years later with the flurry of the rediscovery of icons following their cleaning and exhibition in the early 1910s.[1]

The fresco medium, taken up as a new consideration for Malevich, brought together two important artistic sources for formal experimentation, while tapping into the spiritual in art. The ecclesiastical mural painting tradition of Eastern Orthodoxy, especially scenes depicting the congregations of saints and angels seated compactly on the walls of Russo-Byzantine churches, meshed, in Malevich's approach, with prime examples of contemporary Symbolist mural painting. Having been exposed to contemporary French painting in the collections of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov, where the latter had commissioned Maurice Denis to install a cycle of Symbolist murals on *The Story of Psyche* in 1908–09, as well as through local publications, particularly the Russian Symbolist journal, *The Golden Fleece* (*Zolotoe runo*), Malevich also moved closer to a studied recognition of the compressed spaces of Cézanne and the solid swathes of Matisse's colour. In his fresco designs he also followed these artists' preoccupation with the subject-matter of multiple nudes congregated in a forest setting. Primarily, Malevich's approach to art was influenced by the way that the Byzantine sacred tradition was held sacrosanct by the peasants, among whom he lived and whose way of life he revered. In part, this may have been motivated by Malevich's own personal struggle with his Roman Catholic roots and the conflicts with his Polish aristocratic heritage.[2]

It can be argued that the visual culture of the Orthodox tradition shaped Malevich's perception of art as a moral imperative. The example of wall paintings in the old churches of Kyiv and the late nineteenth-century restoration of their ancient frescoes drove home the social exigencies of monumental art, building a community of spectators, reinforcing shared values and a collective engagement with the images portrayed. As an unframed tableau exposing a narrative drama before the spectator, mural design blurred the boundaries between the pedestrian and the transcendent. The artist's own psyche seemed to occupy the interstitial space between two realms, the physical and the ethereal, as it gently coaxed the spectator to participate in the revelation of the scenes depicted. Following in the steps of Symbolist painter Mikhail Vrubel, who preserved the emotional fervour and spiritual expression of ancient fresco, Malevich began to value mural painting as the medium of community.[3] Indeed,

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1   There is much scholarship on the influence of Orthodox icons on the art of Malevich. The most systematic analyses of this borrowing can be found in *Kazimir Malevich e le sacre icone russe: Avanguardia e tradizione*, ed. by Giorgio Cortenova and Evgeniia Petrova (Verona: Palazzo Forti, 2000). For further contextualisation of the influence of the rediscovery of traditional icons on Russian modernism, see Chapter 5 of this volume.

2   Andréi Nakov places heavy emphasis on the psychological weight of Malevich's 'Polishness'. Malevich's uncle, Lucjan Malewicz, a Catholic priest, was one of the leaders of the nationalist Polish insurrection against the Tsar in 1863, which accounts for the family's ending up in Kursk to flee Russian chauvinist persecution. Insisting on the Polish spelling of his name (Malewicz), Nakov claims that "the provincial burden of a Catholic sexton's 'Polishness' was a heavy one for the artist", which imbued his art with "moral connotations" and "to a certain extent religious ones". See Andréi Nakov, *Malevich. Painting the Absolute. Vol. 1* (London: Lund Humphries, 2010), pp. 10 and 27.

3   See Maria Taroutina's chapter in this volume and also Aline Isdebsky-Pritchard, *The Art of Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1910)* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), pp. 67–89, especially pp. 78–80.

when Vrubel produced his unprecedented interpretation of the Pentecost in the choir of the twelfth-century church of the St Cyril monastery in Kyiv in 1884, he privileged the ancient and ecclesiastical medium of fresco to serve as a platform not only for his own personal spiritual expression, but for an engagement with the beholder.[4]

Vrubel belonged to the era of Symbolist painters who sought to preserve for modernity the merits of an essentialised image imbued with a sacred ideal and spirituality. As a younger artist of that generation, Malevich longed to discover this link within his own art and turned to Symbolism for inspiration. The Symbolists aspired towards an ideational art that demanded strict discipline over the pictorial elements, most particularly line and colour. While maintaining an active link with the external forces of modernity — its urbanity, cosmopolitanism, and heightened secularism — the French Nabis, for instance, turned to interior scenes of psychological quiescence, and some, particularly Maurice Denis and Paul Sérusier, sought reconciliation of the sacred and profane in imagery modelled on the ancient practice of fresco painting. For western Symbolists like Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, fresco gave permanence to lofty notions of spiritual and secular cohesiveness, best exemplified by the St Genevieve cycle in Paris, a tendentious Republican commission that graced the Panthéon monument. The politicising agency of Puvis de Chavannes's cryptic renderings of a hermetic world carried as much spiritual weight as the monolithically fluid unity of the choir of disciples of Vrubel's fresco in St Cyril's.

Once Malevich came to Moscow to pursue his art studies, he fully embraced the existentialist uneasiness addressed by the Symbolists. Russian Symbolism, in particular, reflected the temperament of *fin-de-siècle* anxieties by utilising diverse modes of expression: from Ivan Bilibin's illustrations of supernatural figures of old Russian folk tales to Alexandre Benois's nostalgic references to the ultimate social cohesiveness of the courts of Louis XIV and Peter the Great, the works of the 'World of Art' (*Mir iskusstva*) group — formed by Sergei Diaghilev in 1898 — embodied this plurality. Under the banner of the World of Art, artists diversified their approaches to metachronistic subjects, as in, for example, the paintings of Konstantin Somov and the paragonic motifs of Mikalojus Čiurlionis. In so doing, they expanded the thematic and stylistic bounds of Russian Symbolism from the affected to the theurgic, and gave breadth and depth to Symbolism's universally redemptive message. When Viktor Borisov-Musatov synthesised the evocative pastel-tinted classical worlds of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, the linear decorativism of Denis, and the introspective intimate imagery of the Nabis, his work came to epitomise the soulful wholesomeness of Orthodox spirituality.

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4   While supervising students of the Kyiv Drawing School in the restoration of the existing twelfth-century frescoes of the monastery church, Vrubel's novel approach produced unconventional (though never realised) scenes of the *Lamentation* for the church of St Vladimir in Kyiv. In addition to his unusual fresco of the *Descent of the Holy Spirit*, he executed a most enigmatic version of the *Mourning at the Sepulchre* — a theme that will become relevant later in this chapter. For more on the history of Vrubel's work for the church of St Vladimir see Chapter 2 of this volume.

Malevich's arrival in Moscow in 1904 coincided with the completion of a fresco mural project commissioned and designed by Borisov-Musatov for a church in the artist's native Saratov. Under the master's supervision, it was executed by Pavel Kuznetsov, Borisov-Musatov's most renowned follower and key member of a group that would be known as the Blue Rose (*Golubaia roza*).[5] Their signature style was marked by a reductive palette of blue hues and pastel tones applied in thin tracings on their canvases. Imitating the lime plaster walls of fresco that absorb pigment and leave only wispy traces of brushwork, they dissolved their forms into diaphanous scrims that suggest the silhouettes of vaguely defined figures, usually female in gender.

By 1906, when Borisov-Musatov's designs for woven tapestry hangings were shown posthumously in a solo exhibition alongside the last exhibition of the World of Art, a *bona fide*, though short-lived, Symbolist movement in Moscow had reached its apogee.[6] Focusing primarily on pictorial themes of females in secret, private worlds of ritual and initiation, most of Borisov-Musatov's sixty-five pieces on display were studies prepared for gobelins intended for the walls of homes of the bourgeoisie. The artist's signature retrospectivism, characterised by enigmatic dreamy maidens walking through lush emerald grounds of abandoned country estates, delves into a psychological realm of feminine grace and mysterious ritual that links his art to a retrospective period that would seem to have very little to do with the immediacy of Malevich's visceral experience of peasant life in Ukraine.[7]

Yet, under the influence of Borisov-Musatov and the Blue Rose, Malevich made a dramatic shift in his choice of subject and painting materials. Substituting tempera for oil paint and moving away from an Impressionist spectrum to a diluted, monochromatic, and flatly-applied palette, Malevich produced a handful of anomalous paintings between 1907 and 1908 that have received little scholarly attention, mostly because they seem incongruous with his oeuvre and have never before been considered as part of his trajectory toward non-objective painting. This somewhat disconsonant group of works from Malevich's Symbolist period establishes a point of departure in his art that will move him from positivism to the abstract precisely because of its inherent spiritual overtones. It was during his time in Moscow that Malevich abandoned the prosaic subjects and style of Post-Impressionism and instead turned his attention to the synthesising imagery of both western and Russian Symbolism, the latter emerging out of the revivalist impetus of neo-nationalism and its reinvestment in folk values and

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5   In around 1903, Kuznetsov, Petr Utkin (another Saratov artist), and several others keen on Borisov-Musatov's art enrolled at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture.

6   An exhibition of modern Russian art under the name of 'The World of Art' was organised by Diaghilev at the Swedish Lutheran Church in St Petersburg, and opened on February 24, 1906; a related solo exhibition of the work of Borisov-Musatov was held separately. See *Mir iskusstva: On the Centenary of the Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Artists*, ed. by Evgeniia Petrova and trans. by Kenneth MacInnes (State Russian Museum, St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 1998), p. 244. A catalogue for the Borisov-Musatov exhibition has not been traced.

7   Notwithstanding his attachment to the peasantry, towards the end of the decade Malevich would turn his attention to the recreational themes depicting middle-class society in the way typified by Borisov-Musatov's work. A good example of this interest is Malevich's *Rest. Society in Top Hats* (1908). Watercolour and gouache on cardboard, 23.8 x 30.2 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg.

spiritual mores. In particular, five paintings of this period, untitled, but designated variously by the artist as 'fresco designs', form a cohesive corpus both formally and thematically that speaks of a tectonic shift in Malevich's relationship to his art. They mark the first step towards the artist's self-conscious identification with a sense of mission and his calling as an artist.

By the time of the seminal Blue Rose exhibition, which opened on 18 March and ran until 29 April 1907, Malevich was already transitioning to a new approach in painting beyond the pseudo-pointillist technique, which he had pursued since 1904, to embrace a Symbolist mode of expression. He longed to be included in the historic Moscow show, but his reputed Impressionism, exemplified by paintings such as *Landscape with Yellow House* (1906–07, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg), could hardly correspond to the contemplative, subjective worlds invoked by the Blue Rose. He was not a participant in the exhibition that, tellingly, included the work of Vrubel. The decision on the part of the Blue Rose painters not to include Malevich essentially relegated the newly-minted Symbolist to the fringe of the movement, raising the question of his true status within the novel and relatively short-lived group. This invites us to consider Malevich's chronological development as a painter, particularly the nebulous circumstances that propelled Malevich to turn to fresco design in the beginning. There is clear evidence of a shift in the artist's interests during his time at the Rerberg School in Moscow, where Malevich sought formal training in 1906. Here he began to lay the foundation for an approach that would reach ultimate expression in his mystical cruciform compositions of later years. This would be achieved by an increasing compression of the picture space, approaching the flatness of mural painting; such experiments would also serve as an exploratory counterpoint to the Impressionist-inspired fragmented and stippled strokes and reductive colour of his early period.

The unresolved issue is whether the anomalous works Malevich began to produce at this time were really intended as entries for the Blue Rose exhibition in early 1907. Or, more likely, are they the product of his reaction and response to the exhibition from which he was excluded? To be sure, Malevich would have been keen to be represented in the Blue Rose exhibition, for it would have launched him from obscurity to the kind of recognition that would validate his chosen profession as a painter. It is tempting to draw a connection between Malevich's fresco designs and the exhibition, although there is no tangible evidence that allows us to assess whether these works were a direct result of the Blue Rose event. Even more perplexing is his timeline for producing them. However one wishes to speculate, the series of designs complements the character and manner, and, to some degree, even the subject of the Blue Rose works.

We can be assured, however, that Malevich visited the Blue Rose exhibition and was enthralled with the installation, as evidenced by the exuberant tone in his reminiscences.[8] Even though this was still early in his career, he recognised that it was like no other exhibition seen before and was commanding in its creation of mood

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8   Kazimir Malevich, *Zametka ob arkhitektury* (1924). See 'A Note on Architecture' (MS, private collection, St Petersburg), http://kazimirmalevich.ru/t5_1_5_13/

through colour. Reviewing the exhibition in *The Golden Fleece*, Sergei Makovsky described the experience of the paintings as being "like prayers" in "a chapel".[9] One of the lingering effects of the viewing experience, as Malevich later remembered it in his autobiographical memoir, was that the space was redolent with the strong fragrance of spring flowers.[10] The sweet scent of daffodils, lilies, and hyacinths wafting through the space and the wispy thin strains of a string quartet filling the atmosphere were likened to the sounds and smells of a liturgical event, be it the polyphonic chanting or the smoky incense wafting throughout the church. Malevich described the overall effect as akin to a "feast day […] a celebration — both a dawning, and yet, at the same time, eventide". In his memoirs, the artist described the show as aromatic visuality: "patches of various forms, which gave off the 'smell' of the colour".[11] This observation coincided with Malevich's growing appreciation for the synaesthetic properties of ecclesiastical rituals and church art shared by a congregation in unison.

That the events leading up to Malevich's fresco designs occurred in springtime during the solemn Lenten and the festal Paschal seasons of the liturgical calendar suggests that his imagery, though not explicitly religious, was nonetheless seeded by eastern Christianity. Struggling with, and ultimately unable to accede to, the self-indulgent, individualistic expression of Impressionism and its variants, his experience of the lifestyle and values of the simple peasantry made the quest toward a higher artistic purpose a logical one. The full recognition of his indebtedness to the devoutly religious and simple lifestyle of village folk would begin to emerge a few short years later in the aesthetic of Neoprimivitism.

Malevich's early cycle of fresco designs almost certainly served as a portent of a lifelong commitment to an art that would galvanise community — the source of Malevich's spirituality. This is not to claim that he was a religious person, or that he was intending to bring religion into his art; rather that the example of the faithful — those who are committed to a redemptive belief in a better, more perfect form of existence — appealed to Malevich, who sought these supreme principles through the agency of painting. Because his art stemmed from a self-awareness that anticipated a lifetime of artistic commitment to this higher cause, the fresco designs that he made in 1907–08 (sometimes referred to as the 'Yellow Series'), though engaging in the hedonistic and transcendent themes of Symbolism, are also prescient of the utopianism that will mark Malevich's art in the years to come.

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9   Sergei Makovskii, 'Golubaia roza', *Zolotoe runo*, 5 (1907), 25.

10   Malevich wrote: "And indeed, the Blue Rose exhibition was not arranged in the same way as other exhibitions. The whole room, the ceilings, the walls, and the floor were specially upholstered in various kinds of material, everything was calm, the harmony of it all really gave off a blue smell, and the exhibition was accompanied by quiet music, which was intended to tie everything together and enhanced the overall harmony of the exhibition." "И действительно, выставка «Голубая роза» была обставлена не так, как другие выставки. Все помещение, потолки, стены и пол были специально обиты разного рода материей, все было спокойно, гармония всего сделанного действительно давала голубой запах, выставка сопровождалась тихой музыкой, долженствующей связать все и дополнить собою общую гармонию выставки. 'Голубая роза' расцвела живописью и музыкой". (Kazimir Malevich, *Zametka ob arkhitektury* (1924)).

11   *Ibid.* "Здесь были пятна разных форм, которые издавали подобно цветам ароматы, которые можно было обонять, но не рассказать, из чего этот аромат состоит."

4.1 Kazimir Malevich, *Untitled. Study for a Fresco Painting*, 1907. Tempera/oil? on cardboard. 69.3 x 71.5 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph © State Russian Museum, all rights reserved.

4.2 Kazimir Malevich, *Study for a Fresco Painting. The Triumph of Heaven*, from the so-called 'Yellow Series', 1907. Tempera on cardboard. 70 x 72.5 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph © State Russian Museum, all rights reserved.

One of Malevich's paintings of this period, *Untitled* (1907, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg) (fig. 4.1) — the fourth of a series of sketches for fresco painting indicated by a notation by the artist on the back of the work — shows a mysterious group of seven slender, feminine figures occupying a dense copse of tall and thin willowy trees that frame a verdant clearing in the foreground.[12] At the heart of the composition are shrub-like forms that support a limp body stretched over the top of the bushes. This recumbent figure commands a prayerful stance from the surrounding figures, suggesting a scene of bereavement. Some of the mourners cross their hands over their chests, others place their palms together, still others stand with arms to their sides in the Orthodox gesture of prayer. In another work, posthumously titled *The Triumph of the Heavens* (1907, State Russian Museum) (fig. 4.2), an androgynous figure is shown with arms outstretched and eyes closed, a halo around its head, and a cowl around the neck, emerging from a cloud beyond the horizon. It hovers as if delivered from the firmament above and gently sweeps over the landscape, framing with extended arms three groups of eleven haloed figures, also of unspecified gender, which are accommodated by the span of its gliding reach. Two of the groups, relegated in a symmetrical composition to the sides of the painting, are cradled by a cloud. The third and central group of figures walks with bare feet firmly on the lush grassy ground. Both paintings appear to represent some kind of mystical event known only to the initiated.

Contemporaneous with the mostly gauzy paintings of the sixteen artists shown at the Blue Rose exhibition, which depicted spectral, pubescent females and aqueous embryos set among breezy fountains, wispy willows, and succulent foliage, Malevich here ascribed to the idealisation of woman championed by European Symbolism. These ineffable symbols of divine grace and eternal love were rendered by depleted blues and azure tones — a range of "illusive distances of cobalt and emerald" as described by Denis, who spoke of painting as "a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order".[13] Malevich's own fluidly fading masses of contoured, somnolent bodies and the mysterious contexts in which they move suggest a strong connection to the work of the Blue Rose painters, who remained active in Moscow until 1908. Yet Malevich's palette deviates from the filmy blue-greys and dissolving cerulean atmospheres of the works of his contemporaries. Rather, Malevich's transparent yellows and daubs of green give texture to these seemingly reclusive and isolated settings. The speckled treatment of the paint emphasises the graphically mottled light peeking through dense vegetation; the early-morning radiance illuminates the foliage, making it as palpable as the twinkling dew that settles like jewels upon the edges of shrubs and individual leaves. Indeed, Malevich's new approach was reflected in the

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12   It is significant to note that, rather than providing titles for his works, Malevich, in Cyrillic inscriptions on the reverse, put greater emphasis on indicating the medium — fresco.

13   Maurice Denis, 'Définition du Néo-Traditionnisme', in Maurice Denis, *Théories 1890–1910* (Paris: Rouart et Watelin, 1920), p. 8.

very words used by Makovsky two years earlier when describing Kuznetsov's and Sergei Sudeikin's paintings at the Twelfth Exhibition of the Moscow Association of Artists in 1905 as "drowsy tranquillity and silence of daybreak".[14]

Not only are Malevich's designs confluent with the Symbolist context of Borisov-Musatov's followers, they are consonant with the philosophical echoes of writers such as Viacheslav Ivanov and others, who harked back to the German Romantic notion of *Bildung* — the concept of 'reflective judgment' as the primary function of art as opposed to its mechanical processes. This self-reflexive consideration of art makes room for the examination of aspects of *being* and *belonging*, which, as will be argued, began to surface in Malevich's art in his 1907 fresco designs. Malevich's questioning and self-projection within his art would become a motivational force that, though originating in these works, would weave throughout the various phases of his subsequent development and culminate in unique achievements: Suprematism, UNOVIS (*Utverditeli novogo iskusstva* ('Champions of the New Art')), and Supranaturalism, the last phase of Malevich's life as a painter, when he returned to a figurative art form, monumentalising the humble peasantry in stark rural environments. Whether readily cognised or not in the early phases of his art, this force formed the basis for a lifelong endeavour, guided by a philosophy that may have begun in mystification, but resulted, at least for him, in pure revelation. As a result Malevich developed a conception of art that, in its aspirational qualities, went beyond individual subjectivity to a humanistic universalism. Through it all, he harked back, as did the Symbolists before him, to the unifying impulse of the Church as the agent of Orthodox community-building.

References to the self-searching that defines Orthodox Easter rituals seep into Malevich's frescoes, just as Catholicism had defined the art of Denis almost a decade earlier.[15] Indeed, Malevich's eerie, transparent palette, the paintings' subdued tones and shock of orange-red, and the calligraphic fluidity throughout the work coincide with the mysterious and unnatural palette of the quintessential turn-of-the-century French Symbolist. By 1900, Denis had achieved a true balance between the ethereal and material, the oneiric and the arcadian, achieving a harmony between line and colour that could be tapped for presenting his spiritual and specifically Catholic subject matter. Like Denis's Catholic imagery, Malevich's work is imbued with a profession of faith, it seems, but of a secular order. Retreating into themes of ritual and mystery and associating them with Orthodox liturgical practice, Malevich deviates from the oneiric to embrace an Orthodox sensibility, setting out on an aesthetic pathway rooted *not* in the intellect, but in the senses, which the example of Eastern Orthodoxy offered him.

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14   [S. Makovskii], 'XII-ia vystavka kartin "Moskovskogo tovarishchestva khudozhnikov"', *Iskusstvo*, 2 (1905), p. 52. Quoted in John E. Bowlt, 'The Blue Rose: Russian Symbolism in Art', *The Burlington Magazine*, 118, 881 (August 1976), 566–75 (p. 571, note 14).

15   The fact that Denis named his home and studio in St Germain-en-Laye a "priory" gives some credence to the artist's spiritual mission: like a monk, he abandons the physical and carnal world to commit to a higher calling for the good of others.

4.3 Kazimir Malevich, *Self-Portrait*, 1907. Inscribed on reverse in Russian, 'Study for a fresco painting'. Tempera on cardboard, 69.3 x 70 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph © State Russian Museum, all rights reserved.

This is borne out by Malevich's *Self-Portrait* (1907, State Russian Museum) (fig. 4.3), which was also included as part of the fresco design cycle. Here, the somewhat introspective young Malevich, shown with steely eyes, dishevelled hair, beard, and moustache, entreats your gaze, as if the artist has taken a moment to retreat from the surrounding ceremony in order to have you look at him closely, and for him to observe you penetratingly. Such visual reciprocity is sustained throughout the image: the painter is shown simultaneously as both actor and surveillant — at once an active player and a witness to the mysterious events taking place. Meanwhile, a crowd of haloed figures surrounds and engulfs him.

The artist's relationship to religious community as a pathway of self-exploration had been addressed pictorially by Paul Gauguin in the 1880s. Like Malevich, who includes himself within the context of some kind of ceremonial observance, Gauguin's *Self-Portrait with 'The Yellow Christ'* (1890, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) shows a questioning artist against the backdrop of one of his most commanding paintings, the crucified Christ rendered in acerbic sulphurous yellows. Gauguin portrays himself as complicit in Christ's suffering (e.g., *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (1889, Norton Museum of Art, Florida) and *Jug in the Form of a Head. Self-Portrait* (1889, Kunstindustrimuseet, Copenhagen)) and yet at some distance from it. Offering a glimpse into his state of mind, so too the young Malevich, shown frontally and foregrounded in a bust-view, projects a defiant-looking demeanour.
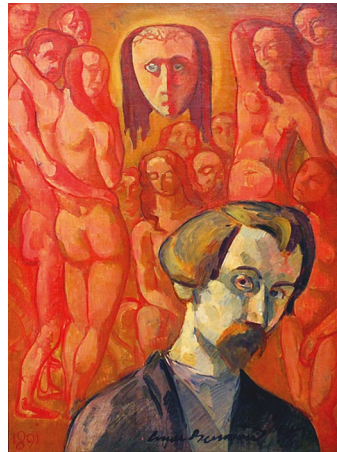
4.4 Émile Bernard, *Symbolic Self-Portrait* (also known as *Vision*), 1891.
Oil on canvas, 81 x 60.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.[16]

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16 Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Émile_Bernard_Autoportrait_symbolique_1891.jpg

Not unlike Gauguin's *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, which includes the artist's self-portrait in the guise of a red-haired Christ, Malevich's *Self-Portrait* renders his own position singularly ambiguous, negotiating the tension between inclusiveness and external witnessing. As in Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling the Angel)* (1888, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh), the artist assumes a notable place among a company of pious believers, yet he remains a dubiously assenting figure. Though surrounded by the saintly elect, Malevich's form is prominently singled out. In the overall yellowish tones of the work and the crowd of nudes it recalls Émile Bernard's *Symbolic Self-Portrait* (also known as *Vision*) (fig. 4.4).

Malevich's adoption of Christian themes in the manner of the French Symbolists is affirmed by his allusion to Bernard's and Gauguin's inclusion of the Christ's head crowned with thorns. Frontal and foregrounded, with a slight bend of the head (as in Bernard's self-portrait), the artist's visage engages directly with the beholder. Within the context of liturgical practice and the iconographic tradition of Orthodoxy, particularly the ubiquitous image of the Pantocrator or Christ the Priest, the artist's identity here coalesces with the role of acolyte. As in the other fresco paintings, Malevich creates an idyllic, pastoral setting occupied by the pietistic haloed figures. Shown among nudes, which in Bernard's work include Adam and Eve, the figure of Malevich assumes an important responsibility born of an inner necessity to the lay community to which he belongs.

Without an aureole, however, he is also not fully initiated into their community and appears somewhat incongruous by his dress. Substituting the avocation of the artist for that of the priest, Malevich dons the vestments of his profession: a painter's smock tied at the neck into a thick floppy bow. Beneath the knot the painter identifies himself with the Cyrillic letters of his name, K-M-A-L, appropriately truncated at the point at which, at least in Polish or Ukrainian, he would call himself a "*maliarz*" or "*maliar*" — i.e., a painter, in the respective languages. Thus, like Gauguin, the sideline observer of a Breton religious observance (e.g., in *Vision after the Sermon*), Malevich is an intimate witness to a religious experience, but, at the same time, he is not fully incorporated within it. Both artists are hyper-conscious of their being both insiders and outsiders to the events taking place around them, and both, it seems, are at some kind of threshold of fuller understanding.[17] Malevich returns to this theme several years later. In *Self-Portrait Against a Background of Red Bathers* (1910–11, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), Malevich shows a distinctly carnal male sexual organ seen along the right side of the artist's head, perhaps a reference to himself as an aroused Adam in

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17   According to the Symbolist critic and theorist Albert Aurier, Gauguin's hypostasising of himself as Christ represents a complex existentialist state that draws on "a potent algebra of ideas". Referring to Gauguin as an "algebraist of ideas", Aurier emphasised a series of associations elicited by Gauguin's works that produced spiritual exaltation. See Albert Aurier, 'Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin', in *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Henri Dorra (Berkeley, CA, London: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 192–203 (p. 193).

the Garden of Eden, but again, unfulfilled, pushed to the margins, and left separated from the rest of the figures.

That Malevich's first *Self-Portrait* dates to his Symbolist period crystallises the notion that the artist saw himself called to a higher vocation, though still questioning his way. The portrait takes on the characteristics of a manifesto, addressing issues of belonging, induction, and habituation. As a manifesto, moreover, it reveals an opposing and definitive stance against the increasingly decadent and morbid turn of Blue Rose Symbolism. The brighter palette, the communion of figures, and a strong sense of a spiritual coalition and exclusivity suggest a direction of purpose and determination to reach specific goals. Thus, by contrast with the Blue Rose artists' despair and a growing uneasy disillusionment with the hopeless status of society, reinforced by Kuznetsov's images of unborn babies and reclusive islands of the consumptives, Malevich's art ushers in a new era of expectation, purposeful orientation, and hope.[18]

It is noteworthy that the Blue Rose exhibition took place precisely during the time of Orthodox Lenten preparations for the liturgical Paschal feast — the Resurrection — essentially the solemn period leading up to Easter. In keeping with this ecclesiastical period of reflection, self-evaluation, and soul-searching, church rituals are intensified for the Orthodox, challenging the faithful to become hyper-aware of their earthly conduct, and to take stock of their spiritual state. In keeping with Eastern Christianity's emphasis on a heightened detachment from the physical and material world, the eschatological nature of the Lenten services keep the faithful focused on a time to come by means of a pensive, introspective observance of church rituals.

In the Byzantine Rite, the Typikon — including Vespers, Matins, the Office of the Presanctified Liturgy, and the series of All-Souls services to remember deceased ancestors — embodies tradition carried out through generations of community prayer. It imbues the canonic springtime observances with a totalising immersion into the realm of the spiritual. For example, the psalmody of the liturgies — the Triodion (Lenten and Paschal hymns), in addition to the prescribed processions and entrances, engages the laity in communion with the clergy who circumambulate the interior of the church, sanctifying everyone with countless blessings and incensings. Malevich would capture viscerally this instance of physical communal worship in his Neoprimivitist *Peasant Women in Church* (1911–12, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam). Here he shows the devout women affirming their baptismal initiation into the community by making of the sign of the cross (in the Eastern style with three fingers together, ending up at the left shoulder) — a symbolic gesture of accountability that is accompanied by singing (three times) the ancient liturgical hymn that repeats the words, "all you, who

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18   One has in mind paintings such as Kuznetsov's *Night of the Tuberculosed* (1907, Medical Institute, Moscow).

have been baptised into Christ, cloak yourself in Christ".[19] Malevich's devout peasant women display the meaning of the 'thrice-holy hymn' (the Trisagion) on their very bodies. Their prayerful gesture of humble 'cloaking' (*metanie*) in the mantle of their faith visibly and openly confirms their belief in, and expectation of, the promise of the universal Kingdom of God.

Malevich's monumental peasant forms occupy every inch of his picture space in the same way that their devout spirit fills the church, especially on Easter Sunday. Moreover, the entire act of worship is conducted in an atmosphere that heightens the senses. The olfactory nerves, absorbing the incense swelling the interior space of the church, participate in a totalising sensorial experience, not unlike Malevich's description of the Blue Rose exhibition of 1907. In addition to the tactile gesture of blessing (and 'cloaking') oneself while bowing reverently, as shown in *Peasant Women in Church*, one can assume that the audial sense is stirred by the polyphonic responses of the laity to the chanting of the clergy during the Liturgy, while the flicker of candles and the light passing over wall murals and icons that surround and engulf the faithful give optical instantiation to the Logos — the word of God. Perhaps it is because of this liturgical context that the golden tints of Malevich's fresco series, steeped in the sensuous experience of the Liturgy, deviate from the concordant scale of blues and dark greys of his Blue Rose contemporaries. Malevich's palette gives full expression to a site of worship illuminated by divine light. Indeed, as the first dawning light brightens the church interior on Easter morning, the Orthodox faithful sing of celebrating "the annihilation of death, the destruction of Hades, and the beginning of another life which is eternal" (Ode 7, Canon of the Pascha). The church, as an extension of paradise, represents a very complex experience of the spiritual in the anticipation, expectation, and realisation of Byzantine *anamnesis* — the mystery of the Eucharist, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Man, made in His supreme likeness, shares in every aspect of this jubilant mystery, *if* he is willing to participate in the spiritual journey. The church is there to set the guideposts. Throughout the liturgical year, the faithful are reminded of prototypic milestones on their spiritual journey toward revelation and redemption. The synthesising experience of Christ's death, burial, resurrection, ascension, His glory in Heaven, and His Second Coming are embodied, for instance, in the example of the profligate, yet contrite, Mary Magdalene, who became closest to Christ at the time of His death, and Lazarus, raised from the dead as a foreshadowing of Christ's own burial and miraculous resurrection.

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19 United in the gesture of 'cloaking themselves in Christ' by making the sign of the cross, the faithful give witness to the sanctification of man (and, by extension, the whole world) as promised by God. The faithful become one with the theological imagery that surrounds and envelops them.
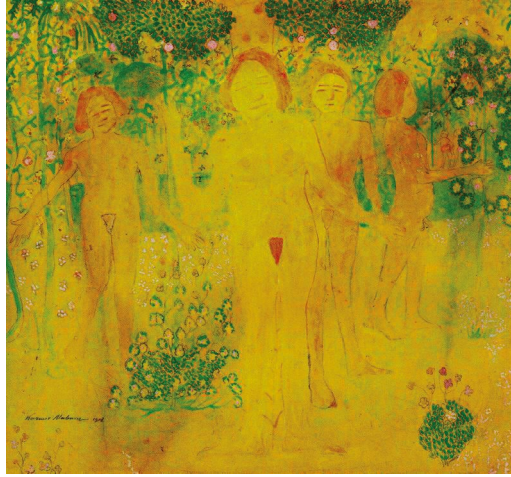
4.5 Kazimir Malevich, *Collecting Flowers* (also referred to as *Secret of Temptation*), from the so-called 'Yellow Series', 1908. Watercolour, gouache, and crayon on cardboard, 23.5 cm. x 25.5 cm. Gmurzynska Collection, Zug, Switzerland.[20]

One might contend that the two subjects of Mary Magdalene and Lazarus, used as didactic paradigms for spiritual renewal, are referenced obliquely in two of Malevich's fresco designs. His untitled study for a fresco painting discussed at the beginning of this chapter (fig. 4.1) can now be read within the context of Paschal iconography. It shows a supine figure draped over a raised bed of foliage, an allusion to some kind of sacrificial act, perhaps a liturgical reference to the Lamb of God (or the Raising of Lazarus). In the case of the lamentation over Christ's body, a male bearded figure to the left and a female with long hair in the middle ground are standing close, and leaning toward the head of the expired body; these figures likely correspond (iconographically) to Mary and Joseph. By the same token, if the scene depicts Lazarus's resurrection from the dead, then the two females might refer also to Mary and Martha, and the bearded figure to Christ Himself. Another of Malevich's fresco designs, *Collecting Flowers* (also referred to as *Secret of Temptation*) (1908, Gmurzynska Collection, Zug, Switzerland) (fig. 4.5), depicting four auburn-haired females who emerge like nymphs from the idyllic forest, comes closest to affirming such an interpretation. While this image identifies closely with the 'feminine' subjects of Denis and Borisov-Musatov, invoking a mysterious, all-female, expression of divine love, Malevich's exploration points more directly to the three Marys and the repentant Magdalene, who boldly ventured out to the sepulchre to see the dead Christ at dawn.

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20 Photograph in the public domain. Wikiart, https://www.wikiart.org/en/kazimir-malevich/not_detected_219728

The sensual figure of Mary Magdalene comes poignantly to mind in yet another of Malevich's images in this fresco design cycle, commonly called *Prayer* or *Melancholia* (1907, State Russian Museum) (fig. 4.6). In composition and mood, as well as in the choice of palette, this image explicitly echoes *The Offertory at Calvary* painted by Denis in around 1890.[21] Yet, from an Eastern Christian liturgical standpoint, the singular figure seated in a lush grove offers a visual correspondence to the words of the Paschal Stichera sung in the Hypakoje of the Byzantine Resurrection Matins, conflating the figure of Mary Magdalene with that of the Angel who is encountered by the three Marys at Christ's empty tomb: "The women with Mary, before the dawn, found the stone rolled away from the tomb, and they heard the Angel say: 'Why do you seek among the dead, as a mortal, the One who abides in everlasting light?'" As the symbolism embodied in this liturgical song reveals, the barren rock is transformed into a throne of enlightenment: "Bearing torches let us meet the bridegroom, Christ, as He comes forth from His tomb; and let us greet with joyful song, the saving Pasch of God" (Hirmos, Ode 5. Resurrection Matins).

The jubilant tone of this Paschal Ode is translated into Malevich's visually evocative painting arbitrarily titled *Collecting Flowers*, cited above. Again, a dominant yellow palette reinforces the resurrection theme, suggesting the renewal of humanity enlightened by the example of Christ's resurrection "bestowing upon the world a new life and a new light, brighter than the sun" (Byzantine Prayer for the New Light). Invoking the Genesis story, the prescribed liturgical office thus celebrates the first day of the new Creation as its day of worship. In keeping with this trope, Malevich's intended frescoes give rise to a realisation that the first fruits of the Kingdom already exist on the earth. Like St Maximus the Confessor and St Sophronius, for whom the Church was the site of the intersection of the spiritual and visible worlds (i.e., the image of that which we perceive spiritually and that which we perceive with our senses), so Malevich taps into the convocative nature of the church assembly to better create art that might be integrated into, if not cultivate, a shared belief system. Indeed, the ancient theologians and Church Fathers spoke of the church as "the heavens on earth, where God, who is higher than the heavens, lives" (St Germanus), and where the "gifts of paradise" are housed, for the Church contains not just the tree of life, but life itself, acted out in the sacraments and communicated to the faithful (St Simeon of Thessalonika).[22]

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21 Maurice Denis. *The Offertory at Calvary* (c. 1890). Oil on canvas, 32 x 23.5 cm. Private collection.

22 The word 'church' (*sobor*) means 'convocation' or 'reunion' — connoting, as St Cyril of Jerusalem specified, the convocation of all mankind, uniting the self with others. As explained at different times by Athanasius the Great, St John Chrysostom, and St Augustine, the term 'church' means 'to summon' (or 'convoke') from somewhere, bringing the presence and the promise of the Kingdom of God to the fallen world. It prepares the world for Christ's Second Coming. The frescoes that cover the walls of Orthodox churches are designed to confirm this message.

4.6 Kazimir Malevich, *Prayer* (also known as *Meditation*), 1907. Tempera on wood. 70 x 74.8 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph © State Russian Museum, all rights reserved.

The convening function of the Church and the sensorial experience of the Byzantine liturgy, along with the convictions of the faithful and their acts of witnessing, fold into a transcendent experience of expectation, hope, and fulfillment that Malevich seems to have absorbed and adopted as guiding principles for his own, albeit fully secular art. It was this higher purpose that he carried into Suprematism and Supranaturalism, creating, in the first instance, a temple-like environment in a gallery space at the Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10 ('Zero-Ten') in 1915, and later in the 1920s and early 1930s, rendering people as timeless, mostly faceless beings, traversing visceral, deeply furrowed farm fields. Their spectre-like forms intimate, nonetheless, that they inhabit not the earthly, but another atemporal and ethereal realm. The example of the inherently cosmic nature of liturgical synaxis — an image of the entire created, but transfigured, world — functions as an analogue to the revolutionary impetus of Malevich's art.

Undeniably, Malevich's early period showing a growing predilection for the oneiric themes of the Symbolists would seed and crystallise the spiritual dimensions of his later art. It is not known whether Malevich took up fresco design precisely around the time of the Blue Rose exhibition in deference to the preoccupations of these artists, who, in their interpretation of the feminine idea, had turned to themes of springtime rebirth, water festivals, and rituals of initiation and motherhood.[23] In keeping with the themes of the Blue Rose, Malevich produced a painting titled *Maternity* (also known as *Woman Giving Birth*) (1906/1908, Tretyakov Gallery). A few years later, under the sway of the Neoprimivitist aesthetic, he returned to the subject in early 1910, painting the canvas entitled *Motherhood/Abundance* (1910, Khardzhiev-Chaga Cultural Foundation, Amsterdam (on deposit at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam)). A further rendition of this subject occurred in his Supranaturalist period in the pencil on paper drawing *Maternity* (c. 1930), showing a mother holding her dead, blackened child in her hands — a modern-day Pietà inspired by the ashen faces of starved peasants during collectivisation. As evidenced by the chronological range of these paintings, the exploration of the contemplative, theurgic impulse, first encountered by Malevich in the atmosphere surrounding the Blue Rose, defined the artist's own introspective worldview, which he explored through painting.

Indeed, even after an illustrious and at once, notorious, period of abstraction during the 1910s, Malevich would return to figurative fresco painting in the latter part of the 1920s, fulfilling a fascination with the medium that he had first encountered in his childhood.[24] Building on the initial example of the French and Russian Symbolists, he sought to create a visually holistic environment that was intended to transport the viewer to a higher consciousness — a goal that would become more apparent with

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23 However, the work was more likely modelled on the Theotokos icon of the Hodigitria.

24 In his autobiographical notes, Malevich mentions "being intensely affected by his initial encounter with professional painters, who had come to his hometown to decorate a church" (see Nakov, *Malevich*, p. 27).

the advent of Suprematism in 1915 and a brief preoccupation with fresco painting in the 1920s, a decade that witnessed a widespread revival of mural painting.[25] In 1927, when Stalinist government pressures made life untenable for artists of the avant-garde, Malevich was given a reprieve from the oppressive atmosphere of Leningrad by an invitation from his Ukrainian friends to teach in his native Kyiv. There Malevich produced a fresco sketch for the Conference Hall of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (1930), which he rendered in pastel, gouache, and graphite pencil on paper, but never realised on site. Prominent in the design is an elongated large cross — a motif he began to incorporate into his new figurative art of Supranaturalism. Upon his return to Leningrad, Malevich would himself design two additional frescoes: a mural for the Leningrad Red Army Theatre, and a project for the House of the Soviets in Moscow.

Malevich's reputation as a forward-looking abstract painter is rarely associated with the brief duration of Symbolism in Moscow. Yet, as a discrete body of early work linked directly to the esoteric themes, ephemeral style, and philosophical turn of Symbolism, his long unstudied fresco designs of 1907–08 appear to have been instrumental in shaping and supporting the futuristic drive of Russian modernism from the 1910s through the early 1930s. Through it all, Malevich's aspirations as an artist paralleled the personal struggle of any individual committing to a higher calling. While still at the Rerberg School in Moscow, Malevich's fellow artists had already pegged him as a somewhat charismatic and endearing — if eccentric — personality. As indicated by their friendly caricatures of Malevich, showing him with his bowl-cut hair (typical of ethnic Ukrainian villagers) and imbuing him with an ascetic look, they understood early on that, notwithstanding Malevich's reserved, monkish appearance, he was intent upon some sort of a didactic mission, using art as his language. It is not surprising, therefore, that Malevich would become a mentor to a new generation of modernist painters in post-revolutionary Russia. Overcoming the self-doubt and uncertainty of the unknown (as expressed in his early portraits) was instrumental to Malevich's self-appointed role as a visionary and 'priest' of art. The questioning demeanour in his *Self-Portrait*, which, it might be argued, is central to the fresco cycle, points to a degree of soul-searching to confirm his avocation as an artist, and also begins to reveal Malevich's psychological state as he constantly reevaluates his status as a painter.

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25 One of the most prominent figures at the Kyiv Art Institute was the monumentalist Mykhailo Boichuk, who, in his capacity as rector of the Ukrainian Academy of Art almost a decade earlier, had created a Studio of Religious Painting, Frescoes, and Icons. During the 1920s, when the Academy was re-established as an Institute, Boichuk headed the Monumental Paintings Section and developed a reputation as a Neo-Byzantinist, creating multiple mural projects throughout the country. Malevich's encounter with Boichuk's followers in Kyiv (the Boichukists) led to a return to figuration in Malevich's art, inspired by the Neo-Byzantine monumentality of Boichukism. See Myroslava M. Mudrak, 'Malevich and His Ukrainian Contemporaries', in *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125ᵗʰ Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth*, ed. by Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder (London: Pindar Press, 2007), especially pp. 104–18.

Malevich's commitment to the missionary nature of his art would blossom after his Suprematist breakthrough: his monastic, introspective existence would be transformed and supplanted by revolutionary slogans such as 'art into life' or the process of 'affirming the new in art', culminating in the formation of UNOVIS in 1918 and securing a following thanks to his charismatic leadership. Just as the intensity of spiritual life can penetrate a whole mass of Orthodox believers united in the awareness that they form a single body within the hierarchy of the church, so Malevich's affirmation of the new in art through UNOVIS represented a community of citizens invested in shaping a perfect society. The artist was fully cognizant of the theology of *anamnesis*, or mindfulness of the present moment, and the church's systematic, congregational method of bringing man to a heightened spiritual awareness. Initiation was (and remains) critical to that process.

The spiritual underpinnings of the fresco project gave Malevich a firm starting point and a foundation for pursuing a more essentialised form — a nuanced, abstract language for expressing spirituality. Later, the motif of the black square, which initiated his singular journey toward the abstract, would signal the communal value of transcendence and become the ultimate symbol of inclusiveness. As a sign of their unity, UNOVIS inductees together with their leader Malevich, hypostatised in the role of priest, would sew little black squares on their sleeves as a mark of their ideological solidarity. It is noteworthy that the ceremonial vestments of the deacon and higher ranks of clergy within Eastern Orthodoxy include cuffs, called the *Epimanikia*, that are frequently embroidered with a cross. This reinforces the thesis that Malevich's avocation paralleled the ecclesiastical patterns of Eastern Orthodox (Byzantine) worship, which he privileged as the belief system of the peasant masses. The tension between belonging and non-belonging, between a sense of inclusivity and exclusiveness, can be traced to a specific exploration of medium (fresco) and to a specific event (the Blue Rose exhibition) in the early years of Malevich's Moscow experience.

The liturgical contemplation of the Second Coming and the world beyond the present serve as a paradigm of Malevich's own aspirations in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905, and again, after 1917.[26] This is not to suggest, by any means, that Malevich 'found religion', or that, he, as a baptised Roman Catholic, sought conversion to Orthodoxy, nor, at least in the context of this analysis, that he was a religious artist or painted religious subjects. Yet the dogmatics of the Eastern Church lie at the very foundation of Malevich's conviction that art must reveal a common belief about spiritual transcendence, redemption, and supreme perfection. Malevich's Symbolist fresco project marks a singular point of departure in the artist's quest for some kind of transcendent absolute — be it in abstract or figurative art. The mostly square format

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26   It is worth noting that Malevich's works predate any other avant-garde artist's treatment of the apocalyptic subject. Kandinsky's earliest references to such themes, for example, in his painting *All Souls*, *Pilgrims in Kyiv*, occur only in 1909.

(about 70 x 70 cm.) and dimensions of the individual paintings foreshadow the square perimeters and iconic completeness of Malevich's Suprematist works, while the use of simple card stock (as opposed to primed canvas) imbues his representations with a supra-temporal quality in the face of a larger, all-encompassing and permanent notion of 'Truth'.

Executed in tempera and completed in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1905, the brightness and lightness of Malevich's fresco studies suggests a renewal of his own belief in a better tomorrow rather than despair at the status quo. By returning to tempera and by contemplating a mural painting project without having an actual commission, Malevich's actions suggest the necessity for him of tapping into the enduring material and spiritual traditions of ancient Orthodoxy to revive a shared belief system made accessible to all society. If one is willing to consider the frescoes as an analogue for Malevich's new direction in his art, then this critical juncture can also be seen as a major shift from pure aesthetic concerns to issues of social import. That experience alone would launch Suprematism as a movement of transcendence, morphed into a utopian ideology. The redemptive note carried throughout Malevich's fresco cycle of heathen imagery seems to embody the stance of the Orthodox Church that makes no distinction between theology and mysticism. Seen as the context for altering consciousness and providing for a change of attitude (*metanoia*) presented by the example of communal liturgical Paschal preparations, the Church offers an opportunity to recommit to a higher calling and redirect the mediocrity of one's habituated lifestyle to take on a nobler existence. Such a change of attitude and understanding would be required of the Orthodox faithful in the period following the Revolution when religion was replaced by proletarian ideology.

As Malevich abandoned western Impressionism and began to deviate from the subjects of western painting, the Orthodox mindset became increasingly appealing to him, leading him and his contemporaries such as Goncharova to a closer exploration of the mores of the peasantry, including their devout lifestyles.[27] Fully immersed in the discourse of Symbolism, Malevich's art derived initial inspiration from the idyllic settings and environments of the art of Puvis de Chavannes and Denis; his Edenic depictions and thaumaturgical subjects share a special kinship with the art of Bernard and Sérusier, whose work Malevich also would have known.[28] Moreover, channelling the moralising self-scrutiny and soul-searching of Gauguin's deeply introspective

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27 The Byzantine-Orientalist themes of the Ballets Russes — the World of Art's most spectacular achievement on the world stage — took up the themes of Eastern Orthodoxy in theatrical production when Sergei Diaghilev commissioned the Neoprimivitist painter, Goncharova, to design the scenography for *Liturgie* (1915). See Natal'ia Goncharova, Décor for the ballet *Liturgie* (1915). Watercolour, graphite, cut and pasted paper, silver, gold, and coloured foil on cardboard, 55.2 x 74.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession no.: 1972.146.10. Rights and Reproductions: 2011 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/480990

28 For example, such paintings as Paul Gauguin's *The Yellow Christ* (1889). Oil on canvas, 91.1 x 73.4 cm. Albright-Knox Gallery, and Paul Sérusier's *Incantation (The Holy Wood),* 1889. Oil on canvas, 72 x 91.5 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts. Quimper, France.

Christological iconography, Malevich's art directs the beholder towards a sublimated atmosphere of communal ritual for the initiated, depicted in these works in the way that a synaxis of saints might be portrayed in Russo-Byzantine church murals. The scene of the now lost fresco of the Apocalypse in the Moscow Church of the Annunciation in the Kremlin, painted by Theophanes the Greek, comes to mind, as does a whole corpus of similar images painted on the walls of Russo-Byzantine churches throughout the Eastern Christian world. At the time of Symbolism's flowering, however, Malevich was already in search of a higher purpose for art and a more meaningful engagement with painting beyond formalist invention. As his resolute commitment to art grew stronger, his Symbolist project of fresco designs, which had focused on death and exalted rebirth, would translate into a symbolic expiration of figurative art, only to be supplanted by a resplendent and transcendent rebirth in abstraction. Suprematism, Malevich's involvement with UNOVIS, and the launching of Supranaturalism bring to full circle the spirituality of his Symbolist period.

Malevich's fresco designs of 1907 did not yet fully embrace what would in a few short years evolve into a Neoprimitivist aesthetic, which explored the prosaic scenes of Slavic agrarian lifestyle as well as their religious traditions, including the style of their church murals. The summoning agency of Byzantine liturgical practice and the dogmatics of the Eastern Church offered the possibility of turning away from western models and discovering indigenous traditions as the mainstay of a new local modernism. And yet, Malevich's paintings of 1907 still remain rather anomalous in comprehensive studies of the artist and hardly receive attention as part of a consistent, totalising artistic trajectory.

5. Spirituality and the Semiotics of Russian Culture: From the Icon to Avant-Garde Art

Oleg Tarasov

The relationship between the avant-garde and the icon is of great importance for the discussion of the semiotics of Russian culture and the spiritual tradition in Russian art. The first reason is a historical one. From this perspective, the icon and the avant-garde image are diametrically opposite sign systems. In the icon, symbol coincides with meaning. Not by accident, it was the act of naming that gave icons their force. In the medieval consciousness a title was inseparable from the identity of the person bearing it. However, the avant-garde image (the abstract image in particular) is a pure sign able to acquire new meanings spontaneously. The sign and its meaning are in an arbitrary relationship here.

Moreover, in the medieval system of aesthetics an icon could be understood only in the context of the ritual associated with it. As we know, in medieval aesthetics, elements giving pleasure did not belong to the artistic idea. From this came the principle that the icon was not considered as a form of 'free' art that was drawn into the service both of the Church and the government. Only in Renaissance art theory did pleasure become one of the aims of art. For the icon, the individual perspectives of the artist and the spectator do not come into play. As a result, the art of the medieval icon painter lay in knowledge of the rules of the craft, as opposed to creative imagination. The aim of the icon is to enable an individual to perceive an image as a truth imposed upon the mind from outside, as revealed only to the Holy Fathers and the saints. For the icon, the laws of optics and the gaze of the spectator are not important. The icon refuses the spectator the possibility of cognition.

Such an understanding might be confirmed by the particularities of framing, both of icons and paintings. We know that the frame is a very important element of artistic space.[1] It makes connections that relate to the general flow of signs and symbols within one, or another, culture of images. Of course it is also linked with changes in humanity's picture of the world. The icon frame derives from the antique niche (*antichnaia nisha*), that is, the physical frame which would surround an ancient painting in situ — an indented space in which to present the image. Here, we have the symbolic unity of the covering of the icon and what it represents. In Old Testament tradition God was distanced from the world. For this reason the function of concealing the holy object was performed by a metal covering of the icon, and its casing, curtain clothes, and borders were decorated with ornament. The icon cover and its sacred clothes were called (from the Greek) *ependysis*, that is, adornment. The gaze of the viewer has no significance.

By contrast, the frame of the Renaissance painting is the 'ego' of the perceiving subject. We have here the transformation of the surrounding world into an object of cognition. Linear perspective, with which this frame was directly linked, presumed a single viewpoint. Hence the artistic space of the Renaissance painting acquired a series of new qualities. On an icon the image is set up as if on a blank wall. Thus the icon is perceived as the world itself. In a painting the image is constructed as if through the transparent glass of a window. For this reason the Renaissance picture must be perceived only as a part of the surrounding world. On the contrary, the model of the world in an icon does not permit the illusion of a spectator's entry into it. A person stands before an icon with the utmost respect and accepts the world as it is.

In avant-garde art we have the deconstruction of any frame, for it declares the end of all rhetorical systems, including icons. The abolition of the picture frame by artists of the avant-garde began to address the problem of the conditional nature of human knowledge of the world. For these artists the aesthetic idea of a painting came to presuppose a new process of perception. Here the icon frame or the Renaissance frame could serve as a symbol of the art of the past, while at the same time being superseded by the new direction in contemporary art. A picture seemed to burst its bounds. Thus a painting and its frame were no longer linked by the laws of the religious system of symbols or the Renaissance theory of optics, but by a common search for what we might call 'essences'.

In contrast with the icon, the avant-garde image (if we continue to regard it from the historical point of view) is the embodiment of the *individuality* of the artist. Consequently, the real project of the avant-garde was not formal innovation, as it was for the Symbolist painters, but the attempt to place the individual in touch with the transcendental, and to transform the world on the basis of 'ideas' revealed only to the

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1   For a wider discussion of the significance of framing in Russian art see Oleg Tarasov, *Framing Russian Art: From Early Icons to Malevich*, trans. by Robin Milner-Gulland and Antony Wood (London: Reaktion Books, 2011).

artist. Hence avant-garde art became a programme, its paintings as symbols revealing their own content. The aim of the avant-garde image was to free the viewer's mind from the usual stereotypes of perception. It appeared in the context of neo-Kantian philosophy, replacing the concept of three-dimensional space with a new theory of a multi-dimensional universe. Special attention was paid to mysticism, Theosophy, and occult doctrines, and to religious images and medieval icons in particular. These images began to be perceived as art objects. They were also perceived as means of opening the way to the 'widening' of human consciousness.

It is against this historical framework that the icon and avant-garde image can be brought together. This is a theoretical discussion that emerges when we begin to regard the icon as a work of art. Like an abstract painting, the icon invariably signals the unreliability of the surrounding reality. In this sense it was, and remains, entirely 'modern' when it comes to the deepest kind of artistic investigation into the limits of the visible in the era of modernism. The aim of the icon as art is the transgression or access to the world of the numinous (fig. 5.1). But the aim of the avant-garde image is the same. The icon and abstract image do not lead the consciousness of the spectator along the path of imagination. They lead it on the path of conviction in an unseen reality. In the case of an icon this is to heavenly beauty; in the case of an abstract image, to the multi-dimensional universe. Thus if the Renaissance painting actively cooperates with the surrounding reality, the icon and avant-garde image are set in opposition to it. The result is a break through the boundary between the material and the spiritual, transcending the limits of human possibility. The conviction among artists arose that the new kind of image must — as was the case with the icon — capture the visual reality of the numinous (fig. 5.2). Such a painting therefore demanded not an aesthetic experience (the icon did the same), but an appreciation that its endeavour was to penetrate to the essence of the visible material world. Consequently, a non-figurative image could be set alongside an early icon next to it on a wall, both images being open to the transcendental, and both being unconnected with external reality.

Keeping in mind these historical and theoretical aspects of the topic of the icon and the avant-garde, the next section of my chapter outlines a few problems concerning the spiritual tradition in Russian art. The rhetorical impulse constituted the framework of Christian culture. From the start, however, western and eastern Christendom resolved the problem of the image in somewhat different ways. In the Byzantine-Slav world, including Muscovite Russia, the icon was conceived as belonging to the realm of metaphysics rather than that of rhetoric. It was the major symbol of Christianity, witness to truth, and to the 'presence' in the world of Christ and the saints. Thus it was enveloped with a special respect and reverence. In the west, on the contrary, the image had a modest status. The image was a 'Bible for simple people' that had to instruct, to touch hearts, and to bring pleasure; its role was limited to the defence of the Christian mission. This relatively modest status of the cult image in Roman Catholic culture was determined by the scholastic tradition. The quest for truth was

5.1 Theophanes the Greek, *The Saviour's Transfiguration*, early fifteenth century. Tempera on wood, 184 x 134 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration_by_Feofan_Grek_from_Spaso-Preobrazhensky_Cathedral_in_Pereslavl-Zalessky_(15th_c,_Tretyakov_gallery).jpeg

5.2 Kazimir Malevich, *Quadrilateral* (also known as *Black Square*), 1915. Oil on board, 79.5 x 79.5 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons. wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kazimir_Malevich,_1915,_Black_Suprematic_Square,_oil_on_linen_ canvas,_79.5_x_79.5_cm,_Tretyakov_Gallery,_Moscow.jpg

given over to scholasticism, not to the picture, for which it was too large and complex. After it accepted Christianity in the tenth century (AD 988), early Russia of course adopted the Byzantine rhetorical tradition, which formed the basis of both its writing and its icon painting. However, in the Old Russian context Byzantine rhetoric did not become a scholarly discipline as in the Catholic world. It was the image, rather than the book, that strove to become speculative philosophy.

This is only one of several issues that are very significant in understanding specific features of Russian image veneration and the 'spirituality' closely connected with religious experience. Another issue is the intellectual construction of Holy Russia as a 'Great Spatial Icon'. What does this mean? It is evidently of the greatest importance that in Muscovite Russia the concept of *translatio imperii* (literally, the 'transfer of rule' from one leader to another in linear succession, stemming originally from God), which had been developed in the Middle Ages, was burdened with unique historical circumstances. This collective religious feeling was not only universally accepted, but adopted with ease: it was incorporated into the remarkable religious enthusiasm that accompanied the Reformation in western Europe, some of which was opposed to icon veneration, and it also took on importance against the background of the conquest of the Balkan Orthodox world by the Muslim Turks. Following the Byzantine model, Muscovite Russia began to conceive of itself as a God-chosen state, possessor both of the chief symbols of sacred power and of the main single symbol of Orthodox faith, the icon. Hence the concept of 'empire', traditional in imperial theology, acquired the character of the utopian concept of Holy Russia or, metaphorically speaking, of Russia as a Great Spatial Icon, whose vast geographical expanse had to be saturated through and through with holiness.[2]

This brings us to the third very important issue for the understanding of the spiritual tradition in Russian art. The reform of the Russian Orthodox Church begun by Patriarch Nikon (1605–81) and Tsar Alexis (1645–76) was accompanied by radical changes in the concept of the visual image. They led to the establishment of a new ritual and a new system of signs for the Russian icon at the Great Moscow Council of the Church in 1666–67. Hitherto, Russian icons had shown the saints making the sign of blessing with two fingers, while the abbreviated name of Christ used four letters, IC XC. In icons of the new devotion, the name of Christ was abbreviated with five letters as IUC XC, and three fingers formed the sign of blessing.

These apparently simple changes occurred amid profound shifts in Russian culture and mass consciousness. The new type of icon and the new devotion were the result of the influence of Renaissance ideas at the Russian court. They were also linked with the individualisation of religious sensibility, the appearance in Russia of western,

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2   For more on the sacralisation of the Russian world through icons, see Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, trans. and ed. by Robin Milner-Gulland (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), especially Chapter 1, 'Venerated Image: The Sacred in the Everyday', pp. 37–118.

Latinised rhetoric, and, finally, the gradual decay of the icon-painting canon and the replacement of the Byzantine and Old Russian icon by religious painting (using linear perspective) within the official Church. From that time the Russian icon ceased to be available to unmediated perception: it belonged to the realm of the imagination, of sensed experience, and also of special 'scholarly' knowledge. In this regard, we find that in Russia of the second half of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, icon painting is taken both as a traditional craft among the 'Old Believers' and as a free art.[3] In the first case, the religious image was perceived as a truth revealed only to the Holy Fathers, not to the icon painter whose role was to bear witness to it. So the traditional craft continued to follow Byzantine and Old Russian models. In the second case, the spectator was made to search for the artistic purpose within the image, that is, for the interpretation of artistic truth. This new type of Russian icon opened a new path in Russian art. The problem of the spectator's perception was for the first time raised before the Russian icon painter: the old icons ceased to satisfy the demands of the imagination. The icon painter began to use books of emblems and engravings as sources for his art.

The frames of the new Russian icons began to reflect, in turn, new aesthetic conceptions. These frames operated as if they set the icon face to face with the surrounding world, with poetry, philosophy, and the whole of worldly culture. With this development the meaning of the icon as art was becoming clear: the contemplation of the image was meant to evoke astonishment and pleasure. An illustrative contrast is provided by the Old Believers, who collected old icons in their oratories that were not perceived as works of art. The Old Russian icon was perceived as a cult image, that is, as part of an old historical system of signs, but not as an original painted image; the prototype was important, but not an original. The idea of the Old Russian icon as an original work of art began to appear only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus the Old Russian icons had stayed silent for a long time, as their artistic form had been unrecognised until this point, of no concern to Old Believers, scholars, and collectors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the whole.

In order to stimulate interest in icons as artistic objects, first the original paint surface needed to be uncovered (which the availability of new methods of restoration made possible), and secondly the beauty of form in the context of Romantic aesthetics and new developments in art scholarship had to be elucidated.[4] The 'intuition' of Schopenhauer and the neo-Kantian 'theory of empathy' as applied to art then came

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3   The term 'Old Believers' refers to those who continued to follow the liturgical and ritual practices of the Russian Orthodox Church that preceded the reforms of Patriarch Nikon in the late seventeenth century. (The reforms led to the so-called '*raskol*' (schism) in the Church, creating a divide which has survived to the present day.)

4   The significance of Romantic aesthetic ideas in understanding the history of the classification and display of icons in the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries has been previously explored in Tarasov, *Framing Russian Art*, pp. 190–91.

into focus.[5] Through 'intuition' a type of cognition that brought art scholarship close to artistic creation took place, while according to the theory of 'empathy', as formulated by German philosophers Wilhelm Dilthey, Theodor Lipps, and others, beauty began to be seen not as an objective quality of the object, but as the result of feelings 'put into' it by the perceiving subject.[6] For Lipps, beauty was 'pleasure objectified in itself', while Dilthey viewed empathy (*einfühlung*) as the central category of a Romantic attitude to life.[7] The work of Heinrich Wölfflin, in which universal categories of artistic form are outlined, is also particularly relevant here.[8]

In the context of these Romantic and neo-Kantian aesthetic ideas, the beauty of the Old Russian icon began to be understood as an 'aesthetic discovery' of the artist, analogous to that of the Italian Renaissance. In works by a younger generation of Russian scholars — Pavel Muratov, Nikolai Shchekotov, Nikolai Punin (whose work in the field of icons is discussed in Chapter 10), and a few others, the Old Russian icon was described as a painterly art that could be understood only by way of a profound investigation of its artistic form. In this regard we can also find the deconstruction of the symbolic system of the Old Russian icon. As we know, the theory of poetic language was linked to avant-garde artistic practice at the beginning of the twentieth century; for example, avant-garde poets were deconstructing the linguistic structures that formalists were studying. A similar process was under way in the visual arts. To single out and apply in practice a set of archetypal symbols was a task upon which avant-garde artists and researchers were working in parallel. Two key personalities came to prominence in this respect: Pavel Florensky (1882–1943), a prominent Russian religious philosopher, and Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), the founder of Suprematism. Their worldviews were directly opposed, but their methods of deconstructing the artistic form of the icon brought their work closer together. Both regarded the sacral visual image as a symbolic system to be deconstructed and as a system of culturally and historically determined signs.

Florensky was the first scholar to regard the icon as a self-contained symbolic structure. Simultaneously, he explored different levels of analyses of the artistic language of the icon. The answers to problems he was solving in the theory of language were being transferred to his theory of representation. In that sense, Florensky is considered the founder of the semiotics of the icon. He demonstrated the metaphysics of the symbolic language of icon-painting in his famous work

5   For a definition of Schopenhauer's intuition, see David E. Cartwright, *Historical Dictionary of Schopenhauer's Philosophy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 141. See also Dale Jacquette, ed., *Schopenhauer, Philosophy and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

6   For a summary of the theory of 'empathy', see Karsten Stüber, 'Empathy', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/empathy/

7   Theodor Lipps, 'Zur Einfühlung', *Psychologische Untersuchungen*, 2 (1912/13), 111–491; Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1961).

8   See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, trans. by Jonathan Blower, ed. by Evonne Anita Levy and Tristan Weddigen (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2015).

The Iconostasis, the article 'Reverse Perspective' which he published in 1920, and in lectures on three-dimensionality in the pictorial arts, which he read early in the 1920s.[9] As we know, science and art during the first two decades of the twentieth century shared the problems of time and space. The posing of these questions led art historians to analyse linear and reverse perspective, that is, the conventional devices used to portray spatial and temporal relations on canvas. For example, the German art writer and theoretician Oskar Wulff published an article about reverse perspective in 1907, in which he traced its forms to an inner viewpoint.[10] In the well-known essay, 'Perspective as a Symbolical Form' (1927), Erwin Panofsky regarded the system of reverse perspective as projection on a spherical surface.[11] Unlike Wulff and Panofsky, however, Florensky treated reverse perspective as projecting the artist's wandering glance onto a surface — or, to be more precise, as a synthesis of the inner and the outer viewpoints. In other words, the viewpoint of the artist was permanently changing, while the viewer figuratively entered the icon to see it from the inside and outside at the same time. "The composition [of the icon]", Florensky wrote, "is constructed as if the eye were looking at different parts of it, while changing its position".[12] This synthesis of the various viewpoints defined the principal quality of the arrangement of the artistic space of the icon. Thus an icon painter could sum up different viewpoints in space, that is, the visual impression of a thing regarded from many points (hence the rounded forms, auxiliary surfaces, and all kinds of broken shapes). An icon painter could also synthesise several viewpoints in time, and so portray one figure twice in one icon as it appears at different times. Florensky seems to have been the first to pose the question of how to apprehend an icon of a saint with scenes from his life ('vita icon'), and the function of their frame in the organisation of time and space. Structural formal analyses also dominated the scholarly mind within the context of Russian Formalism.

Malevich's interest in icons arose on the back of the wave of interest in 'primitive' art, which had emerged in Russia just as it had in western Europe. During his Primitivist stage he shared the Russian avant-garde's general fascination with the icon as 'primitive painting' and an original aesthetic system. Moreover, as he later wrote: "Icons have influenced me greatly […]. I sensed a connection between peasant art and icons […]. In fact I came to understand the peasantry through icons."[13] The

9   Pavel Florensky, 'Reverse Perspective' in Pavel Florensky, *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. by Nicoletta Misler and trans. by Wendy R. Salmond (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), pp. 197–272. Florensky's interpretation of reverse perspective later became consonant with the structural semiotic approach. Boris Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, ed. by Stephen Ruddy (Lisse: Peter de Ridder Press, 1976); Oleg Tarasov, 'Florensky, Malevich e la semiotica dell'icona', *La Nuova Europa*, 1 (2002): 34–47.

10   Oskar Wulff, 'Die umgekehrten Perspektive und die Niedersicht' in *Kunstwissenschaftliche Beiträge, August Schmarsow gewidmet*, ed. by Heinrich Weizsäcker, *et al.* (Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1907), pp. 1–40.

11   Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. by Christopher S. Wood (New York: Urzone, 1991).

12   Florensky, 'Reverse Perspective', *Beyond Vision*, pp. 197–272 (p. 204).

13   Excerpts of 'Chapters of an Artist's Autobiography' [1933] in *Kazimir Malevich. 1878–1935* (exh. cat., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1988), p. 108.

particular features of the avant-garde's preoccupation with the icon are outlined in two books by the artist Aleksei Grishchenko (1883–1977). In the words of Grishchenko, the avant-garde "posed the problem of a new realistic depiction of objects by means of deconstruction".[14] His first book, *On the Links of Russian Painting with Byzantium and the West* (*O sviazakh russkoi zhivopisi s Vizantiei i Zapadom*), came out in 1913.[15] The other, which appeared in 1917, *The Russian Icon as the Art of Painting* (*Russkaia ikona kak iskusstvo zhivopisi*), was a fuller development of Grishchenko's oral communication of 1915, 'Why and How Did We Come Close to the Russian Icon?'[16]

For the Russian Neoprimivitists, including Malevich, the Old Russian icon was "art of the highest order".[17] Together with other examples of 'primitive' art, it offered the opportunity of escape from the academic imitative image to 'pure art'. Henri Matisse, visiting the Ilia Ostroukhov Museum in Moscow in 1911, was in raptures over the beauty of the Old Russian icon, finding it "genuine primitive" popular art and a priceless source of new ideas for his own painting.[18] Grishchenko maintained that the achievements of French painters had helped the Russian 'Neoprimitives' to acquire a "new range of artistic concepts" in general and in the field of Old Russian icon painting in particular.[19]

During the period of his interest in 'primitive' art Malevich studied the formal structure of the icon.[20] We can also find the same new reading of the icon in the works of Natalia Goncharova. We know that Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov collected folk icons and prints (*lubki*) and staged an exhibition of these in 1913 in Moscow.[21] The exhibition, Icon Patterns and Lubki, ran concurrently with Goncharova and Larionov's latest group exhibition called Target (*Mishen'*). At this time Kandinsky also collected

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14 Aleksei Grishchenko, *O sviazakh russkoi zhivopisi s Vizantiei i Zapadom XIII-XX vv.: Mysli zhivopistsa* (Moscow: Postavshchik Dvora ego velichestva T-vo A. A. Levenson, 1913).

15 *Ibid.*

16 Aleksei Grishchenko, 'Introduction to "Russkaia ikona kak iskusstvo zhivopisi"', *Voprosy zhivopisi*, III (Moscow, 1917).

17 Aleksei Grishchenko, *Russkaia ikona*, pp. 7, 37. It is to be noted that Florensky shared with the artists of the avant-garde the precept that "forms should be grasped in the light of their own life, take expression in terms of themselves, openly to the understanding, not in accordance with predetermined perspectives" [emphasis mine], in Pavel Florenskii, 'Obratnaia perspektiva' in Pavel Florenskii, *Sochineniia*, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Mysl', 1990), p. 60.

18 *Utro Rossii* (27 October 1911).

19 A. Grishchenko, 'Russkaia ikona', p. 26; see also pp. 17, 250, 259, and 262.

20 Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863–1922* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962), p. 97; Oleg Tarasov, 'Russian Icons and the Avant-Garde: Tradition and Change', in *The Art of Holy Russia: Icons from Moscow, 1400–1600* (exh. cat., Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1998), pp. 45–47; Tarasov, *Framing Russian Art*, p. 345; Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon. Russian Avant-Garde Art and The Icon Painting Tradition* (London: Lund Humphries, 2008), pp. 67–69.

21 For the catalogue, see *Vystavka ikonopisnykh podlinnikov i lubkov organizovannaia M. F. Larionovym [The exhibition of icon patterns and lubki, organised by M. F. Larionov]* (exh. cat., Moscow, Bol'shaia Dmitrovka, Khudozhestvennyi salon 11, 1913). See Chapter 6 of this volume for a discussion of the influence of *lubki* in the art of Goncharova and Larionov.

Bavarian religious painting on glass as well as Russian folk icons and *lubki*.[22] As a result of this interest we can see the reflection (or imprint) of the sacred composition of an icon in a number of works by these artists. In these works the picture plane is no longer defined from a single viewpoint. The picture demands to be looked at from inner or even multiple viewpoints. Such a position of the viewer was discussed a few years later by Florensky.

Meanwhile, at this stage, Malevich was seeking in his art to elide the boundaries of received aesthetic norms, and move towards metaphysical essences and realities. He wrote later:

> Acquaintance with the art of icon painting taught me that it was not a question of studying anatomy or perspective, it was not a question of whether nature had been truthfully reproduced — the important thing was a feeling for art and artistic realism. In other words, I saw that reality, or a subject, is what must be re-embodied in an ideal form coming out of the heart of an aesthetic.[23]

Consequently, the artist transgresses the beauty of the Old Russian icon in order to enter another dimension of reality. He uncovers a subject to contemplate that is transcendental — absolute nothingness, the potential existence of certain forms, the universal symbol of pure form. He sees his God "in the absolute, at the ultimate boundary, as it were in non-objectivity. Attainment of the finite is attainment of non-objectivity".[24] The composition of a Suprematist painting, therefore, is a view into the meaning of things, achieved through the transformation of 'pure forms' as the primary elements of art. The eye of the viewer of a Suprematist painting falls on a network of the artist's metaphysical experience, and visions of boundless, infinite space. Beyond the visible and chance phenomena of our external world there are no laws of harmony, as in Classicism, nor chance clashes, as in Romanticism; there is only infinite emptiness, nothingness. Hence comes the revolutionary transformation of the aesthetic at the centre of which is the viewer's perception of a work of art. Now the personality of the artist comes into the foreground.

The Old Russian icon was a canonic image; that is, an authentic revelation which the icon painter could only depict, not interpret. On the other hand, Renaissance mimetic painting was based on the interpretation of the idea of divine beauty, and its reception was thus dependent on visual perception. But the Suprematist image had arrived at a new threshold, opening onto a different reality. Hence Malevich's *Quadrilateral* (*Chetyreugol'nik*) (now known as *Black Square*) (1915) (fig. 5.2) was a new icon, which testified to the presence of a direct link with the transcendental — a link the painter himself had experienced. The painter wrote to Alexandre Benois in May 1916 of his

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22   See icons and *lubki* from Kandinsky's collection in *Chagall et l'avant-garde russe* (exh. cat., Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2011), pp. 56–58.

23   As quoted in Nikolai Khardzhiev, *K istorii russkogo avangarda* (Stockholm: Hylaea Prints, 1976), p. 123.

24   Kazimir Malevich, *Bog ne skinut. Iskusstvo, tserkov', fabrika* (Vitebsk, 1922), p. 19.

celebrated work: "I have done one *icon* of my time, bare (as a pocket), *without a frame* […] [emphasis mine]".[25] This renunciation of a frame of any kind and the claim of a new transcendental icon as a construct of the human mind meant a complete break with all previous cultural tradition, and a declaration of a radically new view of the world. Malevich's starting-point was the icon, but he gave it a contemporary guise.

The phenomenon of *revelation*, as, in principle, a crossing of the un-crossable boundary between the earthly and the divine, traditionally studied by mystical theology, appears here as a palpable example of transgression taken by the artist from cultural tradition. The same could be said of Theosophy, which opened up an awareness of other levels of being for Malevich. It was not by chance that this artist noted that his time was "the age of analysis, the result of all the systems that have ever been established".[26] The new experience of seeing the transcendental presupposed the mastering of the most diverse practices in art and meditation. Transgression of the boundary into the invisible world not only ensured the openness of the numinous to the metaphysics of the image, but reduced the role of the frame as a recognisable boundary, as it had been in preceding cultures.

The new horizon that appeared as a result of this breakthrough was truly new in the sense that it possessed the status and the energy to deny all earlier culture. Such was the meaning of the Cubo-Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* (*Pobeda nad solntsem*, 1913), on which Malevich collaborated with Aleksei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Matiushin, and in which he later claimed that the 'black square' symbol had first appeared. *Victory over the Sun*, Matiushin explained, "is all about victory over the Romanticism of the past, over the conventional idea of the sun as 'beauty'. The sun of the old aesthetic was conquered".[27] The culture of all preceding periods was thereby seen in an eschatological perspective. With the 'killing of the sun' it was plunged into chaos, to be mystically regenerated for a new world.

Thus Suprematism was formed and conceived as a spiritual system with a universal cosmic dimension, endowed with the capacity to transfigure the world in accordance with the laws of 'pure form'. Such a quest brought Malevich fame as a prophet. He began to feel relieved by his messianic role in as much as his creative activity was based on the clear desire to change the organisation of the world. Hence his famed painting, *Black Square*, accumulating the artist's creative energy and opening a new world, was intended as a 'new icon' — a 'cult object', having an influence on social reality.

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25 Otdel Rukopisei Gosudarstvennogo Russkogo Muzeia (ORGRM) (State Russian Museum, Manuscript Division, St Petersburg), fond 137/1186/2, reverse. This letter was written in response to Benois's criticism of the Futurist exhibition '0.10' held in Petrograd in 1915. For Benois, 'Black Square' evoked iconic associations, on which Malevich also commented (see A. Benua, 'Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka', *Rech'* (9 January 1916)).

26 Kazimir Malevich, 'Analiz novogo i izobrazitel'nogo iskusstva (Pol' Sezann)' in K. Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v. 5 tomakh*, Vol. 2 (Moscow, 1998), p. 19.

27 *Russkii futurizm. Teoriia. Praktika. Vospominaniia*, ed. by V. N. Terekhina and A. P. Zimenkov (Moscow: Nasledie, 1999), pp. 323 and 325.

5.3 Photograph of The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10 ('Zero-Ten'), 1915. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0.10_Exhibition.jpg
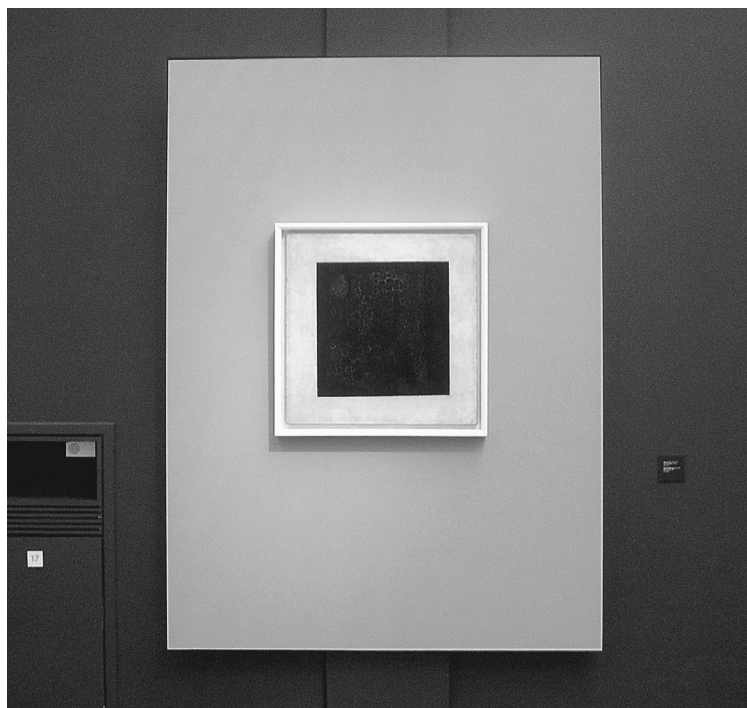
5.4 Display of Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square* (1915), Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2006. Photograph © Oleg Tarasov, CC BY 4.0.

Malevich first showed his Suprematist works at the Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10 ('zero ten') in 1915, placing his *Black Square* in the corner of the exhibition hall where the icon corner was traditionally set up (fig. 5.3). This placing of the work and (as in the case of other works by this artist) the absence of a frame had a conceptual significance. In the artist's words, *Black Square* was "zero form", "the face of the new art", "a regal infant".[28] And, being a self-sufficient form, it did not, of course, need a *frame*, the long-standing symbolic boundary separating a picture from surrounding space. This work was itself 'reality', cosmic emptiness, frameless, and as such was intended to float in the infinite cosmos and give new form to the real world. It did not even need the narrow canvas surround that emphasised the uniqueness of the abstract painting as an aesthetic object, its composition being an enclosed system. The 'framing' effect of the white surround formed a black square, and the square formed the framing, which transformed the whole construction into a 'point', a *fons et origo*, which the artist saw as "the first step of pure creativity in art".[29] Here the Suprematist project began to be regarded as a kind of new religion, and a Suprematist painting took on the function of a new form of icon, a 'cult object' having an influence on social reality.

In the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow a few years ago *Black Square* was displayed in a frame (reminiscent of an icon case) hung against a grey wall (fig. 5.4). Thus the viewer was invited directly to feel the impact of the painting on the real world, as if it were a twentieth-century icon.

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28 Kazimir Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism, 1915', in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, third edition, ed. by John Bowlt (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), pp. 116–36 (134).

29 Kazimir Malevich, 'Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu', in K. Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v 5 tomakh*, Vol. 1 (Moscow, 1995), p. 53.

6. Re-imagining the Old Faith: Goncharova, Larionov, and the Cultural Traditions of Old Believers

Nina Gurianova

The series of programmatic avant-garde declarations published between 1912 and 1915 marked a different period in the evolution of the early Russian avant-garde, which was turning toward abstraction, and to a new conceptual entity that Kandinsky had named a couple of years earlier a "new spirituality" in art.[1] These artists were not interested in the critical ranking and material value of their art, nor in solely formal innovations: on the contrary, by proclaiming the principle of "art for life and life for art", the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-gardists attempted to expand the role of art beyond the instrumentalist framework accepted in modern society and to erode regulated alienation between professional artist and audience in the consumerist world. They saw no value in 'art for art's sake' either. Art was no longer assigned the "soothing, calming influence" of "a good armchair", to use Matisse's popular metaphor, in which "every mental worker […] the businessman as well as a man of letters" can dream of beauty and relax from mental and physical fatigue; rather, art became action, spiritual as well as social responsibility, a constant resistance to individual and cultural inertia.[2] As the futurist poet Aleksei Kruchenykh explained in one of these declarations, "our creativity is generated by a *new deepening* of the spirit,

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1   See Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, translated with an introduction by M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977). The first version of this text was written in German, and dated 3 August 1909. It was published only in December 1911.

2   Henri Matisse, 'Notes of a Painter', in *Matisse on Art*, ed. by Jack Flam (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 30–42 (p. 42). This essay was originally published in December 1908. A Russian translation appeared in the Symbolist magazine *Golden Fleece* [*Zolotoe runo*] in 1909.

and it throws new light on everything. Its genuine novelty does not depend on new themes (objects)".[3]

Coincidentally or not, the majority of these pronounced artistic and poetic manifestos were published the same year that another cultural event of great importance for Russian culture took place in Moscow. The first Exhibition of Old Russian Art, mostly from Moscow private collections, in honour of the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, opened in February 1913 under the auspices of the Moscow Imperial Archaeological Institute. Since there was practically no concept of secular art in pre-Petrine Russia, the exhibited items possessed not only historical and aesthetic value, but, above all, were objects of great religious and spiritual significance. According to many art historians of the era, who came from very different aesthetic beliefs and artistic circles, such as Pavel Muratov and Nikolai Punin, as well as modern-day scholars, this first public exhibition of the recently cleaned twelfth- to fifteenth-century icons on such a grand scale had a tremendous impact on the future development of Russian culture, and affected the 'first generation' of the avant-garde in particular — Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich, Olga Rozanova, Aleksandr Shevchenko, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Kruchenykh, among others.[4]

There was another crucial point shared by the same critics: the instrumental role of thousands of the so-called Old Believers, who came from all social strata, but were mostly peasants and merchants, in the preservation (often under the threat of execution and exile) and conservation of ancient icons, as well as all many other material objects. These included popular *lubki* (cheap, hand-coloured prints) (fig. 6.1), books, and manuscripts, which belonged to the 'uncomfortable' religious and aesthetic traditions of the Russian past that had been rejected and abused by the state. In the west, Russian Old Belief movements are sometimes compared to early Protestantism, which seems to be a deep misunderstanding: the Old Believers were never reformers, but fiercely independent dissenters who remained at the same time traditionalists.[5] "Adherents of the traditional view of the world, they preserved traditional icon painting and the

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3   Aleksei Kruchenykh, 'New Ways of the Word', in *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, ed. by Anna Lawton, trans. by Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 69–77 (p. 77).

4   See Pavel Muratov, 'Vystavka drevnerusskogo iskusstva v Moskve', *Starye gody* (April 1913); Nikolai Punin, 'Vystavka drevnerusskogo iskusstva', *Apollon*, 5 (1913), and 'Puti sovremennogo iskusstva', *Apollon*, 9 (1913), http://www.v-ivanov.it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon, as well as Chapter 10 of this volume. See also Oleg Tarasov, 'The Russian Icon and the Culture of the Modern: The Renaissance of Popular Icon Painting in the Reign of Nicholas II', *Experiment: A Journal of Russian Culture*, 7 (2001), 73–88; Jane A. Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natal'ia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Irina Shevelenko, 'Otkrytie drevnerusskoi ikonopisi v esteticheskoi refleksii 1910-kh godov', *Studia Russica Helsingiensia et Tartuensia X*, Vol. 2 (2006), 259–81.

5   For more on this subject, see: Robert O. Crummey, *Old Believers in a Changing World* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011); E. M. Iukhimenko, *Staroobriadchestvo: istoriia i kul'tura* (Moscow: Ano Staroobriadcheskii dukhovno-prosvetitel'skii tsentr "Krinitsa", 2016).

traditional attitude toward the icon, resisting the new, 'foreign' iconographic style that appeared in Russia in the second half of the seventeenth century under West European influence", argues Boris Uspensky.[6] In fact, Church reform had been harshly imposed from above by Patriarch Nikon and the state elite in the mid seventeenth century. As a result of this schism, and after years of executions and massive oppression, the traditional mainstream religion then supported by the overwhelming majority of the population, and later known as Old Belief, became marginalised by the state itself.

6.1 Anonymous, *Monster from Hell with the Souls of Sinners Mounted on its Back*, mid-nineteenth century. Ink, tempera, 50.5 x 58.8 cm. State Historical Museum, Moscow.[7]

The avant-garde's obsession with the newly discovered magnitude of the spiritual and artistic heritage of medieval Russia, rather than the westernised aesthetics of the centuries that followed, inevitably led them to the reevaluate the cultural phenomena of Old Believers, by definition the only keepers of this ancient tradition through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Wendy Salmond writes: "During the centuries that followed, the traditions of medieval Russia survived largely through the efforts of Old Believer communities. From the far north to the Ural Mountains, Old Believers were fervent collectors of old icons as well as skilled practitioners of traditional painting and iconography" (fig. 6.2).[8]

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6   Boris Uspensky, 'Russian Spirituality and the Veneration of Icons', in *Holy Russia*, ed. by Evgeniia Petrova and Irina Solov'eva (St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2011), pp. 30–41 (p. 35).

7   Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chudo_yudo.jpg

8   Wendy R. Salmond, *Tradition in Transition: Russian Icons in the Age of the Romanovs* (Washington, DC: Hillwood Museum & Gardens, 2004), p. 15.

6.2 Old Believers' Workshop, Icon of Archangel Michael (c. 1800).
Tempera on wood. 36 x 30 cm. Private Collection.[9]

Being themselves marginalised by society both aesthetically and politically in their search for the roots of national memory and spirituality, the avant-gardists apprehended the cultural discourse of Old Believers — non-conformists, who struggled to preserve their religious, intellectual, and cultural autonomy. The Old Believers had consistently resisted the invented national 'narratives' of the official Church and state since the late seventeenth century, and for that crime were silently ostracised for more than two hundred years from social, political, and public life. Schism was not a question of a simple generational conflict, of shifting tastes between 'archaists' and 'innovators';

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9   Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Icon_of_
     Michael_horseman,_Old_Believer_(c.1800,_priv.coll).jpg

this was a complex matter related to religious philosophy, and probably most of all a political issue, a massive popular resistance to oppressive church reform, and a drastic shift in state politics imposed on people by the elites. Finally, this resulted in the cardinal re-evaluation of national identity and the establishment of the Russian Empire in 1721. As Robert Crummey, a historian of the Old Belief movement, points out: "they threatened the emperor's beloved ideals of Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality. […] Simply by existing, of course, they challenged the monopoly of the official Orthodox Church".[10]

The year 1913 was one of those paradoxical moments in history when the ancient past and the utmost contemporaneity came to an unlikely juncture: it reinvented the national self-identity of Russian art. The avant-garde aspiration towards the Russian past and the restoration of its cultural markers was at the same time a political way to resist the established and over-bureaucratised cultural and social structures of the time, such as the Imperial Academy of Arts, for example. And, of course, this 'alternative' national tradition gave them a treasured chance to legitimise their call for artistic independence and creative freedom from the paramount western aesthetic tradition that had dominated the Russian art scene. This was their attempt to build cultural and intellectual autonomy and redefine Russian identity, an interest common to many Russian intellectuals around the turn of the century. Pavel Muratov defined this quest when he questioned the imposed authority of eurocentric values for emerging Russian modernism back in 1907:

> Our painting is already part of the general European current. […] But there one finds cold analysis and the work of an inquisitive, observant mind, whereas here there is delicate lyricism, the confessional song of the soul. […] It is difficult, almost impossible, for us to compare ourselves with the highly cultivated Denises, Guerins, and Vuillards. And why should we have to?[11]

Let us not forget that the move to dismiss cultural eurocentrism was common to the general tendencies of western modernism, which sought inspiration in African art (e.g., Picasso) or Polynesian art (e.g., Gauguin), but in Russia it was an especially complex and sensitive issue. For over two centuries, ever since Peter the Great had commissioned European artists *en masse* to work and teach in Russia, and to introduce Russian society to the concept of secular painting, which had not existed there before, professional Russian art had been consciously oriented toward the west. This imposed eurocentrism had become 'official' aesthetic dogma, replacing the Greco-Byzantine-inspired Russian iconic canon even in religious art. The philosophical and aesthetic orientation of the early Russian avant-garde was expanding in time, rather than in space, and instead of geographically exploring the 'found' traditions of primitive cultures (as was happening with Picasso or Gauguin),

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10   Crummey, *Old Believers*, p. 163.
11   Pavel Muratov, 'O zhivopisi', *Pereval*, 5 (1907), 40.

the Russian Neoprimitivists and Futurists were drilling through the layers of time, returning to what was semi-despised by the westernised elite, and the forgotten roots of their own pre-Petrine past.

The years 1905–17, marked by the uniquely productive and intense evolution of Russian modernist and avant-garde movements in art and poetry, were also known in history as a brief 'golden age' of Old Believer culture. During this decade, no less important than preserving was their role in restoring and disseminating the idea of the 'other' Russia, the possibility of 'other' national and cultural discourse, which had nothing to do with official nationalistic propaganda. Surprisingly, even the public paths of Old Believers and the avant-gardists unintentionally crossed on a few occasions at the Polytechnic Museum, the most popular and highly demanded space for lectures, conferences, and public debates in Moscow. In 1912–13, when the famous Futurist debates were held there, the leading Old Belief religious thinkers even organised a national conference and debates with representatives of the official Church at the same place.

It seems that the early Russian avant-garde could not avoid at least some kind of impact from this equally authentic and ostracised visual and literary tradition which, according to Dmitry Likhachev, eventually found its secret niche in certain forms of traditional folk arts and material culture, in the *lubok*, in different peasant crafts, and in wooden and clay toys.[12] From this perspective, many seemingly separate and isolated elements of the avant-garde's fascination with different aspects of Old Believer culture coalesce into a strong indication of such influence: Kandinsky's, Larionov's, and Nikolai Rogovin's *lubok* collections, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov's interest in Old Believers' religious textual and oral tradition, Goncharova's study of early icons and frescoes, and Rozanova's pursuit of small hand-made, hand-written, and hectograph books (techniques common in Old Believer communities at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries), as well as the general pursuit of apocalyptic symbolism and metaphors, crucial in Old Belief, and commonly shared in Russian Futurist and Neoprimitivist textual and visual narratives (fig. 6.3). To sum up, this tradition reframed the aesthetic and ideological discourse of the Russian avant-gardists, in particular the Neoprimitivist group led by Larionov and Goncharova, and brought them to a sharp, pronounced break with the previous dominant aesthetic models (fig. 6.4).

From this perspective it comes as no surprise that Larionov's family belonged to one of the strongest and most interesting branches of the Old Believer movement, the Pomors, who had a significant community in Moscow at the time. Before he left the country in 1915, Larionov was perhaps Russian art's most restless, radical

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12   Dmitrii Likhachev, *'Russkaia kul'tura novogo vremeni i drevnaia rus''* in his *Vospominaniia, razdum'ia, raboty raznykh let* (St Petersburg: ARS, 2006), Vol. 2, p. 193.

6.3 Natalia Goncharova, St Michael from *Mystical Images of War*, 1914. Lithograph. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/ File:Mystical_Images_of_War_-_8.jpg

genius. "We all went through Larionov's school", Vladimir Maiakovsky once said.[13] The roots of any Russian avant-garde artist, including Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, who started his or her career around 1908, go back to Neoprimitivism, of which Larionov was the recognised leader. In February 1913, directly in conjunction with the extensive icon exhibition, Larionov organised the 'First *Lubok* Exhibition' at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. It ran for less than a week, but was soon followed by another exhibition of *lubki* and icon patterns, altogether 596 items (including 129 icon patterns and 170 *lubki*, as well as hand-made books, from Larionov's own collection), which opened on 24 March in the art salon on Bolshaia Dmitrovka in Moscow.[14]

The very same qualities: forceful expressiveness, synthetic, rather than mimetic principle, and an innate tendency towards abstraction as opposed to any kind of physicality, which Goncharova appreciated in ancient frescoes and icons, also attracted Larionov to contemporary Old Believer *lubki* (fig. 6.1). He describes them below, particularly characterised by their "bleeding out" manner of hand-colouring, as "great art":

> The *lubok* is manifold — printed from copper plates, from wooden plates, coloured by hand and by stencil, within contours and extending beyond the contours — bleeding out. This last practice is not accidental, but is a fully conscious and established tradition. This is confirmed by contemporary Old Believer *lubki*, which continue to be coloured in this manner even today. In view of the fact that whoever is interested in this has a special taste, it is shared by […] hundreds of thousands of people.[15]

For the Neoprimitivists, the *lubok* became one of the major sources with which to visualise — in the midst of contemporary urban and provincial life — the features of the imagined Russia of old songs and folk-tales, the nostalgic peasant Russia which was no more. They used *lubok* popular culture, taken in the most general sense, as a key reference to defy the pompous official cultural doctrines with great irony, and to reframe the authentic concept of national art, linked to Old Believer movements, "shared by hundreds of thousands of people". Thus, in 1912 to 1913, Goncharova created a whole series of watercolours and gouaches on evangelical motifs and the lives of saints (such as *Saint Barbara* in the Tretyakov Gallery), directly influenced by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century hand-painted Old Believers' religious *lubki*.[16] Her ground-breaking sets and costumes for Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *The Golden Cockerel* (1914),

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13 Nikolai Khardzhiev, *Kazimir Malevich, Mikhail Matiushin. K istorii russkogo avangarda* (Stockholm: Hyleia, 1976), p. 81.

14 *Vystavka ikonopisnykh podlinnikov i lubkov organizovannaia M. F. Larionovym* [The exhibition of icon patterns and lubki, organised by M. F. Larionov] (exh. cat., Moscow Art Salon, Bol'shaia Dmitrovka, Moscow, 1913).

15 Mikhail Larionov, 'Predislovie k katalogu vystavki lubka', in *Pervaia vystavka lubka, organizovannaia N. D. Vinogradovym* (Moscow, 19–24 February 1913) [not paginated].

16 On the Old Believers' hand-painted *lubki* see: E. I. Itkina, *Russkii risovannyi lubok* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1992).

6.4 Group of artists (M. F. Larionov, S. M. Romanovich, V. A. Obolensky, N. S. Goncharova, M. Fabbri, A. V. Shevchenko) at the 'Donkey's Tail' Exhibition. 1913. Tretyakov Gallery.[17]

produced by Diaghilev as a part of the famous *Saisons Russes* in Paris, are very much based on the Old Believer *lubki*'s subjects and colour palette as well.

Lubok aesthetics are closely connected to another Old Believer cultural practice, which was revamped in Neoprimitivist and Futurist production: hand-made books. According to Crummey: "since Old Belief is a 'textual community', its leaders valued literacy and saw that boys learned to read […]. Second, the men and especially the women of the Old Believer communities made innumerable copies of manuscript books of pre-Nikonian texts".[18] In order to maintain their tradition, faith, and authority, the leaders of the Old Believers (especially the division of the so-called 'priestless') had to find new models for their existence outside of the mainstream, one of these being through the dissemination of books, which required high literacy among their communities.[19] Since Old Believers were not allowed by law to print books typographically until

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17 Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Donkey's_Tail_exhibition.jpg

18 Crummey, *Old Believers*, p. 49.

19 Priestless (*bespopovtsy*) were a large group among Old Believers (mostly *pomory-fedoseevtsy*) who trusted that Nikonian reforms had broken the apostolic succession and, as a consequence, after all the old priests had been executed or died of natural causes there was nobody with the authority to ordain new priests and perform certain sacraments. Therefore, the Old Believers' laity had to learn to read the Bible and other books of worship in order to celebrate a restricted number of sacraments, such as baptism and the Ministry of the Word.

1905, this led to the production of hand-written colourfully illustrated books, or books multiplied through the most primitive copier, the hectograph, up to the mid-twentieth century.[20] Practically abandoned nowadays, this technique uses a duplicating machine that operates by transferring ink from the original to a slab of gelatin treated with glycerin, from which prints are made. Usually fewer than one hundred copies can be printed.

After 1906 several Old Believer book printers were established in Moscow, and there were plenty of printed and illuminated hand-made books in circulation, well known to Larionov. Kruchenykh, who along with Goncharova and Larionov initiated the creation of the first Futurist artists' books, was deeply interested in the Old Believer movement as well. Even though Futurist books differed from religious manuscripts in concept and goal, as well as target audience, there were certain parallels in the artistic techniques used and in general aesthetic quality. The 'contemporary' twentieth-century Old Believer books were less expensive, and much more manageable (especially considering their usually small size) and more accessible than the original medieval Russian and Byzantine books, being more intimate and 'user-friendly' for the contemporary reader, including children. They did not carry with them the highly reverenced 'masterpiece' quality of the valuable *incunabula*, but instead were simple, joyfully naïve in their design, and democratically affordable for anybody. The Futurists were looking to achieve exactly the same qualities in the production of their books. Following Larionov's initial example in *Pomada* (1913), Rozanova and Kruchenykh started to paint some of the copies by hand in watercolour and gouache over lithographs as well. In their Futurist books the rich visual texture mirrors various poetic devices — deformations, shifts, plays on the non-coincidence of a unit of meaning and a word — paralleling deliberate colouration in painting ('bleeding out" in Larionov's words, as seen in Old Believer *lubki* or manuscript books) that ignores and goes beyond the outline of the depicted object. The synthesis of colour and sound, the painterly and the poetic, became complete in Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's *Te li le* (1914), designed by Rozanova, and created using a unique seven-tone hectographic printing technique. In Rozanova's and Kruchenykh's visual poetry, the 'hieroglyphic' quality of the word-image is intensified, and its ornamental nature eclipses the meaning contained in it. The poetic word is transformed into image and is perceived visually as an inimitable, enigmatic picture. The word is viewed rather than read, and its semantic meaning gives way to its graphic, visual sense, which is apprehended momentarily (as though its meaning is unintelligible or unknown). Some of the 'transrational' sound-letters evoke the medieval Russian musical notation,

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20   On Old Believers' hand-made religious books, see: *Litsevye apokalipsisy russkogo Severa: Rukopisi XVII-XIX vv. iz fondov Drevlekhranilishcha Pushkinskogo doma*, ed. by Gleb Markelov and Arina Bil'diug (St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Pushkinskogo doma, 2008). There is a separate catalogue of the hectograph books as well: N. Iu. Bubnov, *Staroobriadcheskie gektografirovannye izdaniia Biblioteki Rossiiskoi akademii nauk* (St Petersburg: BAN, 2012).

which consists of signs reminiscent of small hooks, or marks — so-called *kriuk* (hook) notation, widely used by Old Believers.

"Old Believers, who cherished the faith of their fathers, collected old icons either as revered religious relics, or as a rarity and treasure", writes Viktor Lazarev in his essay on the discovery and subsequent historiography of old Russian icons.[21] Lazarev continues:

> The famous collections of [Andrei] Postnikov, [Illarion] Prianishikov, [Aleksandr] Egorov, [Ivan and Georgii] Rakhmanovs have been assembled this way. It is worth mentioning that in comparison with such long-standing and painstaking commitment on the part of some Old Believer private collectors, the state and church institutions showed complete indifference towards Russian antiquity.[22]

Even after the 1905 Decree on Religious Tolerance, issued on 17 April by Tsar Nicholas II, Old Believers were still treated cautiously as religious outsiders by the Holy Synod. The October Manifesto of 1905 pronounced freedom of consciousness; these regulations, which directly affected Old Believer communities throughout the country, were finally confirmed on 17 October 1906 by the long-awaited new law concerning Old Believers' social status. For the first time, they were allowed to build their churches and prayer houses, disseminate their religious ideas, and print books. It was not until 1904 to 1905 that the 'public' revival and the first exhibitions of medieval Russian icons began, and in 1909 Ilia Ostroukhov, an artist and well-known Moscow collector, opened his private Museum of Icon Painting to visitors.

Indeed, to understand the scale of the impact that the rediscovery of ancient Russian art had, one should realise how much the mass perception of the icon in the nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries differed from today. Nowadays, when we speak of Old Russian art, the first name that comes to mind is that of Andrei Rublev. However, at that time his name was practically unknown, until the restorative works on the famous Trinity icon (*Troitsa*, 1425–27, Tretyakov Gallery, fig. 1.7) started in 1903–04, and continued through the 1920s. Since the late seventeenth century, many Greek and Old Russian icons had been irretrievably destroyed by force or neglect. Many others were endlessly over-painted under the influence of secular and religious European art, with their mimetic and illusionistic qualities, which were cherished by the reformed Church and state authority as the only canon accepted in society. Nikolai Leskov's story, *The Sealed Angel* (1872), widely read at the time, describes the common situation that whatever ancient objects were saved, these were not displayed in public, but were thrown out of reformed churches and hidden instead in Old Believer private collections and chapels (fig. 6.5), praying houses, and religious communities, mostly

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21   Viktor Lazarev, 'Otkrytie russkoi ikony i ee izuchenie' in V. N. Lazarev, *Russkaia ikonopis' ot istokov do nachala XVI veka* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 2000), p. 12.

22   *Ibid.*

in the Russian north.[23] No old icons had been systematically studied or appreciated throughout most of the nineteenth century, and the acknowledged entity of so-called 'old icons' included mostly seventeenth-century works. Dmitry Rovinsky, Fedor Buslaev, and Nikodim Kondakov, the first scholars who entertained iconographic studies and conducted the initial investigations of the subject, were still very much working from purely archeological and ethnographic perspectives, and based their research almost exclusively on Old Believer archives and collections.

6.5 Old Believers' Country Church, Blagoveshchensk. As published in Henry Lansdell, *Through Siberia* (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1883), p. 527.[24]

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23 Nikolai Leskov, *The Sealed Angel and Other Stories,* trans. by K. A. Lantz (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984). Leskov knew Old Believers' communities well and greatly appreciated pre-Petrine icons. He was the first Russian writer to publish several polemical newspaper essays in defence of old Russian icon painting in 1873.

24 Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Page_527_of_"Through_Siberia"_(1883)._A_starovers_or_old_believers_country_church._Blagoveschensk.jpg

The Exhibition of Old Russian Art in 1913 was directly preceded by a smaller but valuable show of newly cleaned icons, mostly from the collection of Nikolai Likhachev, which was organised by the Second Congress of Russian Artists in St Petersburg (27 December 1911–5 January 1912).[25] The Second Congress played a particular role in the re-evaluation and preservation of Russian medieval art and architecture, since its programme was largely dedicated to the issues associated with the conservation of Russian national artistic heritage.[26] Interestingly enough, the Russian version of Kandinsky's essay, *On the Spiritual in Art* (fig. 1.1), which had just been published in German in December 1911 (dated 1912), was commissioned as one of the major papers for the same Congress. In the absence of Kandinsky it was read aloud by his friend, the futurist theoretician, medical psychologist, and artist, Nikolai Kulbin, and followed by the comments of the critic, Sergei Volkonsky, and the well-known Byzantinist and art historian, Dmitry Ainalov. This turned into a much bigger and long-lasting discussion on the tradition and future of Russian art.

Along similar lines, and in anticipation of the Second All-Russian Congress of Artists which opened on 27 December 1911, Natalia Goncharova made the following press statement on Christmas Eve:[27]

> The older frescoes are being destroyed in the most barbaric manner. Painted walls are opened up to make air-vents and pegs are nailed in them for coat-racks as if paintings were not even present there. […]
>
> As concerns the preservation of ancient art (icons, broadsheets) and artistic industry [*khudozhestvennaia industriia*], it is essential that some measures be taken. These things are too valuable […].
>
> Besides, these works are of infinitely great significance for the future of Russian art.[28]

Nonetheless, it was not only upon Russian artists that Old Russian art had such an astonishing effect. Matisse, who visited Moscow in the autumn of that same year, asked his Russian patrons if he could see Russian icons (fig. 6.6).[29] According to Ostroukhov, who showed Matisse his collection, he "delighted" at the icons:

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25 See V. Georgievskii, 'Obzor vystavki drevnerusskoi ikonopisi i khudozhestvennoi stariny', *Trudy Vserossiiskogo s'ezda khudozhnikov v Petrograde*, Vol. 3 (Petrograd, 1914), 163–74.

26 See Vladimir Zverev, *Ot ponovleniia k nauchnoi restavratsii* (Moscow: Gos. nauchno-issl. in-t restavratsii, 1, 1999).

27 As Russia still used the Julian calendar before 1917, Christmas Eve was on 24 December.

28 Reprinted in English translation in Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, p. 271.

29 Matisse had had a previous chance to familiarise himself with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century icons when some examples were brought to Paris by Sergei Diaghilev for the 1906 Salon exhibition. According to Shevelenko, Diaghilev and Aleksandr Benois included thirty-six icons of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, which belonged to the Novgorod, Moscow, and Stroganov schools, in the retrospective exhibition of Russian art, *Salon d'automne. Exposition de l'art russe* (Irina Shevelenko, 'Suzdal'skie "bogomazy", "novgorodskoe kvatrochento" i russkii avangard', *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 124 (June 2013), 148–79, http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2013/124/13sch.html. For more on copper icons such as figure 6.6, see *Russian Copper Icons and Crosses from the Kunz Collection: Castings of Faith*, ed. by Richard Eighme Ahlborn and Vera Beaver-Bricken Espinola (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

> Literally the whole evening he wouldn't leave them alone, relishing and delighting in each one. And with what finesse! […] At length he declared that for the icons alone it would have been worth his while coming from a city even further away than Paris, that the icons were now nobler for him than Fra Beato […]. Today Shchukin phoned me to say that Matisse literally could not sleep the whole night because of the acuity of his impression.[30]

Matisse shared his perspective in a newspaper interview given to *Russia's Morning* (*Utro Rossii*) (27 October 1911): "This is primitive art. This is authentic popular art. Here is the primary source of all artistic endeavour. The modern artist should derive his inspiration from these primitives."[31]

While it became a cliché in contemporary criticism to characterise the famous pioneering collectors of western modernist art, such as Ivan Morozov, Sergei Shchukin, and the Riabushinsky family as 'new bourgeois' newcomers from the emerging enterpreneurial merchant class in Russia, liberal in their politics and taste, their Old Believer origins are rarely mentioned. Nonetheless, these origins seem to be crucial in their self-identity: all of them were descendants of well-known Moscow Old Believer families, who kept close ties with Old Believer religious communities in Moscow, were knowledgeable about ancient icons, and were brought up in a cultural tradition that *a priori* understood the beauty of this world as an abstracted, spiritual quality, rather than a sensual one.[32] It seems very likely that it was precisely such an upbringing that made them more prepared and receptive than most of their contemporaries to any manifestation of abstraction in contemporary art, which defies any mimetic value and any realistic and physical likeness of the world depicted.

Arguably, Matisse's fascination with Old Russian icons on the one hand, and Shchukin's and Morozov's interest in Matisse and Picasso — the most radical of artists at the turn of the century — on the other, belong to the same phenomenon — a quest for new spirituality in contemporary art. But if, for Matisse, the impact of old Russian icons meant formal discoveries first of all, and the suggestion of different ways of artistic expression via abstract categories, for Goncharova, Larionov, and their fellow artists, icons brought forth the promise of a new expression of national, aesthetic, and individual self-identity. In the words of Goncharova:

> Great and serious art cannot help but be national [*natsional'nyi*]. By depriving ourselves of the achievements of the past, Russian art is cutting itself off at the roots. […]
>
> It seems to me that we are living through the most critical [*otvetstvennyi*] moment in the life of Russian art. The factors that have caused this are: the strong impact of French art of the last decades and the strong rise in interest in ancient Russian painting.[33]

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30 Iu. A. Rusakov, 'Matiss v Rossii oseniu 1911 goda', *Trudy gosudarstvennogo ermitaza*, 14 (1973), 167–84. Quoted in Pierre Schneider, *Henri Matisse* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), p. 303.

31 Quoted in *Ibid.*

32 See E. M. Iukhimenko, *Pomorskoe staroverie v Moskve i khram v Tokmakovom pereulke* (Moscow: Moskovskaia Pomorskaia staroobriadcheskaia obshchina, 2008).

33 Cited in Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, p. 271.

6.6 Theotokos of Tikhvin Icon (late 19th century, Moscow). Cast copper. 9.5 x 11 cm.
Private collection. Photograph © Nina Gurianova, CC BY 4.0.

This search for new identity is visualised in one of Goncharova's still lifes, *Fruits and Engraving* (1912, Tula Regional Art Museum), obviously set in the artist's studio, and also known as *Nature Morte (An Icon, Armchair, and Photograph)*.[34] Goncharova's composition reads as a kind of visual manifesto that slightly preceded the avant-garde's published declarations. In pursuit of a new creativity and artistic self-identity, she joins together a few distinct sources, hand-picked reference points that chart her inspiration: the simple, so-called 'peasant' Old-Believers' Russian icon (without the costly *oklad*, the metal casing enclosing icons that was a rarely found among the Old Believers) and the very contemporary photograph (or print) of a Neoprimitivist sketch by Larionov that was close to her heart — the *Provincial Coquette*. This was a

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34 Under such a title, but dated much earlier (1907), this painting was listed by Ilia Zdanevich in his book: Eli Eganburi [Ilia Zdanevich] *Natal'ia Goncharova. Mikhail Larionov* (Moscow: Ts. Miunster, 1913), p. VI.

self-statement, in a sense, with ironic reference to Matisse's metaphor of art as an 'easy chair', with Cézanne's 'revered' lemons spread all over it.[35] This 'visualised' metaphor, a huge plush chair in bright fauve green, is the centrepiece of her composition; however, it only serves as a pedestal — no more, no less — for the old icon. In fact, Goncharova enters into a kind of witty and gracious debate with her famous French contemporaries here, who had come to epitomise the roots of European modernist innovations of the twentieth century.

Keeping in mind this fascination with the Old Believers and their aesthetics, it is very important to remember, nonetheless, that the ethnic and primitivist sensibility of the early avant-garde in general, and, in particular, the pluralist aesthetics of Goncharova and Larionov's Neoprimitivism, was by no means a sectarian bond to a single culture, be it popular national tradition or medieval Russian religious art. Like their European counterparts, the Russian avant-gardists were interested in popular and traditional art of various historical periods and cultures. They were known for studying and meticulously sketching objects in the ethnographic museums of Moscow and St Petersburg, including statuettes of Tungusian shamans, wooden Enisei, and North American idols, as well as Scythian stone sculptures called 'stone women' (*kamennye baby*), which often feature in other Goncharova still-life compositions. Along with the frequently repeated image of the Old Russian icon, these stone women became one of Goncharova's favourite subjects and a source of inspiration not unlike that of the African mask for Picasso.

This interest in archaic and traditional cultures, in which artistic activity is in various ways connected with the life of the entire community, such as that of the Old Believers, was inspired by the avant-garde's determination to find more in art than commercial or utilitarian value. On the other hand, western modernist influences were still present, and remained among the distinguishing features of Russian avant-garde aesthetics, but the creative interpretation of these influences rarely spilled over into direct stylisation or the external imitation of form. This pluralist expansiveness reflects the invented word *vsechestvo* ('everythingness') that exemplified the free choice of traditions proclaimed by Larionov: "We acknowledge all styles as suitable for the expression of our art, styles existing both yesterday and today".[36] The notion of "world backwards" (*Mirskontsa*), invented in the Futurist book of that title by Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov in 1912, reflected the new interpretation of temporality, which accorded a heightened relevance to cultural memory. *Vsechestvo* is usually treated as an avant-garde aesthetic exploration and utilisation of the newly found and rediscovered traditions, from children's drawings and Neolithic graffiti to Scythian and Byzantine art. For Russian avant-gardists — Futurists in particular — it justified their paradoxical jump four centuries 'backwards' in time, and their exploration of the pre-Petrine past, epitomised in Old Believer culture, which went hand in hand with their visions of contemporaneity.

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35   The practice of covering an icon with an *oklad* became very popular after Peter the Great.

36   Mikhail Larionov, 'Predislovie k katalogu vystavki lubka', in *Pervaia vystavka lubka, organizovannaia N. D. Vinogradovym* (exh. cat., Moscow, 19–24 February 1913).

6.7 Old Believer's Chapel, Museum of the Russian Icon, Moscow.
Photograph © Nina Gurianova, CC BY 4.0.

While searching for their own answer to the questions 'What makes art national?' and 'What does it mean to be a Russian artist?' the Neoprimitivists and Futurists wanted to start history anew, to create a new spirituality and 'authenticity' in art, which could be shared by the majority of people. Paradoxically, in Russian modernity, artistic innovations, usually categorised by critics as a step forward, expressed a philosophical 'return' toward the cautious revision of the beginnings of Russian religious and intellectual thought as well. Such ideas were shaped by Byzantine and Eastern philosophies, embedded in pre-Petrine culture, and expressed first and foremost in icon painting. This line of 'achronic' consciousness led to innovation along with archaization — retrospectivism in the broadest sense.

When Marinetti accused the Russians of a lack of Futuristic aspirations and a devotion to the restoration of tradition instead, he had a point: if Italians were eager to "destroy museums" to be liberated from their own grand classical past, and redefine national identity through new aesthetic ideals, Russians, on the other hand, had to excavate their own history, in order to get rid of the most recent aesthetic dogma and the westernised self-identity that had been imposed on them. While Italians chose to be utopians in their purely futuristic ambitions, Russians never rejected the past, and indeed internalised and deconstructed it, making a clear argument in their poetics for primitivism and tradition against all the attractions of civilised modernity. The typical subjects of Larionov, Goncharova, Malevich, and even Kandinsky are, first

of all, 'traditional' subjects, focused on the ritualised work and days of the Russian provinces, and peasant life, something else which brings them close to the peasant aspects of Old Believer culture (fig. 6.7).

Marinetti called the Russian avant-garde *passéists* (those who look into the past) for a reason: reinvention and revision of historical memory was their aesthetic and ideological priority. This direction was to a great extent determined by Larionov and Goncharova's turn to Old Russian art and their predilection for eastern tradition as a counterweight to the eurocentric orientation of Russian culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Young artists, mostly of humble origin, from small towns, who shared Larionov and Goncharova's Neoprimitivist aspirations — Aleksei Morgunov, Malevich, Le Dantu, Rogovin, and others — were deeply connected to the Russian provinces, and kept alive the memory of primitive and folk art aesthetics with its archaic elements, as well as the pre-schism Eastern Orthodox iconography and symbolism preserved in the Old Believers' *lubki* and hand-written books. These traditions were neglected from the eighteenth century onward as 'heretical', and considered 'barbaric' and 'low' by the cultural and theological dogma of both the post-Petrine westernised elite and the institutionalised Holy Synod. "One of Peter's decrees revealed a very modern consciousness of the impression that Russian culture and religion made on foreigners," aptly observes Salmond. She writes: "It forbade painters to produce icons that were incompetently painted or that could be perceived as 'ugly' by foreigners and thereby incur their mockery or contempt."[37]

Thus, it feels only logical that when Goncharova attempted to reinvent the new canon of monumental art in her religious compositions, such as her famous tetraptych *Evangelists* (1911, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg), she chose to be inspired by the ancient frescoes of Novgorod, and the expressive minimalistic style characteristic of Old Believer iconography of the Russian north. Even though Goncharova never considered herself an icon painter, as a religious person she desired to revitalise the long-neglected, alternative national tradition of religious art, which she perceived as very different from the imperial patterns implanted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the daringly unconventional *Madonna with Child* (1911, Tretyakov Gallery) her work is much closer to the expressive linear stylistics of Old Believers' metal icons than to the modernist but still mimetic Christian imagery of Mikhail Vrubel and Mikhail Nesterov, or the semi-naturalistic prettiness of religious painting from Viktor Vasnetsov's studio, which targeted both middle-class and elite buyers. Even the unusual colours she chose for her *Madonna*, golden yellow and sienna, with ornaments in blue and green framing the image on both sides, correspond to the aesthetics and style of small, intimate copper icons and triptychs that were for personal use, often adorned with white, blue, and yellow enamel, which originated in Vyg monastery in the seventeenth century (and are still produced in Old Believers' workshops in Moscow). It is no surprise then that all the accusations of 'blasphemy' by contemporaries of Goncharova in the press repeated

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37   Salmond, *Tradition in Transition*, pp. 16–17.

almost literally Peter the Great's objections to old icons. "The sacred face of the Virgin is so repulsively distorted in all the images that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish her features", ran a newspaper review of Goncharova's exhibition, tellingly dubbed "Futurism and Sacrilege": "The eyes and nose of the Child are twisted to the side […] the premeditated deformation of holy persons must not be allowed […]. But the four narrow canvases depicting some kind of monsters labelled in the catalogue as The Evangelists are the height of outrage."[38]

Meanwhile, the sense of an aesthetic and spiritual crisis of mainstream and mass-produced religious art at the beginning of the twentieth century seems to have had an overwhelming impact in the artistic milieu. Even Vasnetsov, an artist who was by no means close to avant-garde circles, yet found religious art under European influence in "total decline", describing it as a "formal, lifeless sort of art, academically naturalistic, with the saints giving way to models who posed for the artist". He wrote: "From the eighteenth century our secular art […] springs up under pressure from the European Enlightenment. The influence of European art is also reflected in our icon painting, and not, alas, to its benefit […]".[39] Curiously enough, Vasnetsov uses an argument very similar to the one that had been used by Archpriest Avvakum two and a half centuries earlier, based on the understanding of the impossibility of bringing spirituality and religious expression into any image which overwhelmingly strives to be a mimetic, physical, illusionary 'likeness' of the world depicted, to make it look 'as if alive'.[40] Avvakum puts to shame those who:

> paint the image of the Saviour, Emmanuel, with a puffy face, red lips, curly hair, fat arms and muscles, bloated fingers, just like the legs' fat thighs, and it is all done like a big-bellied and fat German […]. And all this is painted in a carnal way, because the heretics are enamored of carnal grossness and have cast the heavens down to the depths […]. All this that dog Nikon, the enemy, designed — *paint as though they are alive* — and arranges everything in the foreign manner […].[41]

In the case of Russian avant-garde theory and artistic practice, the anarchic refutation of the conventional demands of modern styles, tastes, and 'professionalism' may appear to be an aesthetic provocation, but it conceals something much more significant: a new cognitive experience, a new epistemology, the conscious annihilation of aesthetic clichés of the 'ideal' and 'beauty' established by centuries of European art history since the Renaissance. In all of these 'marginal events' of art, the category of aesthetic value accepted as a norm in a particular epoch is displaced, and art acquires a new significance outside of its current aesthetic definition.

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38   Dubl'-Ve, 'Futurizm i koshunstvo', *Peterburgskii listok* (March 1914).

39   V. M. Vasnetsov, 'O russkoi ikonopisi', in *Deianiia sviashchennogo sobora Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi 1917–18 gg.*, 5 (Moscow: 1996), pp. 46–47.

40   Avvakum (Petrov) (1620–82) was a Russian priest, theologian, and writer, a Martyr Saint of Old Believers, who led the opposition to Patriarch Nikon and was exiled for many years. He was later burned at the stake.

41   Cited in Uspensky, 'Russian Spirituality and the Veneration of Icons', in *Holy Russia*, p. 35.

"Art is not an entertainment and not a temple right in the middle of the marketplace, but a new understanding of world phenomena (*novyi smysl mirovykh iavlenii*)", Mikhail Matiushin wrote.[42] As the process of artistic creation was placed on the same footing as the creative *presencing-in-the-world*, spiritual action (*odukhotvorennoe delanie*) became a goal of their art. This was perceived as something much more profound than the way it was commonly understood to be understood in the everyday life of contemporary society. Avant-gardists aspired to bring a new knowledge, a spiritual transformation to the world: the 'found' Old Believer tradition offered a clean break with the established norm, and a promising possibility of the new model of art, which perfectly coincided with their own search for abstraction and inner spirit in their work. At the same time, the rebellious nature of the Old Believers' struggle against official hierarchy and indoctrination must have been appealing to avant-gardists, who in their turn challenged the Academy and other established social models of the art world. In this respect, the Russian avant-garde introduced a paradigm shift, a complete switch of reference points, which can be likened to a contemporary schism, but in the aesthetic sphere rather than the religious or theological one.

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42   [Mikhail Matiushin?], review of *Sadok sudei 2* (St Petersburg: Nash vek, 1913), *Soiuz molodezhi* (St Petersburg), 3 (1913), 83.

7. 'Russian Messiah': On the Spiritual in the Reception of Vasily Kandinsky's Art in Germany, c. 1910–1937

Sebastian Borkhardt

And then, without fail, there appears among us a man like the rest of us in every way, but who conceals within himself the secret, inborn power of 'vision'. He sees and points. Sometimes he would gladly be rid of this higher gift, which is often a heavy cross for him to bear. But he cannot. Through mockery and hatred, he continues to drag the heavy cartload of struggling humanity, getting stuck amidst the stones, ever onward and upward.

Vasily Kandinsky[1]

In around 1908 the art of Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944) underwent a decisive change. The works he created in Murnau, near Munich, where he lived and worked for many months between 1908 and 1914, show an increasingly free use of colour as well as a gradual dissolution of representational subject matter — a shift towards a new, abstract art. From 1910 onwards there was an iconographic shift in Kandinsky's work: several paintings and prints from this period are dedicated to the subject of the apocalypse.[2] Many of them display the motif of a city with a falling tower, which signifies the

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1 Wassily Kandinsky, 'On the Spiritual in Art' (1912), in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), pp. 114–219 (p. 131). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the German are my own. All emphasis in quotations is in the original text. The first English translation of *On the Spiritual in Art* by Michael T. H. Sadler, entitled *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), can be read online: https://archive.org/details/artofspiritualha00kandrich.

2 Eva Mazur-Keblowski, *Apokalypse als Hoffnung: Die russischen Aspekte der Kunst und Kunsttheorie Vasilij Kandinskijs vor 1914*, Tübinger Studien zur Archäologie und Kunstgeschichte, 18 (Tübingen: Wasmuth, 2000), esp. pp. 97–111, 133–48; Melanie Horst, 'Kandinsky's Early Woodcuts: Polyphony of Colours and Forms', in *Kandinsky: Complete Prints*, ed. by Helmut Friedel and Annegret Hoberg (Cologne: Wienand, 2008), pp. 11–31 (pp. 24–26).

destruction of the earthly Jerusalem (figs. 1.1 and 7.1).[3] The transformation of the objective world which Kandinsky executed in these works had its reference in the written tradition of the Bible and in the pictorial tradition of icon painting (see, for example, the *Apocalypse* icon in the Cathedral of the Dormition in Moscow (end of the fifteenth century)). At the same time, by referring to religion, Kandinsky proclaimed his abstract art as a substantially spiritualised art.

The eschatological theme of such works as *Last Judgment* (1912) (fig. 7.1) corresponds with the prophetic tone of the artist's seminal treatise, *On the Spiritual in Art*, which was first published in December 1911 (fig. 1.1).[4] Against the backdrop of an all-embracing materialism that he felt had to be overcome, Kandinsky preached the dawning of an "*epoch of the great spiritual*".[5] According to Kandinsky, his art was to be neither decoration nor an end in itself, but rather, the medium for conveying a spiritual message. As is indicated in the quotation which introduces this chapter, Kandinsky conceived of the artist — and thus himself — as a prophet or even a messiah, sacrificing himself for the sake of humanity.

The religious aspects in Kandinsky's oeuvre have been highlighted by a number of scholars.[6] In this chapter, I shall shift the focus from the artist and his work to the audience to whom his message was addressed. I shall explain the role played by the concept of the 'spiritual' in the German reception of Kandinsky from the early 1910s, when abstract art was first beginning to be recognised in Germany, to 1937, the year that the infamous exhibition of 'Degenerate Art' (*Entartete Kunst*) opened its doors in Munich.[7] The main focus here is the response to Kandinsky's work as described in several key texts on modern art that were published between 1914 and 1920. My intention is to show how some of Kandinsky's supporters in the adopted homeland in which he launched his new art and philosophy elevated and appreciated his work as a manifestation of the 'spiritual', and thus made up for the unintelligibility of

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3   Mazur-Keblowski, *Apokalypse als Hoffnung*, pp. 105, 120–21.

4   Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst, insbesondere in der Malerei*, rev. new edition, second edition (Bern: Benteli, 2006). For the English text, see *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, pp. 114–219 (see note 1).

5   *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, p. 219. "*Epoche des großen Geistigen*" (Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige*, p. 147).

6   See, for example: Sixten Ringbom, 'Art in "The Epoch of the Great Spiritual": Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29 (1966), 386–418; Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Noemi Smolik, *Von der Ikone zum gegenstandslosen Bild: Der Maler Vasilij Kandinskij* (Munich: Neimanis, 1992); Verena Krieger, *Von der Ikone zur Utopie: Kunstkonzepte der russischen Avantgarde* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1998); and Mazur-Keblowski, *Apokalypse als Hoffnung*.

7   In so doing, I draw upon an article by Charles W. Haxthausen entitled '"Der Künstler ohne Gemeinschaft": Kandinsky und die deutsche Kunstkritik', in *Kandinsky: Russische Zeit und Bauhausjahre 1915–1933*, ed. by Peter Hahn (Berlin: Bauhaus-Archiv, Museum für Gestaltung, 1984), pp. 72–89. On the question of the spiritual in German art and art criticism of that time see also Rose-Carol Washton Long, 'Expressionismus, Abstraktion und die Suche nach Utopia in Deutschland', in *Das Geistige in der Kunst: Abstrakte Malerei 1890–1985*, ed. by Maurice Tuchman and Judi Freeman (Stuttgart: Urachhaus, 1988), pp. 201–17.

7.1 Vasily Kandinsky, *Last Judgment*, 1912. Glass painting, 34 x 45 cm., Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris. As published in *Vasily Kandinsky: Painting on Glass. Anniversary Exhibition* (exh. cat., The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1966), no. 18. Photograph in the public domain.

abstraction, of which it was accused by the critical community. In parallel, I will take into consideration the broader context by drawing attention to a concurrence between the German self-image and the concept of a spiritual art which was associated with abstraction and the east. Through this, I aim to provide an understanding of why the 'Russian soul' that was supposed to be operating in Kandinsky's art was considered by some a kindred spirit of the 'German soul'.

In 1912, Herwarth Walden (1878–1941), owner of the Der Sturm gallery in Berlin and a major supporter of avant-garde art, hosted a Kandinsky retrospective that subsequently toured several cities in Germany and abroad. In 1913, the exhibition reached Hamburg. The writer and journalist Kurt Küchler (1883–1925) used the event as an opportunity to write a polemic article in which he vented his hatred of abstract painting and its promoters or, from his point of view, profiteers. Küchler wrote:

> Once again at Louis Bock & Sohn there was an exhibition by one of those unfortunate monomaniacs who consider themselves prophets of a new art of painting. […] Standing in front of the dreadfully scrawled colours and stammered lines […] one initially does not know what to marvel at more: the larger-than-life arrogance with which Mr Kandinsky demands that others take his bungling seriously, the unsympathetic impudence with which the fellows from the 'Sturm' — the patrons of this exhibition — propagate these savage paintings as revelations of a new and promising art, or the condemnable sensationalism of the art dealer who lends his rooms to this madness of colours and shapes.[8]

To Küchler, Kandinsky's paintings were bereft of all spiritual or any other meaning that lay beyond the scope of inability, fraud, or idiocy. Seen from his perspective, the alleged "prophet" was a "monomaniac" whose "revelations" were nothing but a "madness of colours and shapes". Walden responded to Küchler's slating review in his periodical *The Storm* (*Der Sturm*). Under the slogan 'For Kandinsky' (*Für Kandinsky*) he issued a protest statement, which was signed by more than eighty personalities — mainly from the cultural sphere.[9] One of them was the art critic Wilhelm Hausenstein (1882–1957). In a letter to Walden printed in *The Storm*, Hausenstein identified two opposite poles within Kandinsky's work: on the one hand, "the absolute logic of shapes and colours",

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8   Kurt Küchler, 'Kandinsky: Zur Ausstellung bei Louis Bock & Sohn', *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* (15 February 1913), p. 13. "Bei Louis Bock & Sohn hat wieder einmal einer jener unglückseligen Monomanen ausgestellt, die sich für die Propheten einer neuen Malkunst halten. […] Wenn man vor dem greulichen Farbengesudel und Liniengestammel […] steht, weiß man zunächst nicht, was man mehr bewundern soll: die überlebensgroße Arroganz, mit der Herr Kandinsky beansprucht, daß man seine Pfuscherei ernst nimmt, die unsympathische Frechheit, mit der die Gesellen vom 'Sturm', die Protektoren dieser Ausstellung, diese verwilderte Malerei als Offenbarungen einer neuen und zukunftsreichen Kunst propagieren, oder den verwerflichen Sensationshunger des Kunsthändlers, der seine Räume für diesen Farben- und Formenwahnsinn hergibt."

9   Haxthausen, 'Der Künstler ohne Gemeinschaft', p. 73.

and on the other, "a wealth of the most irrational sensuality […] a sensuality that is spiritualised".[10]

The following year, the dualism between the rational and the irrational suggested by Hausenstein reappeared in his survey *The Visual Arts of the Present*.[11] In the book, Hausenstein further explained this dualism as a relationship of tension between *western* rationality and *Russian* mysticism. In doing so, he devalued the rational (i.e., 'western') elements which he found in Kandinsky's work as subordinate. To Hausenstein, the essential quality of Kandinsky's texts and paintings was derived from Russian sources:

> '[On] the Spiritual in Art', according to our literary standards, is only a poor achievement […]. But that is precisely the point: we have no right to apply to these things the common standards which, even in the best case, still have something of western European rationality about them and, hence, do not do justice to the mysticism, the irrational mysticism, the incomprehensible stammering of the Russian soul.[12]

Likewise, he argued that "the ultimate basis of Kandinsky's painting, that which we perceive as the richness of his work, is that wonderful Russian soul".[13] Interestingly, Hausenstein's defence of Kandinsky's abstraction had something in common with Küchler's polemic: both authors seemed to have something of a comprehension problem regarding Kandinsky's works. Yet, while Küchler reduced this problem to the conclusion that Kandinsky's abstraction was meaningless, Hausenstein discerned in it an expression of the "Russian soul". According to Hausenstein, Kandinsky's paintings were *not* without object; rather, the spiritual object had taken the place of the physical object in them.[14] From his perspective, the comprehension problem resulted primarily from the fact that Russian mysticism could not be understood in terms of western rationality. The crucial difference between the two authors is that Hausenstein believed in Kandinsky's sincerity while Küchler did not.

Another early account of the new art was written by the journalist Paul Fechter (1880–1958). In 1914, he published his monograph *Expressionism*.[15] In Fechter's book,

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10 Wilhelm Hausenstein, [no title], in 'Für Kandinsky: Protest', *Der Sturm*, 3 (1913), 278–79 (p. 278). "die absolute Logik der Formen und Farben"; "eine Fülle der irrationalsten Sinnlichkeit […] einer Sinnlichkeit, die spiritualisiert ist".

11 Wilhelm Hausenstein, *Die bildende Kunst der Gegenwart: Malerei, Plastik, Zeichnung* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1914).

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 299–300. "'[Über] das Geistige in der Kunst' ist nach unserem literarischen Maßstab eine schwache Leistung […]. Aber das ist es gerade, daß wir nicht das Recht haben, an diese Dinge den gewohnten Maßstab anzulegen, der auch im besten Fall noch immer etwas westeuropäisch Rationelles hat und für die Mystik, die unsinnige Mystik, das unverständliche Stammeln der russischen Seele nicht zureicht."

13 *Ibid.*, p. 302. "der letzte Grund der Malerei Kandinskys, das, was wir an seinem Schaffen als Reichtum empfinden, ist jene wundervolle russische Seele".

14 *Ibid.* See also Hausenstein, [no title], p. 278.

15 Paul Fechter, *Der Expressionismus* (Munich: Piper, 1914). Fechter used the term 'Expressionism' in a narrower sense, to refer to the recent movement in German art which was spearheaded by the group The Bridge (*Die Brücke*) in Dresden and the circle of The Blue Rider in Munich, and, in a wider sense,

Kandinsky is presented as a main exponent of Expressionism. His artistic approach is described by Fechter as an "elimination of every outward aspect":

> He [Kandinsky] finds the artistically productive, the immediate, purely in himself, in sinking into the depths of his own soul, into which neither representation nor concept have access, in which a chaos of colours reigns and experience is to be found still unformed, shapeless, foreign to any representational understanding […] as a purely spiritual material.[16]

By referring to the depths of the artist's soul, Fechter used a central topos that also appeared in Hausenstein's remarks on Kandinsky. Yet, unlike Hausenstein, Fechter did not relate it to Kandinsky's Russian origin. That does not mean, of course, that Fechter refrained from any national interpretation. On the contrary, he highlighted the 'Germanness' of Expressionism. Fechter wrote: "The will at work within the […] efforts [of Expressionism] is essentially nothing new at all, but same drive that has been operating in the Germanic world since time immemorial. It is the old Gothic soul that […] still lives on".[17] As Fechter put it, Expressionism originated from "the ancient metaphysical need of the Germans".[18] The Germanisation of Expressionism found its equivalent in the cover design of Fechter's book, which showed the head of a saint by Max Pechstein (1881–1955). The apparent intention was to convey the inseparable unity of Expressionism, German artistry, and the "Gothic soul".[19]

Even before the outbreak of the First World War, Expressionism "gained the aura of a future German national style".[20] This is remarkable, as the circle of The Blue Rider around Kandinsky and Franz Marc (1880–1916), which was a main current of Expressionism in Germany, included several foreign artists. Against such a background, the question arises as to what relationship Fechter saw between the Russian Kandinsky and the "old Gothic soul".[21] Significantly, Fechter did not address this issue in his monograph. However, an indirect answer can be found in one of his likely sources, namely, Wilhelm Worringer's (1881–1965) important treatise of

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to refer to modern art as a whole, including Cubism and Futurism. The remarks cited here relate to his chapter III.1, on Expressionism in the narrower sense. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–29.

16   *Ibid*, p. 25. "Ausschalten alles Äußeren". "Er [Kandinsky] findet das künstlerisch Verwertbare, Unmittelbare rein nur in sich, in der Versenkung in die Tiefe der eigenen Seele, in die weder Vorstellung, noch Begriff einen Zugang haben, in der das farbige Chaos herrscht und das Erlebte noch ungeformt, gestaltlos, ferne jedem vorstellenden Verstand […] rein als seelisches Material zu finden ist."

17   *Ibid.*, p. 28. "[D]er Wille, der innerhalb der […] Bestrebungen [des Expressionismus] am Werke ist, ist im Grunde genommen gar nichts Neues, sondern der gleiche Trieb wie der, der in der germanischen Welt von je wirksam gewesen ist. Es ist die alte gotische Seele, die […] noch immer fortlebt".

18   *Ibid.*, p. 29. "[d]em uralten metaphysischen Bedürfnis der Deutschen".

19   Magdalena Bushart, *Der Geist der Gotik und die expressionistische Kunst: Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttheorie, 1911–1925* (Munich: Schreiber, 1990), p. 105.

20   *Ibid.*, p. 8.

21   It should be noted that Kandinsky's abstract art was termed by Fechter as 'intensive' Expressionism and characterised as secondary compared to the so-called 'extensive' (figurative) Expressionism represented by the German painter Max Pechstein. Fechter, *Der Expressionismus*, pp. 24–28. Nevertheless, the posed question remains.

1911, *Form Problems of the Gothic*. Just like his doctoral thesis *Abstraction and Empathy*, submitted in 1906 and published in 1908, Worringer's *Form Problems of the Gothic* proved to be a popular success.[22] In his study, Worringer transformed the term 'Gothic' from a stylistic label for medieval art to a supra-temporal "form will" (*Formwille*) that pervaded 'northern' or 'Germanic' culture.[23] The "vehicle" of this Gothic "form will" was "the abstract line without organic moderation".[24] Consequently, the Gothic was described by Worringer as "in its innermost nature, […] irrational, superrational, transcendental", since "wherever the abstract line is the vehicle of the form will, art is transcendental".[25] In turn, he suggested that naturalism in art — which was defined in *Abstraction and Empathy* as an "approximation to the organic and the true to life, but not because the artist desired to depict a natural object true to life in its corporeality […], but because the feeling for the beauty of organic form that is true to life had been aroused" — accorded with the classical harmony and rationality he associated with 'southern' or 'Romanic' culture.[26]

The oppositions which Worringer established between Gothic and Classical, north and south, and between abstraction and naturalism, coincided with the increased efforts of the Germans to create and highlight their own cultural identity as a result of the foundation of the German Empire in 1871. These efforts were marked in particular by a distancing from France and its art which was traditionally labelled as technically perfect, superficial, rationalistic, classical, sensual, and so on; by contrast, German art was considered to be authentic, profound, emotional, romantic, and spiritual.[27] The latter traits were also assigned to Expressionism. It is in this context that Fechter interpreted Expressionism as an awakening of the Germans' 'Gothic soul'. To be sure, neither in *Abstraction and Empathy* nor in *Form Problems of the Gothic* did contemporary

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22 Bushart, *Der Geist der Gotik*, pp. 20–21. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie*, second edition (Munich: Piper, 1909). English: Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (Chicago, IL: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997); Wilhelm Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik* (Munich: Piper, 1911). English: W. Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, authorised American edition (New York: Stechert, [1918]), https://archive.org/details/formproblemsofth00worruoft

23 Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, pp. 43–45. (Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, pp. 27–29).

24 Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, p. 65. ("da auch hier die abstrakte organisch ungemilderte Linie Träger des Formwillens ist" (Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, p. 49)).

25 Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, pp. 93, 64. ("ihrem innersten Wesen nach irrationell, überrationell, transzendental"; "[w]o die abstrakte Linie der Träger des Formwillens ist, da ist die Kunst transzendental" (Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, pp. 77, 48)).

26 Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, pp. 27–28. ("die Annäherung an das Organisch-Lebenswahre, aber nicht, weil man ein Naturobjekt lebensgetreu in seiner Körperlichkeit darstellen wollte […], sondern weil das Gefühl für die Schönheit organisch-lebenswahrer Form wach geworden war" (Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, p. 26)); Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, pp. 92–93 (here, 'romanisch' is not translated as 'Romanic' but as 'Latin') (Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, pp. 76–78).

27 Thomas W. Gaehtgens, 'Zur Rezeption der französischen Moderne in Deutschland von 1870 bis 1945', in *Französische Kunst — deutsche Perspektiven: 1870–1945. Quellen und Kommentare zur Kunstkritik*, ed. by Andreas Holleczek and Andrea Meyer, Passagen, 7 (Berlin: Akademie, 2004), pp. 1–24 (pp. 9–13); Andreas Holleczek, 'Deutsch-französisch: Der gesuchte Unterschied', in *ibid.*, pp. 85–91.

art play a determining role (Kandinsky was not mentioned in either of these texts). Nevertheless, Worringer's writings were read as justifications or even manifestos of Expressionism and taken as a basis for the assessment of the new art.[28] Three aspects of Worringer's discourse were of special relevance with regard to the reception of Kandinsky: first, Worringer paved the way for a broader acceptance of abstraction by ascribing to it a historical significance in its own right; secondly, a moment of identification was created between German culture — as represented by the concept of a supra-temporal Gothic — and the 'transcendental' art form of abstraction; thirdly, according to Worringer, it was in the Orient that abstraction had been most purely preserved from classical influences. In *Abstraction and Empathy* he wrote: "With the Oriental, the profundity of his world-feeling, the instinct for the unfathomableness of being that mocks all intellectual mastery, is greater […]. Consequently the keynote of his nature is a need for redemption. […] as regards art, it leads [him] to an artistic volition directed entirely toward the abstract."[29] Worringer thus provided a cultural model in which the image of German art moved closer to abstraction *and* the east.

This shift in emphasis was also reflected very clearly in Fritz Burger's (1877–1916) *Introduction to Modern Art*, published posthumously in 1917.[30] Continuing the discourse that had been shaped by authors like Worringer and Fechter, Burger asserted: "Now German art is returning back again to the origin of European culture and discovering in the essence of the Middle Ages that world-embracing spirit by which it felt itself borne."[31] Furthermore, on the basis of a seemingly paradoxical equation of national (i.e., genuinely German) qualities with a nation-transcending spirit of the age, Burger stated in his preface "that *Germany* and its art have stepped into the centre of the modern art movement as its leader".[32]

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28   Bushart, *Der Geist der Gotik*, pp. 20–25.

29   Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, p. 46. ("Bei dem Orientalen ist die Tiefe des Weltgefühls, der Instinkt für die aller intellektuellen Beherrschung spottende Unergründlichkeit des Seins größer […]. Die Grundnote seines Wesens ist demzufolge ein Erlösungsbedürfnis. Das führt ihn […] in künstlerischer Beziehung zu einem ganz auf's Abstrakte gerichteten Kunstwollen." (Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung*, pp. 46–47)). In order not to complicate matters, I refrain from elucidating the difference that Worringer made between the abstraction of 'Gothic man' and that of 'Oriental man'. See Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic*, p. 68; Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik*, p. 52.

30   Fritz Burger, *Einführung in die moderne Kunst*, Handbuch der Kunstwissenschaft: Die Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts, 1, 29th and 30th thousand (Berlin and Neubabelsberg: Athenaion, 1917).

31   *Ibid.*, p. 47. "Nun greift die deutsche Kunst wieder auf den Ausgangspunkt der europäischen Kultur zurück und entdeckt im Wesen des Mittelalters jenen weltumfassenden Geist, von dem sie sich selber getragen fühlte." See also *ibid.*, p. 102.

32   *Ibid.*, p. VII. "daß *Deutschland* und seine Kunst in den Mittelpunkt der modernen Kunstbewegung führend getreten ist".
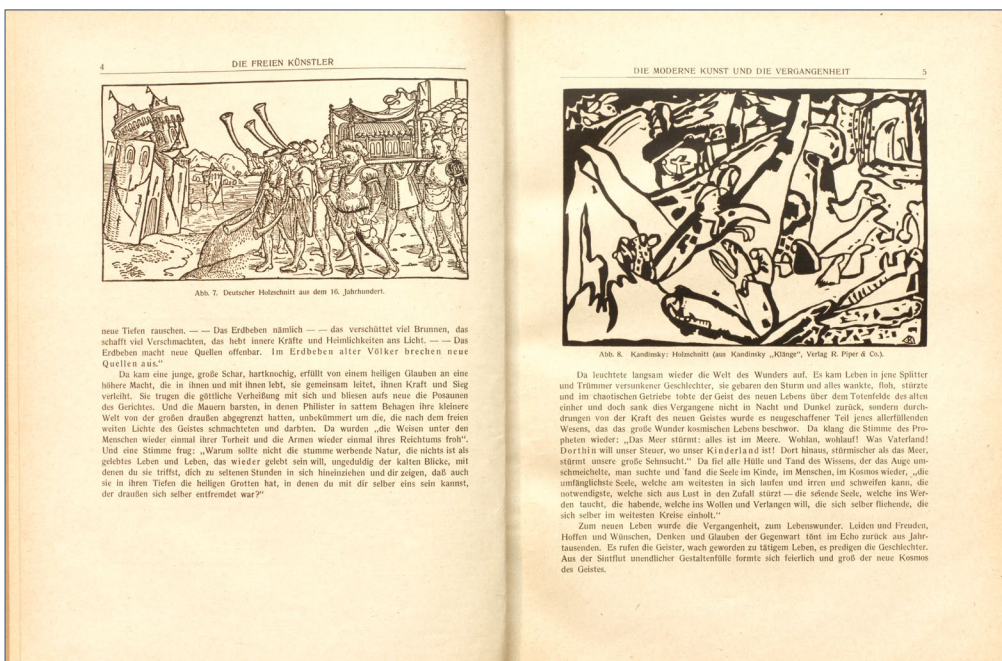
7.2 Old German woodcut and Vasily Kandinsky's woodcut (1911) of *Composition II*. Double page from Fritz Burger, *Introduction to Modern Art* (Berlin and Neubabelsberg: Athenaion, 1917), pp. 4–5. Photograph in the public domain.

7.3 Vasily Kandinsky, *Composition VI*, 1913. Oil on canvas, 195 x 300 cm. State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. As published in Will Grohmann, *Kandinsky* (Paris: Éditions Cahiers d'Art, 1930), plate 13. Photograph in the public domain.

In the first section of the first chapter of his *Introduction*, which appears as a parable on modern culture, Burger told of a generation of people (*Geschlecht*) who searched for "the new, great, expansive home of the human spirit" and eventually found "a new cosmic life": "The material and everything carnal fade before the primal force and primal sense of being; in the twilight of the gods of the past the spirituality of the soul celebrates a great resurrection."[33] Up to this point, Burger's narrative is illustrated with three old German woodcuts and three woodcuts from Kandinsky's volume of poems *Klänge* (*Sounds*) (1913), together with the artist's *Composition VI* from 1913 (figs. 7.2 and 7.3). Their selection and combination was apparently devised by Burger himself.[34]

While the reproductions of old German woodcuts can be readily explained by Burger's tracing back of contemporary German art to the spirit of the Middle Ages, their juxtaposition with Kandinsky's woodcuts deserves closer examination. In fact, the extensive visual presence of Kandinsky's work right at the beginning of the first chapter is surprising, given Burger's conviction as to the leading role of German art.[35] However, a nexus between the cultures of Germany and Russia — and, at the same time, between those of medieval Europe and the Orient — is indeed implied in Burger's book, since he asserted that "*Nordic thinking*" was derived partly from "*Oriental*" thinking.[36] With this in mind, it becomes clearer what Burger meant by his statement that Germany and Russia "step into the circle of modern culture side by side. What links them is their Asiatic heritage".[37] But how should this "Asiatic heritage" be conceived with respect to Kandinsky's art?

The concept of modern culture that Burger developed with recourse to Asia (or the Orient) and to the European Middle Ages was founded upon two pillars: the first of these was the *unification* of humanity into one universal community, while the other was its *spiritualisation*. Besides the Germans, Burger found the most determined champions of this new cultural standpoint among the Russians. Thus he regarded Kandinsky's abstraction, represented by the painting *Composition VI*, as one of the "most radical

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33 *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 6. "der neuen großen, weiten Heimat des menschlichen Geistes"; "ein neues kosmisches Leben"; "Das Materielle und alles Fleischliche versinkt vor der Urkraft und dem Ursinn des Daseins, in der Götterdämmerung der Vergangenheit feiert das Geistige der Seele eine große Auferstehung."

34 At Easter in 1915, Burger wrote to his wife Clara from Strasbourg: "Today I worked all day at home on my introduction. It is a shame that it will receive no approval from you at all, because German woodcuts alternate with woodcuts by Kandinsky to illustrate the text." ("Heute habe ich den ganzen Tag zu Hause gearbeitet an meiner Einleitung. Es ist schade, daß sie Deinen Beifall gar nicht finden wird, denn es wechseln deutsche Holzschnitte mit Kandinskyschen zur Illustration des Textes ab." Cited in Rolf M. Hauck, *Fritz Burger (1877–1916): Kunsthistoriker und Wegbereiter der Moderne am Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts* (doctoral thesis, LMU Munich, 2005; http://nbn-resolving.de/ urn:nbn:de:bvb:19-31766, p. 213).

35 By contrast, in Burger's view Kandinsky was Russian through and through.

36 Burger, *Einführung*, p. VII. "*nordisches Denken*"; "das *orientalische* [Denken]". See also *ibid.*, p. 102.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 52. "treten in den Kreis moderner Kultur Seite an Seite ein. Das, was sie bindet, ist asiatisches Erbe".

formulations of modern ideas".[38] In this radicalness, Burger found confirmed his view that in the case of the Russians the "elemental force of primal instincts is not fettered by civilising chains, as is the case with the peoples of the west; it reaches much more easily, though perhaps also more carelessly, into the world of cosmic expanses".[39] When Burger wrote about the Russians, he was clearly merging the spiritual with the primitivist discourse: "There, more than anywhere else, the noblest religious instincts of the Europeans are wed with raw animal force".[40] However, to Burger, looking to the east was tantamount to looking back to the origins of his own culture, which he saw as being in the Middle Ages. He declared that "we begin to develop an increased interest in the artistic achievements of those periods in which the sacred faith in a higher culture and spiritual community never allowed the differentiation of a personal knowledge and will to become the guiding cultural factor: the world of the *Middle Ages* and of the *Oriental cultures*".[41]

Kandinsky's woodcuts and his *Composition VI* embodied "Asiatic spirit"[42] in contemporary dress — the "Asiatic spirit" being conceived of not as the 'Other', but as a cultural source that was recollected by Expressionism and German culture as a whole. Even though the reproduction of Kandinsky's woodcuts may have been intended to fulfil a function complementary to that of the old German woodcuts (signifying 'Russia, Orient, present' as opposed to 'Germany, Middle Ages, past'), their meanings converged on a higher level. To Burger, they both testified to the cultural ideals he propagated: unity and spirituality.

Burger was not the only art historian to see basic commonalities between the German and the Russian art of his day. Another account which invoked the German-Russian cultural affinity was that of Eckart von Sydow (1885–1942) in his book *German Expressionist Culture and Painting* (1920).[43] Von Sydow observed "a deep chasm" between German and Russian Expressionism on the one side, and French Expressionism on the other.[44] He deduced this from the examples of Marc and Kandinsky, in opposition to Henri Matisse (1869–1954). In the programmatic statements of Marc and Kandinsky he detected a "vigorous tension between reality and metaphysical truth", while the

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38   *Ibid.* "radikalsten Gestaltungen moderner Ideen".
39   *Ibid.* "Diese elementare Gewalt ursprünglicher Instinkte ist nicht wie bei den Völkern des Westens durch zivilisatorische Ketten gefesselt, sie greift viel leichter, freilich wohl auch leichtsinniger in die Welt kosmischer Weiten hinein."
40   *Ibid.*, p. 51. "Mehr als anderwärts liegen da verschwistert die edelsten religiösen Instinkte der Europäer mit roher animalischer Gewalt beisammen."
41   *Ibid.*, pp. 115–16. "beginnen die künstlerischen Leistungen jener Zeiten für uns erhöhtes Interesse zu gewinnen, in denen der heilige Glaube an eine höhere Kultur und Geistesgemeinschaft die Differenziertheit des persönlichen Wissens und Wollens nie zum leitenden Kulturfaktor hat werden lassen: die Welt des *Mittelalters* und der *orientalischen Kulturen*".
42   *Ibid.*, p. 51. "asiatischen Geist".
43   Eckart von Sydow, *Die deutsche expressionistische Kultur und Malerei*, Furche-Kunstgaben, 2 (Berlin: Furche, 1920).
44   *Ibid.*, p. 134. "eine tiefe Kluft".

artistic credo of Matisse, as explicated in his 'Notes of a Painter' from 1908, included "the striving for balance, the ideal of calm".[45] Von Sydow wrote: "In France it was […] the will to change the artistic form that asserted itself […]. […] In Central and Eastern Europe, however, there is a totally new feeling of a deepening inwardness and a new will to new religiousness".[46]

As Hausenstein and Burger had done before him, von Sydow contrasted western rationalism with eastern mysticism. The position of Germany within this cultural map was described by him as follows: the "German soul" was "wedged" between "the predominant naturalism of the west" and "the radical abstraction of the east".[47] In the German Expressionist culture of his time he discerned a propensity for abstraction and mysticism which he felt found its purest manifestation in Russia:

> But where […] is the breakthrough of abstract tendencies taking place today? […] It is in the *Russian* spirit that the new European religiousness has grown: Dostoevsky and Tolstoy! It is out of *Russian* artistry that the longing for the pure arabesque as an expressive art form has arisen: Kandinsky! […] And now: is the Russian spirit not the refuge of mystic spirituality of all kinds and variations?[48]

Interestingly, Kandinsky seems to have shared the cultural model represented by von Sydow and others — at least to some extent. An example of this can be seen in his article 'Abstract Art', published in 1925.[49] It illustrates how Kandinsky himself confirmed and sought to influence the 'spiritual' interpretation of his work. At the beginning of his article, Kandinsky referred to a "*transvaluation* that very gradually abandons the external and very gradually turns toward the internal", which was "the natural herald of one of the greatest spiritual epochs".[50] In this context, Kandinsky pointed out "a shift in art's center of gravity, signifying at bottom the transition from the Romanic principle to the Slavic — from West to East".[51] In Kandinsky's essay, the contrast

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45   *Ibid.* "lebensvolle Spannung zwischen Wirklichkeit und metaphysischer Wahrheit"; "das Streben zur Ausgeglichenheit, das Ideal der Ruhe".
46   *Ibid.*, p. 135. "In Frankreich war es […] der Wille zur Veränderung der Kunstform, der sich geltend machte […]. […] In Mittel- und Osteuropa aber ist es ein ganz neues Gefühl der Vertiefung der Innerlichkeit und ein neuer Wille zu neuer Religiosität".
47   *Ibid.*, p. 136. "Tatsache, daß dem überwiegenden Naturalismus des Westens die radikale Abstraktheit des Ostens gegenübersteht […]. Zwischen beiden eingekeilt lebt die deutsche Seele".
48   *Ibid.*, p. 143. "Wo aber geschieht heute […] der Durchbruch abstrakter Tendenzen? […] In *russischem* Geiste erwuchs die neueuropäische Religiosität: Dostojewskij und Tolstoi! Aus *russischer* Künstlerschaft erhub sich die Sehnsucht zur reinen Arabeske als Ausdruckskunst: Kandinsky! […] Und nun: ist nicht der russische Geist die Zufluchtsstätte mystischer Geistigkeit aller ihrer Arten und Abarten?"
49   W. Kandinsky, 'Abstrakte Kunst', *Der Cicerone*, 17 (1925), 638–47. English in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, pp. 511–18.
50   *Ibid.*, p. 512. ("*Umwertung*, die das Äußere sehr langsam verläßt und sich dem Inneren sehr langsam zuwendet"; "der natürliche Vorgänger einer der größten geistigen Epochen" (Kandinsky, 'Abstrakte Kunst', p. 639)).
51   *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, p. 512. ("eine Verschiebung des Kunstzentrums, die im letzten Grunde den Übergang vom romanischen zum slawischen Prinzip bedeutet — vom Westen zum Osten" (Kandinsky, 'Abstrakte Kunst', p. 639)).

between the 'internal' and the 'external', and between abstract and figurative art, corresponded to the cultural difference between the Slavic east and the Romanic west. As with von Sydow's interpretation, Germany was seen by Kandinsky as lying amidst this field of forces and as having made a recent move towards the east. The content of Kandinsky's essay demonstrated that since the outbreak of the war in August 1914 and Kandinsky's subsequent forced departure from Germany, his understanding of the spiritual value of his art had not fundamentally changed. This is important, as during Kandinsky's return to Russia from 1915 to 1921 he had been faced with the emergence of Constructivism and its non- or anti-spiritual stance.[52]

The conflict between the secularity of (proto-)Constructivism and the continued emphasis on the spiritual in Kandinsky's art was reflected in Konstantin Umansky's (1902–45) *New Art in Russia* (1920).[53] This, for the first time, gave the German public a broader overview of the developments in Russian art which had taken place since 1914, that is to say, during war and revolution. With regard to Kandinsky's reputation in Germany, Umansky stated: "If anyone deserves the epithet of the 'Russian messiah', it is Kandinsky."[54] The 'spiritualisation' of Kandinsky at this point stood in sharp contrast to the almost programmatic criticism of western views on Russian art which Umansky offered at the beginning of his book: "In the west, people have always been very inadequately informed about Russian art. In the European imagination the Oriental artist lived as a barbarian, unaffected by all 'higher' culture, or as a messiah, surrounded by the gloriole of primal creative power ('ab oriente lux')."[55]

It is this way of seeing Russian art that Umansky set about to correct, or at least to complement. Thus, according to Umansky, the "absolute Expressionism" of Kandinsky and the Suprematists, in which "the 'spiritual in art' triumphs" "pause[s] at the threshold of the art to come".[56] In contrast, Vladimir Tatlin's (1885–1953) "machine art" of the *counter-relief* (fig. 10.3) — "a triumph of the intellectual and material, the

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52   See Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 11, 30–32.

53   Konstantin Umanskij, *Neue Kunst in Rußland, 1914–1919* (Potsdam: Kiepenheuer, 1920).

54   *Ibid.*, p. 20. "Wenn einer, so verdient Kandinskij den Beinamen des 'russischen Messias'."

55   *Ibid.*, p. 3. "Über die russische Kunst war man im Westen immer sehr mangelhaft unterrichtet. In der Vorstellung Europas lebte der orientale Künstler als ein von aller 'höheren' Kultur unberührter Barbar oder als ein Messias, umgeben von der Gloriole schöpferischer Urkraft ('ab oriente lux')."

56   *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 22. "absolute[n] Expressionismus"; "[d]as 'Geistige in der Kunst' triumphiert"; "mach[t] […] Halt an der Schwelle der künftigen Kunst". Founded by Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) in around 1913 or 1915, Suprematism was a movement of non-representational painting characterised by geometric colour planes which appear to float in a monochromatic, seemingly endless picture space. See Tatjana Gorjatschewa, 'Suprematismus und Konstruktivismus: Antagonismus und Ähnlichkeit, Polemik und Zusammenarbeit', in *Von der Fläche zum Raum: Malewitsch und die frühe Moderne*, ed. by Karola Kraus and Fritz Emslander (Cologne: König, 2008), pp. 16–28 (pp. 16–17). Like Kandinsky's concept of art, Malevich's Suprematist theory was strongly metaphysical and intuitionistic, and the later Constructivists distanced themselves from this. See Hubertus Gaßner and Eckhart Gillen, *Zwischen Revolutionskunst und Sozialistischem Realismus: Dokumente und Kommentare. Kunstdebatten in der Sowjetunion von 1917 bis 1934* (Cologne: DuMont, 1979), p. 68.

negation of the spirit's right to isolated autonomy" — was described as feeling itself, quite rightly, to be "in perfect harmony with the ethos of the time".[57]

If, as Umansky suggested, Tatlin's material constructions were more up to date,[58] Kandinsky relentlessly continued to promote his own version of modernism founded upon the spiritual. Even in the 1920s, the artist insisted on "a mysterious law" that reigned over the elements of art: "What is that secret, elusive, miniscule 'plus', invisible to us today, which, like a flash of lightning, has the immeasurable power of turning a correct, precise, but still dead construction into a living work? Here, perhaps, coincide questions about the soul of art and the soul of the world, to which the human soul also belongs."[59]

In around 1919, Kandinsky's art shifted to that of a more geometric style (fig. 7.4). The response of the German critical community to this development and its relationship to the 'spiritual' in his art is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, as an initial hypothesis, it seems arguable that the 'spiritual' reception of Kandinsky's Munich period found a continuation in that of his Bauhaus period (1922–33), such that, at least to some of those who were supportive of the artist's work, this was still considered to carry a spiritual message.[60] What is more clear, however, is that in the 1920s Kandinsky was faced with polemical attacks on his person and his work which were based on anti-modernist, anti-communist, nationalist, and/or racist beliefs. After Hitler's seizure of power in January 1933, such views became political reality. In Nazi Germany, Kandinsky's abstract art was seen as symptomatic both of his Russian origin and his activities at the 'Bolshevist' Bauhaus. This was accompanied by a process which can be termed the 'de-spiritualisation' of Kandinsky: firstly, by politicising his work and associating it with communism; and, secondly, by pathologising it and

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57   Umanskij, *Neue Kunst in Rußland*, pp. 19–20. "Maschinenkunst"; "[e]in Triumph des Intellektuellen und Materiellen, die Verneinung der Rechte des Geistes auf isolierte Autonomie"; "in vollkommenem Einklang mit der Gesinnung der Zeit".

58   See also Konstantin Umanski, 'Neue Kunstrichtungen in Rußland: I. Der Tatlinismus oder die Maschinenkunst', *Der Ararat*, 1 (January 1920; repr. Nendeln: Kraus, 1975), 12–14 (pp. 12–13).

59   *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, pp. 516–17. ("einem rätselhaften Gesetz"; "Welches geheime, heute unsichtbare, von der Beobachtung fliehende minimale Plus [hat] die unermeßliche Kraft […], aus einer korrekten, exakten, aber toten Konstruktion blitzartig ein lebendes Werk zu schaffen? Hier treffen sich vielleicht die Fragen der Kunstseele und der Weltseele, zu der auch die menschliche Seele gehört." (Kandinsky, 'Abstrakte Kunst', p. 644)).

60   Will Grohmann (1887–1968), one of the foremost interpreters of Kandinsky in the Weimar Republic, wrote in a monograph on the artist: "Because what still distinguishes Kandinsky from the Constructivists in this period [around 1921–23] is his broad horizon. He does not even consider letting the means become the end; instead, they remain an expression of something spiritual, they are […] devised for purposefully touching the soul." ("Denn was Kandinsky auch in diesem Zeitabschnitt [um 1921–23] von den Konstruktivisten unterscheidet, ist die Weite des Horizonts. Er denkt nicht daran, die Mittel zum Zweck werden zu lassen, sie bleiben Ausdruck eines Seelischen, sind […] erfunden zur zweckmäßigen Berührung der Seele." Will Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky* (Brunswick: Kandinsky-Gesellschaft, [c. 1930/31]), p. 15.) The last words of this passage were derived from *On the Spiritual in Art*, where Kandinsky concluded: "Thus it is clear that the harmony of colors can only be based upon the principle of purposefully touching the human soul." *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, p. 160. ("So ist es klar, daß die Farbenharmonie nur auf dem Prinzip der zweckmäßigen Berührung der menschlichen Seele ruhen muß." (Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige*, p. 68)).

declaring it to be an expression of mental illness. Both these elements characterised the presentation of Kandinsky's work within the exhibition, Degenerate Art, that opened in Munich in 1937: featuring the slogans "Crazy at any price" and "Works by Kandinsky [who] before 1933 [was a] teacher at the communist Bauhaus in Dessau", the exhibition's audience was able to view several works by Kandinsky which were arranged in a bizarre, step-like manner.[61]

7.4 Vasily Kandinsky, *Multicoloured Circle*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 138 x 180 cm. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT. As published in Will Grohmann, *Wassily Kandinsky* (Cologne: DuMont Schauberg, 1958), p. 285. Photograph in the public domain.

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61   Mario-Andreas von Lüttichau, 'Die Ausstellung "Entartete Kunst", München 1937: Eine Rekonstruktion', in *"Entartete Kunst": Das Schicksal der Avantgarde im Nazi-Deutschland*, ed. by Stephanie Barron (Munich: Hirmer, 1992), pp. 45–81 (p. 61). "Verrückt um jeden Preis"; "Arbeiten von Kandinsky vor 1933 Lehrer am kommunistischen Bauhaus in Dessau".

Thinking back to Küchler's review of the Kandinsky retrospective of 1913, it is easy to realise that the Nazis rested their art policy on long-cherished resentments against the avant-garde.[62] Terms such as "madness of colours and shapes", with which Küchler had labelled Kandinsky's art, were characteristic of the Nazi view on abstraction. Whereas in 1913 such views against abstraction had been challenged by Kandinsky's supporters, in the 1930s they were enforced by a totalitarian regime that did not brook opposition. Thus Kandinsky was now officially branded a communist agitator or, worse still, an insane lunatic.

In his autobiographical text, 'Reminiscences' (1913), Kandinsky stated: "Art in many respects resembles religion."[63] Both in religion and art, belief plays a crucial role. Accordingly, the prophets of art are hailed by some as harbingers of a promising future, while others denounce them as maniacs or deceivers. The same can be said of the reception of Kandinsky in Germany. In the eyes of his contemporaries, Kandinsky's art swung between the extremes of artistic revelation and artistic decline. The direction in which the pendulum swung seems to have been determined, in particular, by two factors: first, the authors' view on Russian culture in relation to their own German culture; and, second, the authors' attitude towards abstraction as a means of visual communication. The 'spiritual' interpretations of Kandinsky's work in Germany which have been discussed in this chapter all have in common that they do not immediately relate Kandinsky's art to the religious traditions of Russia, for instance, icon painting. Rather, commentators of the period traced Kandinsky's work back to their sweeping ideas of an eastern or Russian spirituality.[64] Moreover, Kandinsky himself had an influence on the interpretation of his art in Germany: at least for some beholders of abstraction, his notion of the 'spiritual in art' — however this was understood — filled the semantic gap which the representational object had left.

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62   See also Christoph Zuschlag, *"Entartete Kunst": Ausstellungsstrategien im Nazi-Deutschland*, Heidelberger kunstgeschichtliche Abhandlungen, n.s., 21 (Worms: Werner, 1995), pp. 25–31.

63   Wassily Kandinsky, 'Reminiscences' (1913), in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, pp. 357–82 (p. 377) ("Die Kunst ist in vielem der Religion ähnlich." (Kandinsky, 'Rückblicke', in *Kandinsky: Autobiographische Schriften*, ed. by Hans K. Roethel and Jelena Hahl-Koch, unchanged new edition (Bern: Benteli, 2004), pp. 27–50 (p. 46))).

64   It can only be mentioned here that these ideas were largely informed by the reception of Russian literature, in the first place by the writings of Fedor Dostoevsky (1821–81). In his essay 'Abstract Art' Kandinsky took the Germans' "general enthusiasm for Russian literature, usually beginning — and this is particularly significant — with Dostoyevsky" as an indication of the asserted shift towards the internal and the spiritual (*Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, p. 514). ("Es entstand erst eine allgemeine Begeisterung für die russische Literatur, wobei gewöhnlich — was besonders bezeichnend ist — mit Dostojewsky angefangen wurde" (Kandinsky, 'Abstrakte Kunst', p. 640)).

8. Ellis H. Minns and Nikodim Kondakov's *The Russian Icon* (1927)[1]

Wendy Salmond

In March 1922, Byzantine scholar and academician Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925) arrived in Prague, an elderly, penniless émigré with little more in his suitcase than a massive book manuscript and a photo archive (fig. 8.1). Kondakov intended his book to be the definitive work on the Russian icon, his gift to the Russian people in a time of iconoclasm, when an entire culture of shared spiritual values seemed under threat.[2] It was the fruit, not simply of decades of laborious scholarly research, but also of an intimate familiarity with icon painting as a living craft still practised in late Imperial Russia. Kondakov had begun to write this last major work of his career in 1915, amidst a fierce polemic in the national art press that cast him as the exemplar of all that was outmoded in his generation of scholars. Begun in Petrograd, the 620-page manuscript was completed in Yalta in 1918, but continually reworked right up until the author's death in February 1925. Finding a publisher for the book became the central preoccupation of Kondakov's final years. If he failed in this, he believed, it would take fifty or sixty years before a work of its kind would appear again, and an entire body of knowledge would be lost.[3]

When it was finally published posthumously in 1927, in an abridged English edition by Oxford's Clarendon Press, *The Russian Icon* should have marked a watershed. It was the first monograph in English on the subject, written by a scholar of international stature; it was masterfully translated and annotated by Cambridge academic Dr Ellis H. Minns; and it was luxuriously produced, thanks in part to a subsidy from the son of the American industrialist and Slavophile, Charles R. Crane (fig. 8.2).[4]

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2   On Soviet iconoclasm see, for example, Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

3   I. L. Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki ob iskusstve Vizantii i drevnei Rusi 1920–30 gody. Po materialam arkhivov* (Moscow: Izd. Akademii gornykh nauk, 2000), p. 60.

4   For an excellent historical overview of British attitudes towards Russian icons see Richard Marks, 'Russian Icons Through British Eyes c. 1830–1930', in *A People Passing Rude: British Responses to Russian Culture*, ed. by Anthony Cross (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012, https://doi.org/10.11647/ OBP.0022), pp. 69–88.

And yet, Kondakov's magnum opus failed to win an audience. Though it appeared just in time for a surge of popular interest in Russian icons abroad, it never became the book of choice for the English-speaking public seeking a guide through the 'dark forest' of the icon's history. In part the reasons were practical — at 105 shillings its purchase was a luxury few could afford, and the small print run further limited its influence.[5] But what really doomed Kondakov's achievement to oblivion for much of the twentieth century was the widespread assumption that it represented an out-of-date and fundamentally flawed understanding of the icon, written by a man of nineteenth-century sensibility incapable of responding to the aesthetic demands and discoveries of the modern age.

My chapter offers some suggestions for why this crude caricature of Kondakov's work took hold in the 1920s and became axiomatic throughout the Soviet period. In particular, it considers the role that Minns's translation may have played, however inadvertently, in cementing this impression. Minns's interventions in and framing of the text highlight the turmoil and uncertainty of the 1920s, when the emerging history of the Russian icon was a touchstone for generational as well as ideological conflicts.

Writing the Text (1915–25)

Nikodim Kondakov came to the study of Russian icons relatively late in his career. After writing a pioneering dissertation on *The History of Byzantine Art and Iconography Based on Miniatures in Greek Manuscripts* in 1876, he spent a quarter of a century building an international reputation as "the patriarch of Byzantinists",[6] "laying out the main paths for studying the artistic culture of Byzantium and the Slavic countries that came under the influence of the Byzantine Empire".[7] His history of the Russian icon, by contrast, originated in a very practical concern with the contemporary state of icon painting in his homeland. A fact-finding trip in 1900 to the villages of Mstera, Palekh, and Kholui — the centres of icon production in late Imperial Russia — revealed the rapid decline of this ancient craft into a production-line industry, and raised fears for its survival in the new century.[8] The experience prompted Kondakov to embark on a crusade to reconnect the contemporary icon painter with the history of his fast dying tradition.

Kondakov's official contacts at court and in the upper echelons of academia paved the way for the creation of the Committee for the Guardianship of Russian Icon Painting

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5   By comparison, the English edition of Aleksandr Anisimov's *Vladimirskaia ikona Bozhiei Materi* (*Our Lady of Vladimir*, trans. by N. G. Yaschwill and T. N. Rodzianko (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1928)), also subsidised by John Crane, cost 35 shillings or $8 ('S. P.', 'Review of Our Lady of Vladimir by A. J. Azimov, N. G. Yaschwill, T. N. Rodzianko', *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, 56, 327 (June 1930), 323).

6   The phrase is Gabriel Millet's, cited by Ellis Minns in his preface to Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), p. vii.

7   G. I. Vzdornov, 'Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov v zerkale sovremennoi vizantinistiki', in *Nauka i restavratsiia: Ocherki po istorii otkrytiia i izucheniia drevnerusskoi zhivopisi* (Moscow: Indrik, 2006), p. 305.

8   See N. P. Kondakov, *Sovremennoe polozhenie russkoi narodnoi ikonopisi* (St Petersburg: Tipografiia I. N. Skorokhodova, 1901).
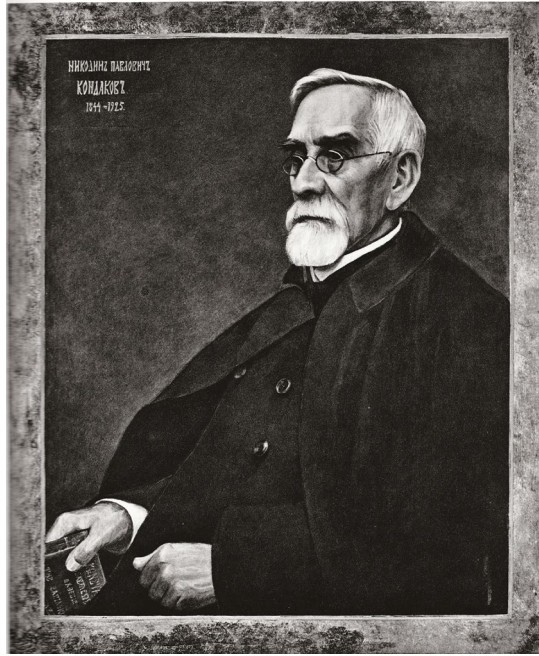
8.1 Portrait of Nikodim Kondakov by Princess Natalia Iashvil (ca. 1924). From G. V. Vernadskij, 'Nikodim Pavlovič Kondakov', in *Sbornik statei, posviashchennykh pamiati N. P. Kondakova. Arkheologiia, istoriia iskusstva, vizantinovedenie* (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1926). Photograph in the public domain.
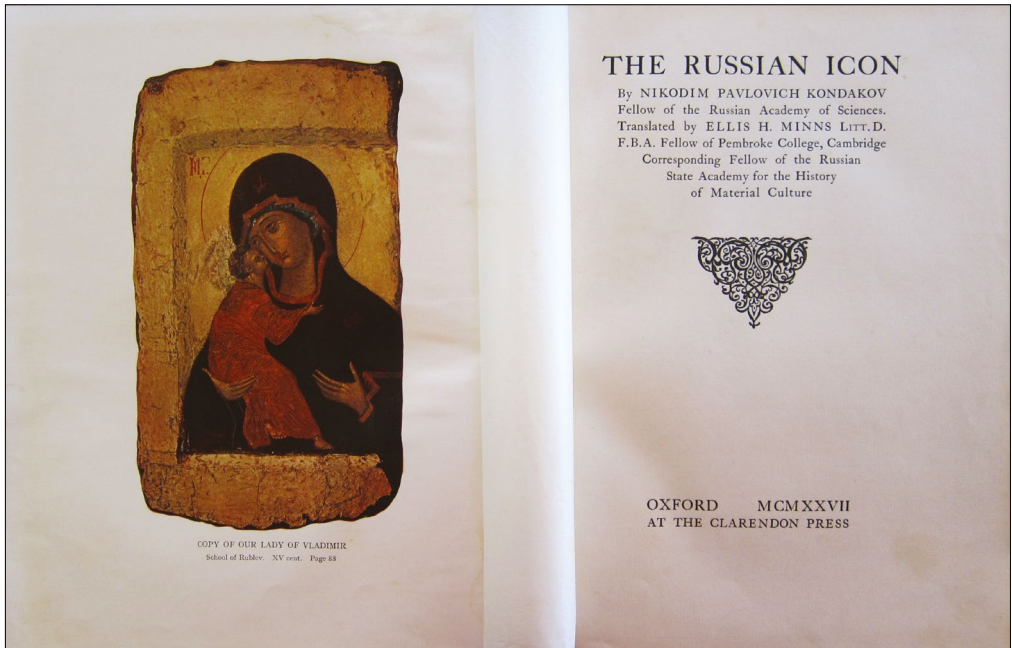
8.2 Title page of Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927). Photograph in the public domain.

in 1902, of which he was *de facto* director. At his urging, the committee opened schools for young icon painters, and successfully lobbied Tsar Nicholas II for a ban on the production of icons printed on tin.[9] At the same time, he had strong grass-roots links to the practical world of icon painters through his protégés Vladimir Georgievsky (1861–1923) and Grigory Chirikov (1882–1936), who shared his appreciation of the icon as a complex material artefact deeply imbedded in the liturgical and cultural practices of Orthodoxy.[10] Seen from this perspective, no icon could be taken in isolation, for it was linked not only to its prototype, but also to innumerable other icons across time and place, part of a craft tradition that responded continually to external influences and events, and occasionally produced sublime works of art.

His first publication on icons, the *Iconography of Our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ* (1905), was specifically intended for use in the committee's schools as a *litsevoi podlinnik* — a visual primer containing the main iconographic and stylistic prototypes contemporary icon painters needed to keep the ancient traditions of their craft alive.[11] But as he moved on to explore the iconography of Mother of God icons, Kondakov's scholarly curiosity was piqued as he noticed that certain iconographic types emerging in Russia in the fourteenth century showed a new element of humanism and expressiveness he had not encountered in Byzantine prototypes. These qualities, he believed, could only be explained by Russian icon painters coming into contact with early Italian icons. This hypothesis was the crux of his emerging 'Italo-Cretan' or western theory, and its most vivid illustration was the *umilenie* or 'tenderness' type, best known in the celebrated Vladimir Mother of God icon in Moscow's Dormition Cathedral, which scholars then believed to be a fourteenth-century work.

Kondakov launched his theory in 1910, with a lecture to the Imperial Society of Lovers of Ancient Letters; that same year saw the first of his three projected volumes on Mother of God iconography, subtitled *The Links between Greek and Russian Icon Painting and Italian Painting of the Early Renaissance*.[12] As a radical departure from conventional wisdom on the 'backwardness' of the Russian icon, Kondakov's theory of western influences attracted a "storm of the most violent protests" from the official

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9   See Robert Nichols, 'The Icon and the Machine in Russia's Religious Renaissance, 1900–1909', in *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, ed. by William C. Brumfield and Milos M. Velimirovic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 131–44; Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, trans. and ed. by Robin Milner-Gulland (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).

10   Kondakov's enduring friendships with Georgievsky, Chirikov, and Aleksandr Anisimov are thoroughly documented in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*.

11   N. P. Kondakov, *Ikonografiia Gospoda Boga i Spasa nashego Iisusa Khrista* (St Petersburg: Tovarishchestvo R. Golike i A. Vil'borg, 1905; reprint Moscow: Palomnik, 2001). It was the first volume in an intended series of illustrated icon primers (*litsevoi ikonopisnyi podlinnik*).

12   See N. P. Kondakov, *Ikonografiia Bogomateri: sviazi grecheskoi i russkoi ikonopisi s ital'ianskoiu zhivopis'iu rannago vozrozhdeniia* (St Petersburg: Tovarishchestvo R. Golike i A. Vil'borg, 1910). This was followed by N. P. Kondakov, *Ikonografiia Bogomateri*, 2 vols. (St Petersburg: Tipografiia imperatorskoi akademii nauk, 1914–15), https://archive.org/details/ikonografiabogom01konduoft, https://archive.org/details/ikonografiabogom02konduoft. The manuscript of the third volume was acquired by the Vatican in 1925, but remained unpublished until Ivan Foletti's translation of it appeared (*Iconographie de la Mère de Dieu III* [Rome: Lipa, 2011]). For the story of this long-missing work, see Ivan Foletti, 'The Last Kondakov: Rediscovery of a Manuscript', *Orientala Christiana Periodica*, 74, 2 (2008), 495–502.

archaeological community.[13] In response, he defended his theory with all the vigour of an explorer charting a path through virtually unknown territory — after all, in 1910 the vast majority of early Russian icons remained buried beneath layers of overpainting, dirt, and adornments, and their outlines and iconographic details were often the most legible information available, to be collated like points on an emerging map. Any attempt at building a coherent history required an act of archaeological sifting, imaginative reconstruction, and conceptual daring.

As a scholar who prided himself on the objectivity of his methods and deductions, Kondakov looked to the largest possible sample size to test his unfolding hypothesis of external influence and internal adaptation in early Russian icon painting. His emerging historical framework found its ideal demonstration in the collection of his friend Nikolai Likhachev (1862–1936), a diplomat and scholar whose enormous icon collection was purchased by the state in 1913 and formed the nucleus of the Department of Icon Painting (*drevlekhranilishche*) at the Alexander III Museum (later the Russian Museum) in St Petersburg.[14]

Likhachev spread his collecting net wide, to include not only aesthetically exceptional icons like the monumental Boris and Gleb (fig. 8.3) from Suzdal, cleaned by Grigory Chirikov in 1907, but also a wide assortment of what were considered run-of-the-mill (*remeslennyi*) icons from Byzantium, Crete, Italy, and Russia. Likhachev's own visual atlas of his collection, *Materials for a History of Russian Icon Painting* (1906), arranged by iconographic type, was a testament to the method of comparative typologies that he and Kondakov shared (fig. 8.4).[15]

Yet as these two senior scholars fleshed out their theory of western influences with increasing confidence, an entirely new view of the Russian icon's evolution began to emerge around 1910–14, in response to the cleaning of icons in private collections and of frescoes in the churches of Novgorod and at Ferapontov Monastery.[16] In 1913, a spokesman for an alternative icon history emerged in the person of Pavel Muratov (1881–1950), a young critic who played a leading role in organising the watershed exhibition of cleaned icons held in Moscow's Delovoi Dvor that year.[17] Muratov

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13 In 1911 Kondakov's young protégé Aleksandr Anisimov wrote approvingly of his mentor's "objective truth" in the face of subjective prejudices, observing that "For Moscow archaeology the Italian influence on Russian icon painting is evidently still too new". Quoted in I. L. Kyzlasova, *Istoriia izucheniia vizantiiskogo i drevnerusskogo iskusstva v Rossii: F. I. Buslaev, N. P. Kondakov: metody, idei, teoriia* (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1985), p. 236. He later rejected Kondakov's position, while retaining a deep respect for the latter's scholarship.

14 See *Drevlekhranilishche pamiatnikov ikonopisi i tserkovnoi stariny v Russkom muzee* (St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2014).

15 N. P. Likhachev. *Materialy dlia istorii russkago ikonopisaniia: Atlas* (St Petersburg: Ekspeditsiia zagotovleniia gosudarstvennykh bumag, 1906).

16 See V. T. Georgievskii, *Freski Ferapontova monastyria* (St Petersburg: Tov. R. Golike i A. Vil'borg, 1911); V. V. Suslov, *Tserkov' Uspeniia Bogoroditsy v s. Volotove bliz Novgoroda, postroennaia v 1352 g.* (Moscow: T-vo tip. A. I. Mamontova, 1911); P. Muratov, *Novgorodskaia ikona S. Fedora Stratilata* (Moscow: K. F. Nekrasov, 1916).

17 See *Vystavka drevne-russkogo iskusstva ustroennaia v 1913 godu v oznamenovanie chestvovaniia 300-letiia tsarstvovaniia doma Romanovykh* (Moscow: Imperatorskii Moskovskii Arkheologicheskii Institut Imeni

exalted Novgorod icons and frescoes, now emerging in all their brilliance from under the restorer's knife, and pointed to Gabriel Millet's recent discovery of the frescoes at Mistra as confirmation that, far from being a provincial outpost, medieval Novgorod had been part of the so-called Byzantine Renaissance, the revival of Hellenic culture under the Palaeologan dynasty (1261–1453).[18] Muratov defended this position in the volume on icons he wrote in 1914 for Igor Grabar's *History of Russian Art*; this was followed in 1915 by his catalogue of Ilia Ostroukhov's icon collection, a selection governed by the aesthetic criteria of modern art, and the very antithesis of Likhachev's encyclopaedic collecting method.[19] Muratov's elegant prose and celebration of the icon's formal rhythms and structures, coupled with his pride in the discovery of a distinctive, world-class Russian art, made him the natural leader for a younger generation of self-styled aesthetes alienated by Kondakov's dispassionate objectivity and exhausting erudition. With increasing irritation, Kondakov watched the younger man assume the mantle of authority that had been his, while the scientific objectivity and holistic approach he prized fell victim to an "empty dialectic" that pitted aesthetes (lovers of form) against iconographers (pedants of subject matter).[20]

In 1915, Kondakov began writing his own version of the Russian icon's history. Commissioned by Mikhail Tereshchenko, a wealthy trustee of the Russian Museum, the study was to be a scholarly guide to the museum's new icon collection (fig. 8.5).[21] But it was also to serve as an antidote to what Kondakov perceived as the faddish, exaggerated celebration of Russian icons that had followed the 1913 Moscow exhibition.[22] In his eyes, the upsurge of press coverage was just vulgar journalistic excess, based on nothing but the subjective projections of the writer, uninformed by historical fact and context. This irascible stance made it all the easier for Kondakov's young critics to paint him as a plodding factographer, immune to the emerging beauties and 'uniquely Russian' appeal of Novgorod icons, an intolerant patriarch ripe for toppling.

Imperatora Nikolaia II, 1913); Pavel Muratov, 'Epokha drevne-russkoi ikonopisi', *Starye gody* (April 1913), 31–38; 'Blizhaishchie zadachi v dele izucheniia ikonopisi', *Russkaia ikona*, 1 (1914), 8–12.

18   Gabriel Millet, *Monuments byzantine de Mistra* (Paris: Leroux, 1910).

19   P. Muratov, *Drevne-russkaia ikonopis' v sobranii I. S. Ostroukhova* (Moscow: K. F. Nekrasov, 1914).

20   Kondakov was dismissive enough of these new discoveries that in 1911 he refused Georgievsky's invitation to join him on an inspection of the newly cleaned frescoes by Dionisy at Ferapontov Monastery, instead making his regular summer trip to Italy to examine more Italo-Cretan icons. Irina Kyzlasova describes this as evidence of the "tragic discord" between Kondakov's theories and the wealth of new information emerging to challenge them. See Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 192.

21   See I. D. Solov'eva, 'N. P. Kondakov i Russkii muzei Imperatora Aleksandra III', in *Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov 1844–1925. Lichnost', nauchnoe nasledie, arkhiv. K 150-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia* (St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004), pp. 5–7.

22   Ivan Foletti contrasts the even-keeled tone of the *Ikonografiia bogomateri*, the second volume of which was completed in 1914, with Kondakov's irascible polemics against "the aesthetic school" in *The Russian Icon/Russkaia ikona*. See Ivan Foletti, *Da Bisanzio alla santa Russia: Nikodim Kondakov (1844–1925) e la nascita della storia dell'arte in Russia* (Rome: Viella, 2011).

8.3 Icon of St Boris and St Gleb (mid 14th century), Tempera on wood. 142.5 x 94.3 cm. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Unknow_-_St_Boris_and_St_Gleb_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg

8.4 Plate from N. P. Likhachev, *Materialy dlia istorii russkago ikonopisaniia: Atlas* (St Petersburg: Ekspeditsiia zagotovleniia gosudarstvennykh bumag, 1906). Photograph in the public domain.

8.5 Nikodim Kondakov (seated at left) with staff of the Department of Early Russian Art, Russian Museum, St Petersburg, 1914. Photograph © State Russian Museum, all rights reserved.

The 1917 Revolutions and their aftermath dispersed this fractious community of scholars, critics, and collectors engaged in the nascent study of icons. Many (including Kondakov and Muratov) ended up in Paris, Prague, Rome, or Berlin, struggling to continue their work in exile. Those who remained in Soviet Russia, however, paradoxically benefited from the Bolshevik nationalisation of the Orthodox Church's property by gaining unprecedented access to Russia's oldest icons. In summer 1918, a team of experts directed by Igor Grabar and Aleksandr Anisimov led a series of expeditions to the ancient towns and monasteries along the Volga to study and conserve their icons and frescoes. Cleaning revealed that some of the most revered miracle-working icons of Russian Orthodoxy, like the Bogoliubov and Maksimov Mothers of God, were several centuries older than previously thought. By the end of that year, the Vladimir Mother of God, around which Kondakov had constructed a key part of his western theory, would be revealed, not as the fourteenth-century work its

overpainted surface suggested, but as a twelfth-century Byzantine icon owing nothing to the humanist impulses of the early Italian Renaissance.

By October 1918 Kondakov was living in Odessa and had already completed the first draft of his icon manuscript, when word of these discoveries first reached him.[23] But, in the chaos of the Civil War, he was unable to return to Moscow to examine the conservation work in person, and he would hear nothing more from his friends in the capital for the next five years. In 1920 he set sail for Constantinople with his manuscript, his 'western theory', and hundreds of photos of icons in the Russian Museum collection, taken back in 1913. Ahead lay the bitter life of a pioneer banished from the epicentre of new icon discoveries, the Central State Conservation Workshops in Moscow overseen by Grabar and Anisimov.[24] Henceforth, Kondakov would be seen as a man for whom time had stopped at the moment of exile, his work the emblem of a vanished past.

Translating the Text (1921–25)

Dr Ellis Hovell Minns (fig. 8.6) was teaching paleography at Pembroke College, Cambridge when, in May 1921, he received a letter from Kondakov after a prolonged silence.[25] Twenty years earlier, while a student at Pembroke, Minns had spent two periods in St Petersburg studying South Russian archaeology of the Scythian period. He had warm memories of the vibrant scholarly world of late Imperial archaeology, and particularly of Kondakov's hospitality and support. A "painful scholar and learned antiquary",[26] with a gift for uncommon languages, Minns's reputation rested on a single book, *Scythians and Greeks* (1913), but it was one that even Russian scholars considered a fundamental text on the subject.[27] From his rooms at Pembroke College and his home

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23 Letter from Grigory Chirikov to Nikodim Kondakov, 25 September/9 October 1918, published in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi istorii*, p. 232.

24 Pavel Muratov stayed on in Moscow as an employee of Narkompros (the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment) until 1922. When he published his first works on icons abroad in 1923, he was able to integrate some of these discoveries smoothly into his own text, without in any way altering the picture of 1913–15. See P. P. Muratov, *Drevnerusskaia zhivopis'. Istoriia otkrytiia i issledovaniia* (St Petersburg: Bibliopolis, 2008), pp. 415–16.

25 Sir Ellis Hovell Minns (1873/4–1953) was in turn undergraduate, Fellow, Librarian, Professor, President, and Senior Fellow of Pembroke College, and in 1927 was named Disney Professor of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge. He was recognised as one of the founding fathers of Eurasian archaeology. He visited Russia in 1898–99 and again in 1900–01. Among Minns's papers in the Cambridge University Library is a draft report of his travels and study plans, dated 27 December 1900–7 January 1901. See Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, MS Add. 7722.

26 A characterisation of Minns from the *Pembroke College Gazette*, 1 (1927), 8.

27 Ellis H. Minns, *Scythians and Greeks. A Survey of Ancient History and Archaeology on the North Coast of the Euxine from the Danube to the Caucasus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1913). Minns was affectionately addressed by his Russian correspondents as "Il'ia Egorovich". His papers contain a letter from Kondakov dated 4/17 November 1913, congratulating him on *Scythians and Greeks.* On the

at 2 Wordsworth Grove in Cambridge he carried on a voluminous correspondence in six languages and received Christmas greetings in sixteen.[28] After losing touch with so many of his Russian colleagues in the chaos of the Civil War, Minns was delighted to learn that his former mentor was still alive, and he was eager to assist him.
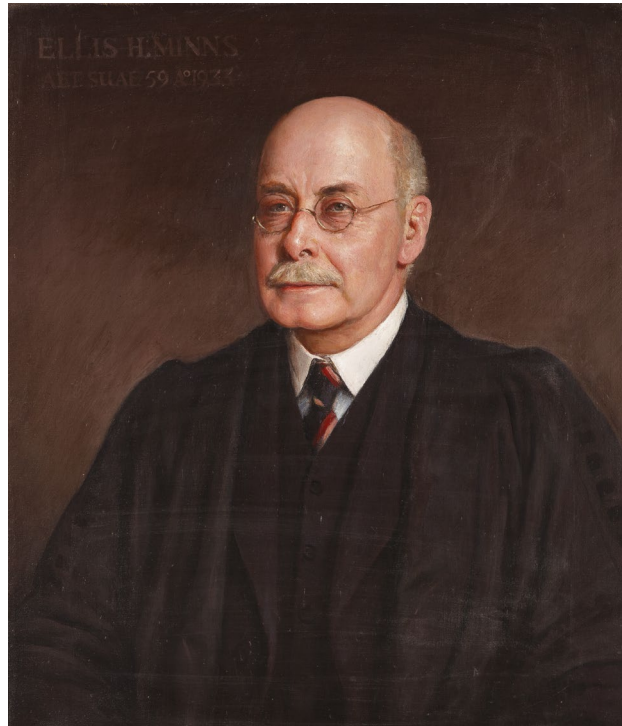
8.6 Portrait of Dr. Ellis Hovell Minns, 1933 by Arthur Trevor Haddon. Courtesy of Haddon Library, Faculty of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Photograph © Haddon Library, all rights reserved.

Now living in Sofia, Kondakov was desperate to find a publisher for his icon manuscript, and his letter to Minns was an appeal for help. In his reply Minns ruled out any prospect of finding an English press willing to publish a mammoth work on icons in Russian, citing the dire economic conditions of the post-war publishing

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book's broad impact, see E. D. Philips, 'In Memoriam: Ellis Hovell Minns', *Artibus Asiae*, 17, 2 (1954), 168–73.

28   The correspondence that Minns received, written in Russian, Hungarian, German, French, Czech, and Latin, is housed in the Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, MS Add. 7722.

industry in Britain.[29] There was a slim chance, however, that Oxford's Clarendon Press would consider a short popular work, and Minns volunteered to translate an abridged version for the English market. After protracted negotiations, Oxford agreed to take the project on, and by June 1922 the contract was signed.[30] The following October, a subsidy from one of Kondakov's admirers, the wealthy young American John Crane (1899–1982), allowed for a longer text and an unusually luxurious presentation.[31]

Minns's generous and quixotic gesture was, as he put it, an *opus pietatis* (act of mercy) on behalf of an aging scholar whose last great work seemed fated to disappear without trace in a "godforsaken" post-war Europe.[32] Even the barest outline would be an important contribution to scholarship, he assured Kondakov. In taking on the project, Minns was unaware that two works on medieval Russian art and icons written for a general European audience had just recently appeared — *Altrussische Kunst* (*Old Russian Art*), written by Austrian scholar Fannina Halle, and Louis Réau's *L'Art russe des origines à Pierre le Grand* (*Russian Art from its Origins to Peter the Great*).[33] Far from making his own work redundant, however, for Kondakov these popular surveys would simply have confirmed the need for a history written by a real expert. Not

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29 Minns's response was the first of thirty-five letters he wrote to Kondakov between 1921 and 1925, recording the trajectory of the translation project. I express my deep thanks to Dr Michaela Kuthanová, curator of the Literarní archív Památník národního písemnictví in Prague (hereafter 'Literarní archív') for providing me with scans of the letters.

30 Through Minns a contract was drawn up in June 1922, stipulating a text of 60,000 words, one hundred illustrations (grouped in forty-eight plates), twenty author copies, and an honorarium for Kondakov of £105. "Given the current state of our book market, I am amazed that they agreed to such an expensive publication", he wrote to Kondakov (Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 3 April 1922, Literarní archív).

31 John Crane was the son of Chicago industrialist and diplomat Charles R. Crane (1858–1939), an enthusiast for all things Russian and Slavic, and brother of Richard Crane, the first American ambassador to Czechoslovakia in 1919–21. In the 1920s John Crane was Czech president Tomáš Masaryk's personal assistant, and a regular attendee at Kondakov's lectures in French, as well as the private lessons on icons he gave to Masaryk's daughter Alisa. See Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 59.

32 Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Sergei Kondakov, 12 July 1927, Literarní archív. In an earlier letter Minns noted that he received nothing for his translation except for his author copies, almost all of which he sent to colleagues, including Likhachev (Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Sergei Kondakov, 19 October 1925, Literarní archív). However, Kyzlasova cites a letter of 27 October 1923 in which Crane reported paying for Minns's translation (Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 70, note 185). It may be that Crane sent money for the publication expenses through Minns as intermediary: in October 1923 he reported a visit from a protégé of Crane, come to inquire about the progress of the translation. (Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 24 October 1923, Literarní archív).

33 Fannina W. Halle, *Altrussiche Kunst* (Berlin: E. Wasmuth, 1920); also in French, *L'Art de la vieille Russie*, trans. by Maurice Bloch (Paris: Les Editions G. Cres et Cie, 1922). In addition to citing Muratov's volume six of Grabar's *Istoriia* and Charles Diehl's *Manuel d'art byzantin* (1910), Halle also referenced Dmitry Merezhkovsky's publications, *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* ('Tolstoi i Dostoevskii', first published in *Mir iskusstva*, 1901–02) and *Tsar and Revolution (Le Tsar et la Révolution)* (Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1907), and Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art (*Über das Geistige in der Kunst) (Munich: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1912); Louis Réau, *Russian Art from its Origins to Peter the Great (L'Art russe des origines à Pierre le Grand*) (Paris: Henri Laurens, 1921).

only were both heavily dependent on Muratov's volume in Grabar's *History of Russian Art*, but each adopted a position antithetical to his own. Réau rejected Kondakov's Italo-Cretan theory out of hand, in favour of Muratov's idea of a rival Byzantine Renaissance, while Halle's book, with its references to Kandinsky's "inner necessity" and the "musical rhythms" of Novgorod icons, demonstrated the sort of mystical lyricism Kondakov loathed.[34] It was not until Minns was well into the project that he would have any inkling of the battle to tell the 'right' history of Russian icons in which Kondakov had been embroiled before the Revolution, and which was still very much alive in emigration.

Between May 1921 and February 1925, Minns wrote thirty-five letters to Kondakov through which we can trace the progress of their collaboration. As the first batch of typescript arrived at his Cambridge home in June 1922, Minns quickly saw that major changes were needed if Kondakov's work was to reach an English-speaking audience with scant notion of Russia and the world in which icons lived.[35] He cautioned against inundating this inexperienced reader with indigestible abstractions and an ocean of facts: "One must remember that our public, even the serious public, knows very little about the subject, and that we must avoid any conglomeration of material."[36] In instalments, the indefatigable Kondakov sent back a substantially revised book, his huge and unwieldy manuscript pruned down to half its original size. Yet comparing it with the complete, largely unedited Russian edition that would follow in 1928–32, it is remarkable how much of his original Kondakov managed to preserve.[37] Even in their condensed form, the first three chapters on the origins, function, and technique of the icon were dense with a lifetime's accumulated knowledge, a web of facts and observations that made every icon part of a living organism. These contextual chapters were followed by eight more that formed an historical timeline of the icon's evolution in Russia, from Kyiv to Palekh.

With the dogmatism of an expert setting the record straight, Kondakov continued to insist on his western theory as the key to understanding the 'Russianness' of the

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34 In an earlier version, published as a special issue of *L'Art et les artistes,* Réau still accepted Kondakov's Western theory. See Louis Réau, 'Russie, art ancien', *L'art et les artistes* (June 1917), 39–40. For Kondakov's dismissive attitude to Halle, see *The Russian Icon*, p. 104, note 2. He was equally intolerant of the "mere arbitrary metaphysical speculation" and "similar far-fetched nonsense" of thinkers like Prince Evgeny Trubetskoi (*Ibid.*, p. 103).

35 See Marks, 'Russian Icons through British Eyes'.

36 Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 6 February 1925, Literarní archív.

37 N. P. Kondakov, *Russkaia ikona*, vols. 1–4 (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1928–32). The manuscript was purchased from Kondakov for 10,000 crowns by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs in honour of his eightieth birthday in 1924 with a view to publishing it. In 1927 this task was given to the Seminarium Kondakovianum, the institute formed to continue the late scholar's work. Two volumes of illustrations appeared first, followed by two volumes of text.

early Russian icon as it turned towards 'feeling and expression' in the late fourteenth century:[38]

> This streak of foreign influence, enlivening the decadence of the Byzantine schema and meeting the spiritual demands of the nation runs so clearly through the whole domain of Russian icon painting, that it is just the path which was wanted to lead us through its *terra incognita*. It gives us a definite historical landmark which enables us more or less to take our bearings and, the great thing, to get away from that domination of the mere *ipse dixit* which marks both barbarism and superficial aesthetic criticism.[39]

That he himself was not immune to the dangers of "mere *ipse dixit*" can be seen in his own use of a stylistic 'compare and contrast' analysis to convey "a right idea of the first beginning and the independent development of Russian icon painting in the fourteenth century". A comparison of a Greek icon of St Athanasius and St Cyril of Alexandria with a Novgorod icon of the same subject was used to show the superiority of "expression, variety, free mastery" in the former work over the Russian icon's "restrained simplicity" (fig. 8.7).[40] In plate XIV he paired the famous Archangel Michael icon from Novgorod (formerly in the collection of Stepan Riabushinsky) with one of the Archangel Gabriel from Suzdal from Likhachev's collection (fig. 8.8), to the clear disadvantage of the former.

In the "charming" Suzdal icon, "the whole body is felt plastically under the clothes, whereas in the former there was no body, no solidity at all, just a flat scheme drawn out, and on it the folds are not all in straight lines, instead of their being wavy and rounded as they ought to be with a woollen material". While the former was still Byzantine, the latter "points to the art of Italy now coming into its own".[41]

Kondakov used his Introduction to lambast the uninformed dilettantism of all those who, before the Revolution, had "hastened to declare the Russian icon to be 'great art', the discovery of which would astonish Europe and which would claim a place as a 'new world-treasure'". He scoffed at the florid catchphrases bandied about by Muratov and his cronies — "free idealism", "Pure art", "Russian soul" — and concluded with this scathing note: "To show that this aesthetic theory is absolutely wanting in any scientific consistency or philosophical content there is no need to analyse it as a whole or in detail: it is sufficient to confront it with a statement founded upon history and an analysis of the facts."[42] Still brooding on the conflicts of 1913–15, when his scholarly principles and years of erudition were so cavalierly dismissed, in trying to set the record straight Kondakov instead intensified the animosity of his opponents and perplexed potential readers confronting the dark forest of the icon's history.

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38   Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 8.

39   *Ibid.*, p. 9.

40   *Ibid.*, p. 49.

41   *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72. The icon is now attributed to Pskov. See *Drevlekhranilishche pamiatnikov,* p. 171.

42   Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 10.

8.7 Comparison of two 15th-century icons of St Athanasius and St Cyril of Alexandria.
From Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), plate VIII.
Photograph in the public domain.

8.8 Icon of Archangel Michael (Novgorod School, 14th century) and icon of Archangel
Gabriel (Suzdal, 15th century). From Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford:
Clarendon Press, 1927), plate XIV. Photograph in the public domain.

Despite Kondakov's impatience to see his revised manuscript in print, Minns made painfully slow progress on the translation.[43] Plagued by a tendency to procrastinate and get bogged down in minutiae, and already overwhelmed by teaching and family obligations, it took him a year to buckle down. He had no difficulties capturing the distinctive nuances of Kondakov's voice — "crisp, measured, at times rather ponderous".[44] But from the first pages he was confronted by the enormous challenge of rendering into English the arcane technical terminology of icon painting.[45] Minns wrote to former contacts in Russia for advice — to the elderly Likhachev in Petrograd, and in Moscow to the numismatist Aleksei Oreshnikov (1855–1933) and the archaeologist Aleksei Zakharov (1884–1937) (figs. 8.9 and 8.10).

Through Zakharov he was able to acquire many of the seminal pre-revolutionary works on icons that are now dispersed among the Cambridge University Libraries.[46] Gradually, Minns was able to supplement Kondakov's footnotes with a set of his own, addressing thorny questions that even today perplex those unfamiliar with icons and Orthodoxy. These included discursions on the *riza* (the metal icon cover); on the etymology of the words *risunok* and *pisat'* (drawing versus writing or painting);[47] the precise meaning of *umilenie*;[48] and the difference between the *dvuperstie* and the *imenoslovnoe* blessings.[49] On occasion Minns would indulge his own scholarly interests by inserting short learned asides, as where he saw a parallel between the workshop practices of modern icon painters and the division of labour in Mughal painting, and observed that: "This is not the only point of resemblance between Russian and Indian art at that time."[50] He even allowed himself a small personal note: "I well remember the impression produced upon me by the beauty of these chapels [in the Annunciation Cathedral] which I visited at our author's recommendation."[51]

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43   The translation was still not finished in time for Kondakov's eightieth birthday in 1924. Because of it, Minns turned down Georgy Vernadskii's invitation to write a scholarly article for a 1926 Festschrift, but he did write a brief tribute, the first appreciation of Kondakov to be published in English. (Ellis H. Minns, 'N. P. Kondakov: The Father of Russian Archaeology', *The Slavonic Review*, 3, 8 (December 1924), 435–37).

44   N. Beliaev, '*The Russian Icon*', *Seminarium Kondakovianum*, 2 (1928), 364.

45   In her obituary of Minns, Elizabeth Hill described him as "the creator of the English terminology" of iconography (Elizabeth Hill, 'Sir Ellis Hovell Minns (1874–1953)', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 32, 78 (December 1953), 236–08). Louis Réau had already created a French glossary of terms for his *L'histoire d'art russe* of 1921. It is an indication of Minns's initial lack of familiarity with the subject that he did not know of this work until Kondakov recommended it to him.

46   These included Grabar's *Istoriia russkogo iskusstva*, Anisimov's *Our Lady of Vladimir* (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1928) and *Les Icones anciennes* (1930). Acquired in the pre-revolutionary period was Nikolai Likhachev's *Istoricheskoe znachenie italo-grecheskoi ikonopisi, izobrazheniia bogomateri v proizvedeniiakh italo-grecheskikh ikonopistsev* (St Petersburg: Izdanie Russkago arkheologicheskogo ob-va 1911), inscribed to Minns by the author and with an abstract handwritten by Minns, dated 1 October 1911.

47   Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 40, note 1.

48   "More often *umilenie* seems to be a sad tenderness, between love and pity: the verb *umiliat'sia* is 'middle' in sense, 'to be touched, to feel emotion', perhaps 'yearning' gives it fairly well". Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 75, note 1.

49   Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 49, note 1.

50   *Ibid.*, p. 42, note 2.

51   *Ibid.*, p. 159, note 2.
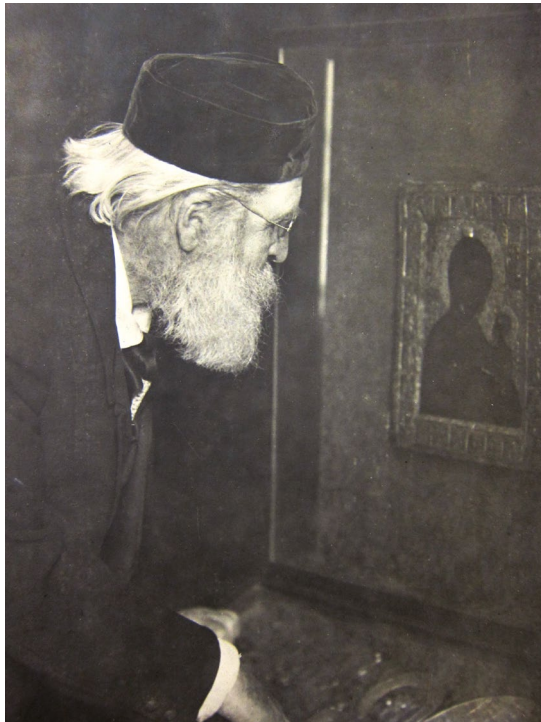
8.9 Photograph of Nikolai Likhachev inspecting an icon of the Mother of God, inscribed: "To dear Il'ia Egorovich Minns in remembrance, with heartfelt respect, N. Likhachev, 9. VIII. 1924." Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, Add. 9436/98. Photograph © Cambridge University Library, all rights reserved.

8.10 Photograph of Aleksei Zakharov and his wife, 1924. Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, Add. 7722. Photograph © Cambridge University Library, all rights reserved.

Minns's supplemental notes also acknowledged the changes occurring in Soviet Russia as he worked on the manuscript. Although Kondakov had cut most of his original references to the cleaning efforts he had participated in before 1918, or learned of from his Moscow contacts thereafter, Minns took a moment to note that "The new Government regards icons without any religious reverence merely as pictures; and if there is a good chance of discovering something interesting under later paint or varnish, the authorities have no shyness about it."[52] He knew of Lenin's systematic campaign (begun in Spring 1922 and continuing into the following summer) to confiscate from Orthodox churches all valuables ruled "unnecessary to the cult" and turn them into hard currency through export or melting down.[53] In December 1924 he went up to London to hear Sir Martin Conway speak of his recent trip to the Soviet Union, where he had observed the stockpiles of confiscated icon covers and adornments.[54] Where Kondakov described Peter the Great's 1722 decree to remove "unnecessary additions" to icons in the form of precious adornments, Minns now added the note: "I hear that a similar stripping of *rizy* has gone on since the revolution and that it has exposed much interesting work". These laconic asides reinforced the book's sense of epochal transformations taking place in the icon's circumstances, even as its history was being written.

As he came to the end of his task, in early February 1925, Minns told Kondakov that he was writing a "Translator's Preface" to orient the English reader. "Your text is written for Russians," he pointed out, "and assumes that the reader has a mass of information and customs that our brother is ignorant of and can't find in any of the books available".[55] In retrospect, though, Minns's preface reads at least as much like an effort to contextualise Kondakov himself and to explain his perplexing tone, at once harshly polemical and oddly dispassionate. By this time Minns was well aware of the deep divisions surrounding the writing of the icon's history prior to 1917, and he explained it in the familiar terms of a rivalry between Moscow nationalists (Muratov and his supporters) and St Petersburg westernisers (Kondakov and Likhachev). He described the "extravagant enthusiasm" with which cleaned icons were first received in the Russian press, and how it had produced in Kondakov "a reaction, so that in this book his attitude towards icons is more critical than could be expected of a man expounding the art of his own country and the object of his long study. One might

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52 *Ibid.*, p. ix.
53 On 23 February 1922 the decree, "On the confiscation of property without museum significance located in churches and monasteries" was issued. See *Treasure into Tractors: The Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918–1938*, ed. by Anne Odom and Wendy Salmond (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2009).
54 Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 8 December 1924, Literarní archív. Conway's book, *Art Treasures in Soviet Russia* (London: E. Arnold & Co., 1925) was an important and rare eyewitness account of how Soviet museums benefited from the church confiscations of 1921–22.
55 Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 6 February 1925, Literarní archív.

almost say that the author undervalues the subject of his book, a thing so rarely met with that the translator must point it out".[56]

With scrupulous fairness, Minns forewarned his readers that, where he was "conscious of any deviation from his author," he would append his initials (E. H. M.).[57] "In treating a new subject, the literature of which is singularly inaccessible," he wrote, "[the translator] has thought it his duty to warn the English reader that certain conclusions are not universally accepted, even though he has not space for setting out the full arguments on both sides." Introducing Kondakov as one of the "great supporters of a westernising theory of Russian art" he added: "We may perhaps take it that […] our author, knowing the West well, saw too much of the West, while the Moscow school [by which he meant Muratov and his circle] has been too much inclined to minimise it."[58] In a long footnote appended to Kondakov's discussion of his western theory (page 82), Minns introduced Muratov as the main proponent of the opposing Byzantine Renaissance theory, inspired by the mosaics of Kariye Djami in Constantinople and the frescoes at Mistra. He followed this up on page 87 with the comment: "Our author seems too insistent in denying the possibility of any Greek influence upon Rublev, and upon the Novgorod school as well."

Minns faced a much greater editorial challenge when he became aware of the cleaning and new dating of the Vladimir Mother of God icon, whose identity as a fourteenth-century image inspired by Italian prototypes was a key part of Kondakov's western theory. He had only just completed the translation when, in February 1925, Kondakov died without seeing it published. Later that year, three new works appeared reporting on Anisimov's findings about the newly cleaned icon and accompanied by remarkable photographs.[59] Clearly concerned that Kondakov's work contained no mention of this ground-making revelation, that autumn Minns asked his Moscow contact Zakharov to put him in touch with Anisimov, and the latter obligingly sent photos of the icon, as well as of Rublev's Trinity (fig. 1.7).[60]

Kondakov was in fact well informed about the conservation work being done in Moscow on the oldest Russian icons, having received letters from Georgievsky and Anisimov in 1923 confirming the magnitude of their discoveries. "The material we have

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56 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, pp. vii-viii.

57 *Ibid.*, p. x. In one of his last letters to Kondakov, for example, he insisted quite firmly on "what I want to add of my own to the end of the chapter 'Russo-Byzantine Icon painting'" (Letter from Ellis H. Minns to Nikodim Kondakov, 29 May 1924, Literarní archív). In all, Minns added twelve of his own footnotes.

58 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. ix.

59 Minns lists these in a footnote: "P. P. Mouratov, *L'Ancienne peinture russe* (Prague, 1925), pp. 73, 85, f. 21, 89, f. 22; Oskar Wulff and Michael Alpatoff, *Denkmäler der Ikonenmalerei in Kunstgeschichtlicher Folge* (Hellerau bei Dresden: Avalun-Verlag, 1925), pp. 63–66; M. Alpatoff and V. Lazareff, 'Ein Byzantinisches Tafelwerk aus der Komnenenepoche', *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen*, Vol. 46 (Berlin, 1925), pp. 140–55 (Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 39, note 1.)

60 On Anisimov's difficulties providing his friends and colleagues abroad with photos of key restored icons, in defiance of Grabar's wishes, see Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 241. Georgievsky reported a similar problem. (*Ibid.*, p. 206.)

uncovered over this period is so significant in both quality and quantity," Anisimov wrote, "that it transcends everything known in this field up until now and forces us to reconsider absolutely anew, not just specific questions, but the entire history of early Russian painting, which incidentally hasn't really existed until this point."[61] Anisimov sent him forty-three photos documenting newly cleaned icons, including the Vladimir Mother of God and Rublev's Trinity, and urged him to publish them together with the new findings. Kondakov replied on 8 August 1923, expressing his interest in Anisimov's analysis of the Vladimir Mother of God, but adding: "It's possible that this addendum will no longer make it [into the English edition], but in that case I'll add it to my big two-volume work on the Russian icon, which is still in manuscript."[62] And indeed, in the abridged English text he limited himself to a cautious mention of the recently cleaned Bogoliubov Mother of God, citing the letter Chirikov had sent him in 1918 and concluding: "In time, when we can see [the icon] with our own eyes […] we shall be able to tell how much of the twelfth century-original it preserves."[63]

Kondakov's response to this seemingly devastating blow to his western hypothesis was surprisingly philosophical. While acknowledging that "The cleaning of Russian icons of first importance in age and artistic significance should of course have served as a guide for our present work," he hoped that, "since circumstances don't allow this, it must be hoped that the results of this cleaning will not prove to contradict it especially."[64] There was of course a practical dimension to his decision. Still expecting a speedy conclusion to Minns's translation, this fundamental revision to one of his key premises would have delayed the project still further. No less importantly, his scientific principles rebelled against taking someone else's word for such a monumental discovery, even that of colleagues as trusted as Chirikov and Anisimov.[65]

For their part, working for the Central State Restoration Workshops in Moscow, Anisimov, Chirikov, and Georgievsky understood better than anyone the real complexity of the icon's unfolding history within the Soviet context and the inestimable value of the older man's vast erudition in making sense of the latest finding: "Your thoughts on the uncovered works cannot but be valuable, significant and useful in the process of developing scholarly knowledge in this area of specialty, as the opinion and thoughts of a person with an exceptionally broad outlook and exceptional experience,"

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61   Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 240.

62   *Ibid.*, p. 246.

63   Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 62.

64   Kondakov, *Russkaia ikona*, Vol. 3, p. 7, cited in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 228.

65   The necessity of studying the original artefact was an article of faith for Kondakov. He noted "how the determination of an icon emerges, not straight away, but only by comparing it in the original with other analogous works […]. Judging an icon's age from photographs means risking a high degree of error". (N. Kondakov, 'Review of N. Likhachev, *Materialy dlia istorii russkogo ikonopisaniia*', *Zhurnal Ministerstva narodnogo prosveshcheniia*, 8 (1907), 427–28.)

Anisimov wrote to him.[66] For these three men, at least, this was no crude competition between old and young, between the representatives of a discredited regime and a newly empowered one, but rather a collective crusade to uncover the truth about Russian culture independent of state borders.[67]

Back in Cambridge, Minns was concerned that Kondakov's death had robbed him of the opportunity to incorporate the latest discoveries in his final great work. In a beautifully penned note congratulating him on his eightieth birthday in 1924, Minns had expressed his regret that he had not been able to complete the translation in time.

USE AND PLACE OF ICONS IN RUSSIA 39

in order to restore them and freshen up the colours, so that an old icon came out in a new style.

However, if we think how in old times people used to 'olive' icons (to cover them with oil sometimes darkened on purpose) and cover pictures with varnish, and how in recent times they cleaned the varnish off whole galleries of old pictures, so much so that they took off the original delicate polish, and even the old paint so as almost to expose the ground coat, we must not complain too much of the treatment icons have received.

Our Lady of Vladímir.

Since this book was set up I have received from Professor Anísimov photographs of this icon as it appears since it was cleaned, and full accounts of it are accessible.¹ The results are so important that I have added an extra plate VI A showing the faces, and this note is the only place available. The general scheme can be seen from the fifteenth-century copy shown on the Frontispiece. In the original this is represented by a Russian repainting, *c.* 1400, which has nothing beneath it owing to the *riza* having been stripped off many times. But the faces, especially the curve of Our Lady's nose, are entirely unlike the Russian style, and find close analogues in Byzantine work of 1100–1150, e.g. Our Lady in the Martorana at Palermo.² We may therefore believe that it really is the icon brought from Constantinople for Andrew Bogolyubski about 1131 and set up by him in the Cathedral at Vladímir on the Klyaz'ma in 1155 ; stripped by the Tartars in 1237 and brought to Moscow in 1395 to the great joy of that city ; and since then the Palladium of the Russian State. The *kiot* in which it was preserved in the Uspenski Sobor can just be distinguished on Pl. IV, to the left of the Royal Doors, but not the elaborate metallic decorations.³ The colouring of the faces is not quite like that of our Frontispiece, Our Lady's face is more of an olive tone with greenish shadows ; the Child's is painted more boldly with almost whitish surfaces passing rather suddenly into green shadows or the red of lips and cheek. A most important point is that the scheme of Our Lady *Eleusa* (*Umilénie*, p. 75, n. 1) proves to be older than the fourteenth century. Alpatoff quotes for it a Psalter in the Pantocrator on Athos (A.D. 1064), the Smyrna Physiologus, and a Psalter at Berlin, and Likhachëv has found it upon a seal, all of the eleventh century. This fact would have made our author revise some of his judgements (*vide* p. 88). E. H. M.

¹ *Jahrb. d. Preusz. Kunstsammlungen,* 89, f. 22.
LXIV, ii (1925), pp. 140–55 ; M. Alpa-   ² Dalton, *Byz. Art,* p. 408, f. 239.
toff u. V. Lasareff, ' Ein byz. Tafelwerk aus   ³ For these see W. Stephens, *The Soul of*
d. Komnenenepoche ' ; Wulff-Alpatoff, pp.   *Russia,* London, 1916, p. 68, coloured plate.
63–6 ; Muratov, *Peinture,* pp. 73, 85, f. 21,

VI A. OUR LADY OF VLADIMIR. FACES
Byzantine. XII cent. Moscow.

8.11 Addendum on the Vladimir Mother of God (12th century) by Ellis H. Minns with photograph of the icon after restoration supplied by Aleksandr Anisimov. From Nikodim Kondakov, *The Russian Icon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927). Photograph in the public domain.

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66 Letter of 21 August 1923, published in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 243. In the same letter Anisimov called Kondakov "the teacher of our teachers and our common teacher, to whom both Russian and world scholarship is much indebted".

67 Irina Kyzlasova, the foremost scholar on both Kondakov and the history of early Soviet icon restoration, has consistently emphasised the "spiritual kinship" between Kondakov and his protégés, and their common goal of promoting a coherent national culture that transcended barriers of geography, generation, and method (Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 228.)

Now, he decided to intervene directly in the text, certain that Kondakov would have had to "revise some of his judgements" were he still alive. He inserted a lengthy addendum titled "Our Lady of Vladimir" and marked it with his own initials, explaining that the recent cleaning of the icon revealed that "it really is the icon brought from Constantinople for Andrew Bogolyubski about 1131".[68] With the photos Anisimov had sent from Moscow to hand, he explained that "The results [of the cleaning] are so important that I have added an extra plate […] showing the faces" (fig. 8.11).

Yet rather than locate the new text and image on page 88, where the Italo-Cretan theory and the Vladimir Mother of God were discussed in historical context, Minns chose instead to place it at the end of an earlier chapter on "the use and place of icons in Russia" as "the only place available". It was an extraordinary decision: like a newsflash, the new text and image abruptly interrupted the book's flow. Even now, it creates the effect of a disfiguring crack in Kondakov's grand historical edifice, shaking his immense authority and drawing attention away from the epic panorama to focus inadvertently on human fallibility.

As it turned out, Kondakov would have had ample time to adjust his manuscript to the new discoveries, for a further two years would pass before *The Russian Icon* was finally published, released into a world profoundly different from the one in which it had been conceived over a decade earlier.

Reception and Reactions

In the reviews that greeted *The Russian Icon* when it appeared in 1927, there was warm praise for Minns's achievement and indeed, there was a sense that it was as much his book as Kondakov's. For the Paris-based émigré art critic, Vladimir Vejdle, Minns "has translated it so brilliantly, has provided a commentary of such value for the European reader, so full of knowledge and love of his subject, that it has truly become an English work on Russian icon painting".[69] Robert Steele, a one-time follower of William Morris and inclined to take a dim view of Kondakov's academic approach, noted that, "even before this book was published Prof. Minns was able to correct him in the very important case of the Vladimir Mother of God" and expressed the hope that Minns would write "the sort of truly useful and reliable book that English readers would like to read".[70] André Grabar, who had been a member of Kondakov's inner circle in Prague, also commended Minns for having "the happy idea to inform the reader of the result of new works dedicated to the Vladimir Mother of God. Similar

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68   Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 39.
69   V. Veidle, 'Angliiskaia kniga o russkoi ikone', *Vozrozhdenie* (26 January 1928), 4.
70   Robert Steele, 'The Russian Icon', *Quarterly Review*, 251 (1928), 146.

updates at relevant points figure quite often in the footnotes. We should be grateful to the learned translator of these indispensable corrections".[71] Overnight, Minns had become *the* English authority on Russian icons.[72]

Kondakov's star, on the other hand, having reached its zenith in 1924 on his eightieth birthday, began a rapid descent.[73] Far from being a celebration of his legacy, the posthumous publication of *The Russian Icon*, which Minns had undertaken as an "act of mercy", seemed perversely to signal his fall from grace. The vast edifice of his history, built from a myriad of hard-won facts, each one scrupulously researched and examined, seemed suddenly shaken by the forensic debunking of one stubbornly upheld hypothesis. The resulting impression of a largely unusable, unreliable, and outdated text was compounded by Kondakov's correlation of the Russian icon's evolutionary development towards "realism" and "expression" with Italian Renaissance art, at the very moment when 'the Russian primitive' was coming to the attention of western viewers attuned to modernist aesthetics. Minns's addition of a photograph of the recently cleaned Trinity by Rublev (provided by Anisimov) to offset Kondakov's own choice of a "mediocre" Trinity icon from the Russian Museum solidified the impression that he was "a man of erudition rather than one of keen aesthetic perceptions".[74]

How quickly *The Russian Icon*'s magisterial scope was reduced to the status of a failed hypothesis compounded by aesthetic gaffes can be seen in the attitude of the young American art historian, Alfred Barr, who spent the Christmas holidays of 1927 in the Soviet Union on a tour of cultural sites.[75] Barr brought with him a copy of Kondakov's just-published book, which he would later describe as "often misleading and irrelevant, for he [Kondakov] was able to include only two or three of the icons

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71   A. Grabar, '*L'icone russe*', review of N. P. Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, trans. by E. H. Minns (Oxford, 1927), *Byzantion*, 6, 2 (1931), 915.

72   At the behest of Kondakov's followers at the Seminarium Kondakovianum, Minns checked the translations of the English captions for the Russian edition; he also went over the translation of Anisimov's *Our Lady of Vladimir*. In addition, Minns was a member of the organising committee for the 1929 Loan Exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, as well as editor of the catalogue. For his reputation as an expert on icons, see Marks, 'Russian Icons through British Eyes', pp. 84–86.

73   For the new generation of Soviet critics, Kondakov's besetting sin was his disregard for the formal and stylistic qualities of icons, in deference to a narrowly defined iconography. Thus Fedor Shmit wrote of him and his generation that "they believed that in Byzantine art the dogmatic content, the religious theme (the iconography) was everything, the style only incidental" (Theodor Schmit, 'The Study of Art in the USSR (1917–1928)', *Parnassus*, 1, 1 (January 1929), 7–10). For Viktor Lazarev, Kondakov and Likhachev "narrowed down the concept of iconography to a mere question of the subject and remain silent on the problem of form. Since they hold that the style of a work of art is practically identical with its subject, their system of classification becomes wholly a matter of externals, which completely ignores the profound ideas expressed by the image" (Victor Lasareff, 'Studies in the Iconography of the Virgin', *The Art Bulletin*, 20, 1 (March 1938), 26–65, https://doi.org /10.1080/00043079.1938.11408662.)

74   Avrahm Yarmolinsky, 'The Art of the Russian Icon', *The New York Times*, 3 January 1932, BR13.

75   See Alfred H. Barr, Jr, 'Russian Diary 1927–1928', *October*, 7 (Winter 1978), 10–51.

cleaned since 1917, none of which he had seen. Unfortunately his is the only serious and comprehensive discussion of the subject in English".[76] Coincidentally, another book on icons for a non-Russian audience had also appeared in 1927 — Pavel Muratov's *Les Icones russes* — and Barr was able to borrow it from the library of the Ostroukhov Museum (now a branch of the Tretyakov Gallery), anticipating that "it will correct much of Kondakov". While the competing books of two émigré scholars might reasonably have seemed equally suspect in the atmosphere of the late 1920s, in fact Muratov's passionate nationalism and his focus on the icon's aesthetic rather than contextual, historical, or iconographic aspects made his approach more tolerable to western aesthetes and Soviet atheists alike.[77]

For Kondakov's one-time protégés, Anisimov and Chirikov, now working at the epicentre of Soviet state-sponsored icon restoration, the common goal was "the salvation of those remains of Russian culture, without which the creation of any healthy national future is impossible", and Kondakov remained for them a towering authority and kindred spirit.[78] But as the Soviet Union moved towards the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32) and the cultural revolution that accompanied it, new isolationist narratives highlighting Russia's unique path came to the fore, while old ones stressing its historical place within a network of international connections and influences were suppressed.[79] Thus, while Ostroukhov's collection remained intact as a branch of the Tretyakov Gallery, and the elderly collector himself was appointed its curator, the very *raison d'être* of Nikolai Likhachev's enormous collection at the Russian Museum was effectively neutralised when the Italian schools were moved to the western European section of the Hermitage in 1923, with the Byzantine and Italo-Greek icons following them to the Eastern Department in 1930, 1931, and 1935.[80] As for Likhachev, his library and collections were confiscated, and after a period of imprisonment he was sentenced to exile.[81]

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76   Alfred H. Barr, Jr, 'Russian Icons', *The Arts*, 17, 4 (January 1931), 307.

77   Ivan Foletti makes just this point (*Da Bizanzio alla Santa Russia*, p. 167).

78   Letter from Aleksandr Anisimov to Nikodim Kondakov, 11 July 1923, published in Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, p. 239.

79   See Foletti, *Da Bizanzio alla Santa Russia*, pp. 167–69.

80   In all, two hundred and fifty works were transferred, with two hundred more going to Antikvariat. See 'Russkaia ikonopis' i prikladnoe iskusstvo', in *GRM. Iz kollektsii Akademika N. P. Likhacheva. Katalog vystavki* (St Petersburg: Seda-S, 1993).

81   Likhachev was one of Minns's principal contacts as he worked on the translation, although the aging and marginalised scholar was unable to offer him much concrete assistance. See Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, Likhachev, N. P. Letters to Sir Ellis Minns (1906–35) Add. 9436/87–108. Through Likhachev, Minns had a good idea of the worsening situation for scholars in the Soviet Union. Minns's papers include this note he jotted down from *The Times*: "End of January 1931. Platonov, Likhachev, Lubiavski, Tarle, all expelled from the Academy of Sciences for Anti-Communism. Likhachev had been in prison since 1930. A few days later Karpinski protested (aged 85) and will probably share

In the same spirit, the Soviet regime aggressively policed the lines of communication with the émigré world, especially where the icon was concerned. Whereas a state-sponsored travelling exhibition of icons abroad in 1929–32 could be countenanced if its message of aesthetic quality was carefully controlled, the 1928 publication of Anisimov's seminal study on the Vladimir Mother of God by the Seminarium Kondakovianum in Prague was seen as a treasonous act, with disastrous consequences for the author.[82] That an émigré organisation hostile to the Soviet state co-opted one of Soviet scholarship's greatest cultural triumphs was bad enough; that Anisimov dedicated the work to Kondakov was the *coup de grâce*. As Director of the Central State Restoration Workshops in Moscow, where much of the revelatory icon cleaning was being carried out, Igor Grabar exerted a proprietary control over new information that exacerbated this isolationism, jealously guarding the distribution of photographs of restored icons. Émigré scholars either pursued alternative avenues of study (the theologically-based works of Evgeny Trubetskoi, Leonid Ouspensky, Stepan Riabushinsky, and the Icon Association (*Obshchestvo 'Ikona'*) in Paris), or found themselves hermetically sealed in a pre-Revolutionary state of knowledge, like Kondakov. Not even Muratov, now considered a leading authority on icons outside Soviet Russia, was exempt, as Minns pointed out in his review of Muratov's *Byzantine Painting* (1929):

> Muratoff represented a definite stage in the study of Russian painting, a reaction against Kondakov's exaggeration of Western influence, but an exaggeration of the importance of Novgorod perhaps due to the fact that Novgorod had offered the earliest opportunities of seeing early frescoes and icons skilfully freed from later overpainting. Now that this process has been carried much further and extended to Moscow and Suzdal, Muratoff can no longer follow it with his own eyes, and he has done well to turn to the history of Byzantine art as a whole.[83]

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their fate." (Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, Sir Ellis Hovell Minns: Correspondence, MS Add. 9436/102.)

82 On the exhibition, see Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, pp. 287–89, 350–52. On its American venues, see Wendy Salmond, 'How America Discovered Russian Icons: The Soviet Loan Exhibition of 1930–32', in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. by Douglas Greenfield and Jefferson J. A. Gatrall (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 128–43. Anisimov belonged to an entire generation of leading icon scholars and expert restorers repressed or killed in the 1930s. On his fate, and that of Grigory Chirikov and others, see Kyzlasova, *Istoriia otechestvennoi nauki*, pp. 291–397; and Shirley A. Glade, 'Anisimov and the Rediscovery of Old Russian Icons', in *Alter Icons*, pp. 101–03. On the related 'Slavists' Affair', see F. D. Ashnin and V. M. Alpatov, *"Delo slavistov": 30-e gody* (Moscow: Nasledie, 2000).

83 Ellis H. Minns, 'Review of *La Pittura Bizantina* by P. Muratoff (Rome: Casa editrice "Valori Plastici")', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 7, 21 (March 1929), 757–58.

The Russian Icon Revived and Revisited

In his insightful 2011 study of Kondakov's career as an historian of Russian art, Ivan Foletti describes *The Russian Icon* (together with *Russkaia ikona*, the complete four-volume Russian edition published shortly afterwards) as "a sort of final manifesto of the Kondakovian method so heavily criticised by the partisans of Muratov".[84] Throughout the twentieth century this method, he argued, was "excised from history", while Kondakov himself was treated as a *damnatio memoriae* — a man deliberately erased from memory.[85] One reason, Foletti conjectured, was Kondakov's anti-nationalist approach to the study of icons, together with his recognition of them as religious objects. An alternative view, offered by Ivan Savitsky, whose father worked with Kondakov in Prague, was that Kondakov was the victim of a generational battle where extreme positions were the norm, with neither side interested in compromise. Kondakov and the generation born in the 1870s "simply spoke different languages", and this divide remained in effect throughout the Soviet era.[86]

In recent decades, however, there have been definite signs of renewed interest in this 'dinosaur' of late imperial scholarship.[87] Kondakov's methodological approach and the questions he asked now seem strikingly, refreshingly contemporary. Always attuned to the cultural context in which icons functioned, he dreamed of conducting a statistical survey of icon types that could show "which icons were the most loved and adorned over the centuries".[88] Though he found late *kustar* icons aesthetically deficient, he never doubted their importance, "for artistic handicrafts present most difficult and complicated problems to historical interpretation and accordingly their study has been avoided".[89] No admirer of Novgorod icons, he could still appreciate that fifteenth-century Novgorod icons included "cheap shop-work" for the common people alongside "icons of wonderful refinement painted with extreme skill" for the

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84 Foletti, *Da Bisanzio alla Santa Russia*, p. 141. Foletti is the only scholar to have looked in any detail at the two editions. Rather than use the original Minns volume, however, he consulted the French translation of the English reprint published by Parkstone in 2008. Not only are Minns's critical edits missing, but translation problems abound (Foletti, *Da Bisanzio alla Santa Russia*, p. 152, note 367), leading to some amusing online discussions among Russian readers, including a comparison of the resulting text to "a translation of Pushkin from the Vietnamese" that makes Kondakov sound like "a rather cuckoo foreigner". See 'Kondakov N. P. Russkaia ikona', *Forum proekta 'Khristianstvo v iskusstve*, http://www.icon-art.info/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=162872

85 Foletti, *Da Bisanzio alla Santa Russia*, p. 166.

86 I. P. Savitskii, 'Akademik N. P. Kondakov v Prage', in *Mir Kondakova* (Moscow: Russkii Palomnik, 2004), p. 199.

87 The pioneering archival research of Irina Kyzlasova provided the catalyst for a reappraisal of Kondakov's legacy, in the face of scepticism from scholars like Gerold Vzdornov, who dismissed her high evaluation of *Russkaia ikona* as "exaggerated" (Vzdornov, 'Kondakov v zerkale sovremennoi vizantinistiki', p. 274, note 2).

88 Kondakov, *Russkaia ikona*, Vol. 3, p. 26.

89 Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 2.

higher classes, concluding: "The distinction allows us to some extent to gauge the popularity of different saints with different classes, and to note the beliefs connected with the icons of the various saints."[90] His attention to the regional specificity of pigments and to the increasing uniformity of dimensions as the production of icons expanded reflects his respect for the icon as the ultimate material fact. Throughout his descriptions, we find astonishingly vivid and expert comments on articles of dress, developed from a series of private lectures on Byzantine court dress that he prepared in Prague for Alicia Masaryk and John Crane.[91] Finally, his extensive travels and keen eye for local detail allowed him to link the distant past with the present, an affirmation of his central premise that the icon continually evolved in response to its environment. Far from being fixed and unchanging, the history he wrote was alive with questions and connections, the outpouring of a restless, relentless, and endlessly curious mind. In the words of icon scholar Liudmila Shchennikova, the value of Kondakov's history transcended "all the critical judgments about wrong hypotheses and attributions. It is astonishing in its scale and unshakeable encyclopaedic foundation".[92]

If translations can be seen as harbingers of cultural change, then the recent flurry of reprints of Minns's 1927 translation (unattributed, but virtually unmodified) in 2006, 2008, 2009, and 2012 is a significant event.[93] What is lost in these glossy publications, however, is the original translation's unique value as witness to a particular moment in the unfolding history of the Russian icon. For while Minns's notes are maintained in the English reprints (complete with his initials), nowhere is he identified as the translator, nor is his preface included. Gone are the carefully paired images upon whose stylistic and material differences Kondakov's arguments depended, their place taken by beautiful colour photographs that bear little relation to the text. No mention is made of the Vladimir Mother of God icon (though it is featured on the cover of the first, 2006 edition) or the once controversial revelation of its age and origins.

Just as the reprinting of the complete Russian edition, in 2004, reflected the post-Soviet resurgence of Orthodoxy and the patriotic embrace of émigré culture, for readers outside Russia the ready availability of the abridged English version coincides neatly with the interdisciplinary interests of our own day and the rejection of modernist aesthetic values for something more contextually layered.[94] In an homage

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90 *Ibid.*, pp. 96–97.

91 For example, his meticulous description of the clothing of Boris and Gleb (pp. 64–65), and of Paraskeva's kerchief as indicating an early Christian deaconess (p. 100). See also his posthumous article: Nikodim Kondakov, 'Les Costumes orientaux à la cour Byzantine', *Byzantion*, 1 (1924), 7–49

92 L. A. Shchennikova, 'N. P. Kondakov i russkaia ikona', *Voprosy iskusstvoznaniia*, 8 (1996), 551.

93 N. P. Kondakov, *Icons* (London: Sirocco, 2006).

94 On the 2004 facsimile of the four-volume Russian edition, see K. Stoliarov, 'Tat' ne kradet i cherv' ne tochit: Unikal'nyi trud akademika Kondakova vernulsia na rodinu', *Nauka i religiia*, 12 (2007), 30–32.

to Kondakov written in 1926, Georgy Vernadsky alluded to the scholar's position at the intersection of multiple disciplines, of which art history was just one:

> To be sure, Kondakov was always engaged in Art History. He was deeply interested in the theory of art and aesthetics. But these problems by no means absorbed him entirely. He specialised in the domain of an entire group of sciences: Byzantine studies, History, History of Religions, History of Civilisation, Archaeology. It was precisely to this last sphere that his preferences and scientific studies gravitated. Without doubt, Kondakov is at one and the same time an historian of art, religion, civilisation, Byzantine history, but above all he is an archaeologist in the sense he ascribed to the word […] the object of archaeology is the history of civilisation in the largest sense of the word. The archaeological method applies to the study of human civilisation's material monuments, considered as symbols, intermediaries between the researcher's awareness and the civilisations he studies.[95]

Written in the twilight of Imperial and Orthodox Russia, repeatedly revised in emigration, and compressed and simplified to meet the needs of an audience for whom it was never intended, Kondakov's *The Russian Icon* was predicated on the continued existence and evolution of the icon and the world that nurtured it, long after any passing fad for the 'Russian primitive' had blown over. With the introductory section on "the contemporary state of icon painting" refashioned into a final chapter labelled "Decadence", the book now ended on this unintentionally elegiac note:

> The hope for the future would seem to be to raise the artistic nature of the craft to such a level that religion would help it to rise to free and personal artistic creativity. The Russian people […] deserves, like other European nations, to have given it a period of education on the basis of […] personal artistic creativeness.[96]

As the worst period of Militant Atheism and the wholesale destruction of icons began in 1928, the bitter irony of this long-awaited book's appearance was clear. Kondakov's tragedy was not, after all, the very public demolition of his cherished western theory — a natural victim of the scientific method that he would certainly have taken in his stride — but the fact that his book came out too late for the Russian people to use as he intended. In the twelve years it took to write, translate, and publish *The Russian Icon*, the world Kondakov described with such expert authority was effectively destroyed. Minns's translation — a work of deep piety towards a venerated teacher — was a work imprinted with the deep uncertainty of a decade that witnessed both the discovery of select icons as works of art and the destruction of the culture for which icons had been produced. Increasingly distanced from the

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95   G. V. Vernadskij, 'Nikodim Pavlovič Kondakov', in *Sbornik statei, posviashchennykh pamiati N. P. Kondakova. Arkheologiia, istoriia iskusstva, vizantinovedenie* (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1926), p. XXX.

96   Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, p. 203.

urgency and exigencies of twentieth-century cultural politics, contemporary readers can find in this remarkable book both the accumulated knowledge of an entire era of Russian scholarship and a poignant reminder of that knowledge's vulnerability to ideological pressures.

9. Stelletsky's Murals at Saint-Serge: Orthodoxy and the Neo-Russian Style in Emigration

Nicola Kozicharow

In 1911 the artist and critic Alexandre Benois wrote in an article on Dmitry Stelletsky in the journal *Apollo* (*Apollon*): "I want to see whole cathedrals painted by Stelletsky […]. An authentic, ancient harmony would be revived, as would the miraculous exterior [and] aesthetic quality of ancient displays […]. In such churches it would seem that Byzantium lived again and all authentic features of its art displayed."[1] Almost two and a half decades later, Benois seemed to get his wish. Between 1925 and 1927, Stelletsky executed the murals and iconostasis for the parish church of the Saint-Serge Theological Institute in Paris — one of the most important centres of the Russian Orthodox Church after the Bolsheviks' repression of religion in the Soviet Union began in 1918. Benois's desires, however, were only partly fulfilled; Byzantium did not live again in these innovative designs. The highly stylised, colourful, sometimes even playful, mural scheme and its daring deviations from the Orthodox canon represented an unusual departure for Stelletsky both as an artist and a devout Orthodox believer.[2] His secular paintings generally corresponded closely with medieval forms — so much so that the Russian avant-garde condemned his work as imitative — and his published edict on icon painting emphasised the importance of maintaining a strict adherence to Orthodox

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1   Aleksandr Benua, 'Iskusstvo Stelletskago', *Apollon*, 4 (1911), 5–13 (p. 10), http://www.v-ivanov. it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon "Мне бы хотелось видеть целые соборы, расписанные Стеллецким…Возродились бы подлинныя древния гармонии, возродилась бы вся чудесная внешняя, эстетическая, сторона древних действ…В таких храмах казалось-бы, что все еще жива Византия и подлинна вся показная сторона ея искусства."

2   For K. P. Semenov-Tian-Shanskii, the designs represent an "unyieldingly individual, creative search" ("упорного индивидуального, творческого поиска"). K. P. Semenov-Tian-Shanskii, 'Dmitrii Semenovich Stelletskii', *Khorugv'*, 9 (2004), 3–39 (p. 26).

iconography, yet in Paris his designs for this important religious commission were the most experimental of his career.[3] This chapter considers how Stelletsky's radical use of religious space at Saint-Serge upheld enough of the canon to be viewed as authentic, yet, on the whole, appeared to reflect a more modernist approach that prioritised aesthetic, rather than religious concerns. It will also explore the possibility that his position outside of the avant-garde was less straightforward than his contemporaries and scholars have suggested, at least in the case of these designs.

Before emigration, Stelletsky became well known for his almost forensic dedication to the forms and subjects of Old Russian (*drevnerusskii*) art.[4] Old Russian or medieval Russian culture had existed before the reign of Peter the Great, when the arts, which had previously been almost solely in the service of the Orthodox Church, were secularised and more western modes of representation were introduced. This meant that Old Russian art — especially religious objects such as icons — retained and further developed aesthetics passed down from Byzantium to Russia in the form of icon painting from the late tenth century onwards. Born into a devoutly Russian Orthodox, wealthy, noble family in Brest-Livotsk, Stelletsky was able to begin his studies at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St Petersburg in 1896, thanks to his parents' financial support.[5] There, he quickly began to build up an extensive knowledge of Russian medieval art and architecture. He copied ancient monuments and studied Old Russian art in the Academy's library, and this interest soon drove him to travel on artistic expeditions with his friend and fellow student, Boris Kustodiev, visiting the village of Semenovskoe-Lapotnoe in Kostroma Province in 1900 and Novgorod in 1903.[6] It is likely that Stelletsky acquired the necessary skills to become an icon painter during these visits, although the exact nature of this training or where it took place is unknown. In his painting, he used tempera in the manner of icon painters, and his subjects were almost solely taken from Old Russian life and history and, occasionally, allegories of the seasons or times of day. Compositions and motifs were often repeated from canvas to canvas, especially in emigration. Apart from portraits, subjects from contemporary life rarely appeared in his oeuvre.

Stelletsky was far from the only artist at this time to take an interest in the revival of Russian national culture. Princess Maria Tenisheva's artist colony at Talashkino was one of several settlements in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries that sought to re-establish peasant crafts that were disappearing after Russia's accelerated

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3   For more on Stelletsky's career in emigration see: Nicola Kozicharow, 'Dmitrii Stelletskii and Filipp Maliavin in Emigration: Dreaming of Russia and Resisting Change' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2016).

4   Throughout the chapter, the term Old Russian or medieval will be used to describe art created before the reign of Peter the Great.

5   Semenov-Tian-Shanskii, 'Stelletskii', pp. 3–4.

6   Semenskoe-Lapotnoe became the subject of one of Kustodiev's paintings, earning him a gold medal at the Academy in 1903.

period of industrialisation.[7] Workshops run by professional artists instructed peasants in different arts, and Tenisheva requested Stelletsky's expertise for a paid position at Talashkino. Arriving in the summer of 1904, Stelletsky primarily made designs for the ceramics studio, but also worked in wood and embroidery.[8] In 1904, along with other Talashkino artists, Stelletsky did another Russian architecture tour, this time to visit ancient cities including Rostov, Yaroslavl, Kirillov, and the Ferapontov Monastery. The wall paintings in the latter by the renowned fifteenth-century icon painter Dionisy were an important highlight and would influence his designs for Saint-Serge decades later.

The widespread artistic engagement with national forms in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century became known as the neo-Russian style. Artists interpreted and misinterpreted a wide array of national sources to construct a single category without localising specific influences; accuracy was not necessarily imperative.[9] The work of Viktor Vasnetsov, who had collaborated with other artists on the Church of the Saviour Not Made by Hands at Abramtsevo (1881–82) — arguably the origin of the neo-Russian style in architecture — helped define this style and popularise it among artists like Stelletsky.[10] In the case of his illustrations for the epic *Song of Oleg the Wise*, for example, Vasnetsov indiscriminately selected costumes from church murals and icons to create new art 'in the spirit' of older periods.[11] Stelletsky shared this tendency to draw inspiration from a variety of Russian visual motifs. He blended elements of icon painting and illuminated manuscripts to create a highly idiosyncratic style. Even his icons retained a look that was uniquely his own. His attention to the original sources, however, was far more academic than most. Stelletsky once complained to Kustodiev that Tenisheva "does not pursue the Russian style but that of a 'fairy tale'", even if

7   For more on Talashkino, see Sergei Makovskii, *Talashkino: izdeliia masterskikh kn. M. Kl. Tenishevoi* (St Petersburg: Sodruzhestvo, 1905); M. K. Tenisheva, *Vpechatleniia moei zhizni* (Paris: Izd. Russkago istoriko-genealogicheskago ob-va vo Frantsii, 1933); Wendy R. Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 115–43.

8   For Stelletsky's impressions of his work there, see Letter from Dmitry Stelletsky to Boris Kustodiev, undated, in *Talashkino. Sbornik dokumentov*, ed. by L. S. Zhuravleva (Smolensk: Posokh, 1995), p. 357. In some sources, Stelletsky has been recorded as being at Talashkino as early as late 1903, but I have not found evidence of this.

9   For more on the neo-Russian style, see Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Arts and Crafts Movement* (London: Phaidon Press, 2009), pp. 159–75; Katia Dianina, *When Art Makes News: Writing Culture and Identity in Imperial Russia, 1851–1900* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012), pp. 191–217. There is some confusion over this term as the neo-Russian style is often subsumed under the broader category of the Russian style (*russkii stil'*), which refers to the interest in Russian national culture in art and architecture from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This chapter will use the term 'neo-Russian style' to refer to, as Evgenia Kirichenko defines it, a trend that emerged in the late nineteenth century, which largely originated at the Abramtsevo artist colony, and subsequently informed the work of Stelletsky and other artists such as Ivan Bilibin. Evgenia Kirichenko, *Russian Design and the Fine Arts 1750–1917* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), pp. 134–41.

10   Inge Wierda, 'Abramtsevo's Neo-Medieval Church: A Manifestation of Sobornost', in *Aesthetics as a Religious Factor in Eastern and Western Christianity*, ed. by Wil van den Bercken and Jonathan Sutton, (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), p. 261.

11   Kirichenko, *Russian Design*, p. 150.

some of his motifs at Saint-Serge echoed her work, particularly in embroideries.[12] For Stelletsky, the neo-Russian style represented a serious attempt to know and engage with Old Russian art in a way that was faithful to the source for both spiritual and aesthetic reasons, as we will see with reference to Saint-Serge.

This did not mean that Stelletsky copied forms exactly from medieval sources. Total accuracy was, in fact, an impossibility that Stelletsky acknowledged: "How our ancestors dressed long ago, what drawings their dwellings were decked with, utensils, dresses — of these we know nothing."[13] Despite the interpretative nature of his art, however, his contemporaries and foreigners alike often took his work too literally; Russians in emigration referred to Saint-Serge, for example, as a genuine "copy" of a sixteenth-century Russian church. There were critics who understood his approach. Sergei Makovsky, for example, clearly stated that:

> Stelletskii does not aspire to accuracy; he borrows from Old Russia that which answers to the twelfth century in spirit, but he does not think at all about imitation of the pedantic image of some date, of some iconographic manner. He draws from the 'broad' old times, beloved and intimate, freely choosing that which is needed for an artistic whole, combining taste with unity […].[14]

But, at the same time, Makovsky felt that Stelletsky "feels the drawing, colour, pattern, [and] descriptive allegory like a man of those times, like an ancient man, not knowing another language […]".[15] This spiritual connection to the past was also a key part of Stelletsky's art according to Benois, who referred to him as an "expert […] on Russian style".[16]

The formal link between Stelletsky's art and that of pre-Petrine Russia helped to earn him a place at one of the first major displays of European modernism to be seen in Britain: the 'Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition' in London in 1912. At this exhibition, Stelletsky was positioned as a leading figure in contemporary art, and the apparent Russian equivalent of European avant-garde artists such as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. The revival of interest in Byzantine art in Britain in the years leading up to the exhibition had led critics such as Roger Fry, T. E. Hulme, and Clive Bell to

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12 Zhuravleva, *Talashkino. Sbornik*, p. 358. "проводит не русский стиль, а 'сказочный'".

13 D. S. Stelletskii, 'Vvedenie', *Russkiia narodnyia chastushki/risunki* (Riga: Ernst Plates, 1937). "А как в те далекия времена одевались наши предки, какими рисунками были изукрашены их жилища, утварь, плате — мы ничего не знаем."

14 Sergei Makovsky, '"Slovo o polku Igoria" Stelletskago', *Vremennik Obshchestva druzei russkoi knigi*, 2 (1928), 11–18 (p. 13). "Стеллецкий не претендует на точность, он берет у древность все, что отвечает по духу двенадцатому веку, но думает вовсе о подделке книжнаго образца такой-то даты, такого-то иконографическаго пошиба. Он черпает их 'обширной' старины, возлюбленной и близкой, свободно выбирая то, что нужно для художественнаго целаго, связаннаго единством вкуса […]."

15 Makovsky, '"Slovo o polku Igoria"', p. 12. "чувствует рисунок, краску, узор, начертательную аллегорию, как человек тех времен, как древний человек, не знающий иного языка[…]".

16 Alexandre Benois, *Reminiscences of the Russian Ballet*, trans. by Mary Britnieva (London: Putnam, 1945), p. 306.

identify a formal link between Byzantine and modernist art.[17] The strength of this connection was such that when Boris Anrep came to organise a Russian section of Fry's *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, Stelletsky, whose work could be closely related to Byzantine icon painting through his interest in Old Russian art, was an obvious choice. In the exhibition catalogue, Anrep even stated that Stelletsky was the leader of a "new Byzantine" group in Russia, which also included Nicholas Roerich and Anrep himself.[18] Within the context of this exhibition, the close relationship between Stelletsky's work and that of Old Russia, which upheld and reworked Byzantine forms, made him a modernist, allying his art with current trends in France.

This association, however, was fleeting, and his work, though the most well received of the Russians, gained little recognition outside this exhibition. Within a Russian context, Stelletsky's intimacy with historic modes of representation even drew criticism from avant-garde artists in Russia. In his 1913 text on Neoprimitivism, Aleksandr Shevchenko described the way in which artists should use primitive forms: "This does not involve simple imitation […] not what, for example, is being done by Stelletsky, whose works in no way reveal old Russia, Byzantium, or icons. They are mere historicity — a resolution of high ideas by home-made, amateurish means, an imitation devoid of reception."[19] As Jane Sharp has discussed, Shevchenko believed the exactitude with which Stelletsky replicated the pictorial forms of icons meant that he suffered from an acute disengagement from the contemporary world.[20] Grishchenko — a painter closely aligned with Shevchenko — echoed these sentiments in 1917, describing the way Stelletsky and others revived ancient art: "[…] we should most categorically *condemn* the attempts of Russian artists to reconstruct the ancient worldview in dead imitative forms".[21] Goncharova, too, despised imitation: "We have not learned the most important thing: not to make stupid imitations and not to seek our individuality but to create, in the main, works of art."[22] The idea that Stelletsky painted through the "eyes of the ancients", which was so lauded by Makovsky and Benois, was anathema for Shevchenko, and made his work the antithesis of Neoprimitivism.

17   J. B. Bullen, 'Byzantinism and Modernism 1900–14', *The Burlington Magazine*, 141, 1160 (November 1999), 665–75; J. B. Bullen, 'Byzantinism and British Modernism', in *Continental Crosscurrents. British Criticism and European Art 1810–1910*, ed. by J. B. Bullen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 225–47. See also *Byzantium/Modernism (Visualising the Middle Ages)*, ed. by Roland Betancourt and Maria Taroutina (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

18   Boris von Anrep, 'The Russian Group', in *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition Catalogue* (exh. cat., Grafton Galleries, London, 1912), pp. 30–33 (p. 31).

19   Aleksandr Shevchenko, 'Neoprimitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements', in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, ed. by John E. Bowlt (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), p. 48.

20   Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, p. 250.

21   A. Grishchenko, *Voprosy zhivopisi. Vypusk 3-i. Russkaia ikona kak iskusstvo zhivopisi* (Moscow: Izdanie avtora, 1917), p. 263. "мы должны самым категорическим образом осудить попытки русских художников реконструировать древнее мировоззрение в мертвых, подделочных формах".

22   Natalia Goncharova, 'Preface to Catalogue of One-Man Exhibition', in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, ed. by John E. Bowlt (New York: Viking Press, 1976), pp. 54–60 (p. 57).

For Stelletsky, however, imitation could potentially play an important role in the understanding of Old Russian art. He wrote in his memoirs: "It befits the Russian people to have their own art. Over the years, I understood that only by learning the artistic legacy of our ancestors and even, at the beginning, slavishly imitating it, it is possible…to resurrect our own Russian, native beauty."[23] When it came to religious painting, Stelletsky's opinion was similar. In an article he contributed to the Riga-based journal *Native Antiquity* (*Rodnaia starina*) in 1928 — a year after he completed his work at Saint-Serge — he wrote of the importance of following the canon when painting icons: "One of the Old Russian system's main responsibilities was, as we know, the precise observation of the canon, which embraced all sides of spiritual and everyday life. The canon of icon painting demanded its painters' stringent observation of the *established style*."[24] These restrictions appeared to place "shackles" (*okovy*) on artistic creativity, but were essential in continuing the tradition.[25] Although he did not discuss his own icon painting, it is clear from the article that preserving the tradition, as handed down through hundreds of years of history, was key for Stelletsky.[26]

This dedication most likely stemmed, at least in part, from Stelletsky's firm Orthodox faith. His convictions were so strong that he had rejected Diaghilev's invitation to design for his ballet of the life of Christ — *Liturgie* — in 1915 on religious and moral grounds.[27] Deeply religious and, as prominent émigré critic Mikhail Osorgin put it,

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23 Quoted in Oleg Leikind and Dmitrii Severiukhin, *Khudozhniki russkoi emigratsii, 1917–1941: biograficheskii slovar'* (St Petersburg: Izd-vo Chernysheva, 1994), p. 431. "Русскому народу подобает иметь свое искусство. С годами я понял, что, только изучая художественное наследие наших предков и даже сначала рабски ему подражая, можно […] воскресить свою русскую родную красоту."

24 Dmitrii Stelletskii, 'Dragotsennaia tsep'', *Rodnaia starina*, 5. 6 (1928), 21–22 (p. 22). "Одною из главных обязанностей древне-русскаго строя было, как известно, точное соблюдение канона, обнимавшаго все стороны духовной и обыденной жизни. Канон иконописи требовал от изографов строжайшаго соблюдения установленнаго типа."

25 *Ibid.*

26 Stelletsky was up to date with the latest scholarship on icon painting and responded enthusiastically to Aleksandr Animisov's study of the recently cleaned Vladimir Mother of God in a letter to Princess Natalia Iashvil, who helped translate the book into English (Letters from Stelletsky to Princess Natalia Iashvil, 2 and 20 March 1928 (KI 41), Kondakov Institute.) Animisov revealed that the oldest layer of paint dated back to the eleventh to twelfth centuries, making the Vladimir Mother of God much older than previously speculated by Nikodim Kondakov. The book reproduced images of the icon along with a diagram of the layers of repair and restoration (A. J. Animisov, *Our Lady of Vladimir*, trans. by N. G. Yaschwill and T. N. Rodzianko (Prague: Seminarium Kondakovianum, 1928)). For more information on Animisov's text and the effort to get it published, see Shirley A. Glade, 'Anisimov and the Rediscovery of Old Russian Icons', in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. by Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), pp. 89–111.

27 See Vera Bunina's diary entry on 16 August 1930 in Ivan Bunin and Vera Muromtseva-Bunina, *Ustami Buninykh. Dnevniki Ivana Alekseevicha i Very Nikolaevny i drugie arkhivnye materialy*, ed. by Militsa Grin, Vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Posev, 1982), p. 230. See also John E. Bowlt, 'Léon Bakst, Natalia Goncharova and Pablo Picasso', *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes, 1909–1929*, ed. by Jane Pritchard and Geoffrey Marsh (London: V&A Publications, 2010), pp. 103–17 (p. 108). It was Stelletsky who suggested that Diaghilev ask Goncharova to carry out the designs, and Stelletsky later wrote to Goncharova, asking for her help in getting in touch with Diaghilev. Letters from Stelletsky to Goncharova, 30 June 1917, 13 July 1917 (f. 180, ed. khr. 1714–15), Tretyakov Gallery. This dialogue

"Russian Orthodox to the bone".[28] Stelletsky called his work at Saint-Serge "a service to God".[29] Indeed he took on this two-year commission only at the cost of room and board at time when money and work were hard to come by, suggesting this work was more important than material concerns.[30]

Yet in practice, while visual continuity with Old Russian churches in Russia was a central concern, Stelletsky more loosely interprets older modes of representation in many of his church designs. This freer, more experimental approach to medieval revivalism was in keeping with the neo-Russian style, especially the neo-Russian tendencies incorporated within the modern Russian architectural style popular at the turn of the century: *style moderne*.[31] In what William Brumfield has described as "a remarkable confluence of purpose and understanding", contemporaries of Stelletsky such as Sergei Maliutin and Roerich — who were both at Talashkino — worked with *style moderne* architects to decorate interiors of churches and private buildings.[32] This collaborative effort helped recreate "the logical bond between material and structure in the Old Russian or folk traditions of pre-Petrine Russian architecture" but generally emphasised theatricality and drama over imitation.[33] Stelletsky is not associated with this group of neo-Russian practitioners (which also included, among others, Konstantin Korovin, Mikhail Vrubel, and the Vasnetsov brothers), yet given his virtually unacknowledged church commissions in Russia and work at Saint-Serge in emigration, he undoubtedly engaged with the more modern strand of the neo-Russian style. He collaborated with Aleksei Shchusev, who was one of the most prominent proponents of *style moderne* in Russian church architecture, on several occasions. According to Brumfield, no one but Shchusev "understood better the harmony between medieval forms and the new aesthetic", for he was a follower of the tradition begun at Abramtsevo that — in words that could be applied to Stelletsky's work as well — "grasp[ed] and sens[ed] the sincerity of ancient times and creatively imitate[ed] it not in the copying out and correcting — that is, distorting — of old forms

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suggests that even if the two artists had seemingly oppositional approaches, this did not rule out friendly relations and mutual respect between them.

28   Mikhail Osorgin, 'Pamiati D. S. Stelletskago', *Tserkovnyi vestnik Zapadno-Evropeiskoi eparkhii*, 6 (1947), 9–12 (p. 10). "до мозга костей русским православным человеком".

29   Aleksandr Semenov-Tian'shanskii, 'Pamiati D. S. Stelletskogo', in *Obshchestvo "Ikona" v Parizhe*, ed. by G. I. Vzdornov, Z. E. Zalesskaia, and O. V. Lelekova (Moscow: Progress traditsiia, 2002), pp. 152–58 (p. 156). "служба Богу".

30   Donald A. Lowrie, *Saint Sergius in Paris: The Orthodox Theological Institute* (London: S. P. C. K., 1954), p. 13.

31   For more on *style moderne* or the 'new style' in architecture see William Craft Brumfield, *The Origins of Modernism in Russian Architecture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); William Craft Brumfield, *A History of Russian Architecture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), pp. 426–37.

32   Brumfield, *The Origins of Modernism*, p. 80. Stelletsky met Roerich at Talashkino and found much in common with him, writing to Kustodiev, 'I really agree with [Roerich] — I speak to him a lot about different questions.' Letter from Stelletsky to Kustodiev, undated, quoted in Zhuravleva, *Talashkino. Sbornik*, p. 357.

33   Brumfield, *The Origins of Modernism*, p. 80.

but in the creation of new forms that express… the idea of a place of communion between the people and God".[34]

Shchusev's first church project — the Saint Sergius of Radonezh church in Tula province commemorating the Battle of Kulikovo — was in fact carried out with the assistance of Stelletsky and another artist, Vladimir Komarovsky, who both painted the icons.[35] Count Iury Olsufev, a patron and close friend of Stelletsky, requested both artists' services for the church, and the work was executed sometime between 1911 and 1914.[36] It is clear that Old Russian icons served as important source material for this commission: in a letter to Tretyakov Gallery director Ilia Ostroukhov from 1913, Stelletsky requested the return of his Saint Nicholas icon to create the iconostasis for Saint Sergius of Radonezh at Kulikovo fields.[37] However, the only design by Stelletsky known to have survived (after the Revolution, the church was ransacked and badly damaged during the Bolshevik iconoclasm) is a sketch of Christ on the cross that is hardly canonical.[38] The image relates closely to his secular work in the stylised treatment of form and diverts from tradition in the unusual blue colouring of Christ's skin. It would appear, at least in the case of this design, Stelletsky shared Shchusev's willingness to deviate from convention in design but preserve the spirit of medieval Russia.

Over a decade later, Stelletsky received the most significant commission of his career when he was tasked with decorating the entire interior of Saint-Serge — arguably the most important centre of the Orthodox faith outside of Russia — based on his own designs. Although he had developed a reputation for copying Old Russian artistic precursors very closely, Stelletsky nonetheless stepped outside of the canon for the church's vibrant wall scheme. Rather than superimposing a medieval rubric

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34   *Ibid.*, p. 104.

35   *Ibid.*

36   Kari Kotkavaara, *Progeny of the Icon: Émigré Revivalism and the Vicissitudes of the Eastern Orthodox Sacred Image* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi, 1999), p. 183.

37   Letter from Dmitry Stelletsky to Ilia Ostroukhov, 2 August 1913 (f. 10, ed. khr. 6037), Tretyakov Gallery.

38   For an illustration, see E. V. Tarasenko, *Dary i priobreteniia: novye postupleniia v sobranii grafiki XVIII-nachala XX veka. Risunok, pechatnaia grafika. Katalog vystavki* (exh. cat., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2013). Stelletsky also decorated a second church before emigrating in 1914. As Galina Zelenskaia has established, it was commissioned by Count Aleksandr Medem in 1911 for his estate Aleksandriia near Khvalynski on the Volga and dedicated to Saints Constantine and Helene. The iconostasis was lost after the Revolution, so it is difficult to know what form Stelletsky's icons took before emigration, but the fact that he executed some church painting before Saint-Serge is significant. Cited in Kotkavaara, *Progeny*, pp. 182–83. During the First World War, Stelletsky executed several travelling iconostases for Russian soldiers stationed in Champagne, and one of these survived and was held in the private collection of Nikolai Semenov-Tian'shansky — brother to Aleksandr. Stelletsky reworked it in 1939–40 when it was installed at the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Châtenay-Malabry. For more information, see T. V. Iur'eva, 'Ikonostasy D. S. Stelletskogo', in *X nauchnye chteniia pamiati Iriny Petrovny Bolottsevoi: Sbornik statei*, ed. by O. B. Kuznetsova and E. Iu. Makarova (Yaroslavl: Avers Press, 2006), pp. 144–60, http://www.icon-art.info/book_contents.php?book_id=60. For a reproduction, see Semenov-Tian-Shanskii, 'Stelletskii', pp. 34–35.

onto Saint-Serge, Stelletsky's designs were far closer to the neo-Russian style's free interpretation of Old Russian forms and folk motifs, particularly within *style moderne*. Yet he still maintained enough of a visual connection to earlier Russian churches — primarily through the hanging cloth motifs running along the lower areas of the walls of the church — for the building to be convincing as an Orthodox church.

Stelletsky's experimentation may have partly been out of necessity, given the church building was not Orthodox, but nineteenth-century gothic. Unlike an Orthodox cross-in-square church plan, as seen, for example, at the Church of the Nativity of the Virgin at the Ferapontov Monastery, Saint-Serge follows a standard cruciform plan, thus presenting Stelletsky with a challenge: how does an artist develop an Orthodox programme in this structure? Instead of limiting his use of the church's space, incorporating the foreign structural elements such as the rose windows and the barrel-vaulted nave into the scheme ended up inspiring some of the more inventive designs at Saint-Serge. This creative flexibility emphasises that Stelletsky, though attentive to Orthodox Church requirements, used the most public commission of his career to assert his own style and boldly experiment on a large scale.

Through Stelletsky's murals, Saint-Serge became not a 'copy' of an Old Russian church, as some of his contemporaries viewed it, but a new exemplar of the neo-Russian style in emigration.[39] Like other artists and architects working in this style, Stelletsky drew from and reinterpreted an array of Old Russian sources such as embroidery, manuscripts, and icons, and took more recent developments in artist colonies such as Abramtsevo into account. The widespread revival of Old Russian culture that reached its peak in early twentieth-century Russian art and architecture had been cut short by the Revolution, thus Stelletsky's designs at Saint-Serge helped perpetuate this interest in emigration.[40]

Stelletsky's approach to the neo-Russian style is clearly expressed through the most unusual element of his wall painting: the predominance of colourful, stylised foliage throughout the interior (fig. 9.1). The use of these forms can be related to several different sources that the artist would have known. In terms of possible architectural precursors, the Tsarina's Golden Chamber (sixteenth century) and the Terem Palace at the Kremlin, which Stelletsky would at least have known through photographs and possibly pattern books, feature colourful ornamental designs that encompass

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39   See, for example Lollii L'vov, 'Russkoe iskusstvo za granitsei', *Illiustrirovannaia Rossiia*, 17 (23 April 1927), 12–13 (p. 12); Iulia Reitlinger, quoted in Kotkavaara, *Progeny*, p. 259.

40   Marc Raeff has discussed the continued interest in medieval Russian culture abroad through, for example, the study of Slavic linguistics at the Cercle linguistique de Prague. The Bolsheviks had generally frowned upon medieval revival as it was closely connected with religious culture. Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919–1940* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 99–100.

large sections of the wall and ceilings.[41] Both the Tsarina's Golden Chamber and Saint-Serge have decorative patterns running along the inside of the vaults, and the colour scheme of red and yellow is reminiscent of Stelletsky's in the gallery (fig. 9.2). The walls and ceilings of the Terem Palace, which were, due to fire, repainted in the revivalist style of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, are similarly covered in extensive ornamental designs.[42] Many Orthodox churches also used such motifs in their interiors, notable examples including the Cathedral of Saint Vasily the Blessed (Saint Basil's) (1555–60) in Moscow and Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv.[43] A section of the wall design in the narthex can be connected with ornaments found in mid-seventeenth-century Yaroslavl churches, which Stelletsky visited in 1904, especially those at Saint Nicholas on the Stumps (1689–90).[44]

While the use of ornament at Saint-Serge was certainly inspired by the interiors of sixteenth- to seventeenth-century religious and secular buildings, the neo-Russian style would appear to have been of equal influence. Vasnetsov's set design for the *Snow Maiden* palace interior (c. 1885, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) may have played a role, especially the stylised, colourful floral motifs covering the walls.[45] Artists practising the neo-Russian style within *style moderne* architecture, too, similarly filled the entire wall-space with designs. Roerich, for example, along with the architect Shchusev, carried out wall paintings and mosaics for the Trinity Cathedral at the Pochaev Monastery in the Ukraine (1905–12), which enveloped the walls in religious scenes and flower motifs.[46] In his work for the apartment of N. P. Pertsov (1905–07) in Moscow, Maliutin adapted the teremok style popularised at Talashkino to a small interior with "dramatic" but "impractical" and "affected" results.[47] Indeed, the interior is swarming with various decorative schemes of odd creatures and wild flowers competing for space, whereas Stelletsky chooses fewer elements, instead allowing rich colours to take centre stage in a much simpler, ordered interior. This application of bold colours is similar to the red and green chapel in Pavel Riabushinsky's manor-house in Moscow (1900), designed by the most prominent architect of *style moderne*, Fedor Shekhtel. Yet even Shekhtel's colours seem more subdued by comparison with Stelletsky's, in which vibrant green, red, yellow, and black are sharply contrasted.

41   The Tsarina's Golden Chamber has been repainted several times in its history, but the decorative scheme remains intact and has been largely well preserved. Kathleen Berton, *Moscow: an Architectural History* (London: Studio Visa, 1977) p. 78.

42   The original seventeenth-century interior of the Terem Palace has not survived but was repainted in the nineteenth-century revivalist style, which sought to use decorative motifs of the seventeenth century, reinterpreting these designs. See William Craft Brumfield, *Gold in Azure: One Thousand Years of Russian Architecture* (Boston: D. R. Godine, 1983), p. 223.

43   Although Saint Sophia was rebuilt in the seventeenth century after it was destroyed by the Mongols in 1239–40, the eleventh-century frescoes and tenth- to twelfth-century mosaics are, for the most part, well preserved. Brumfield, *Gold in Azure*, p. 23.

44   Lev Zander, 'V obiteli prepodobnago Sergiia', *Pravoslavnaia mysl'*, 2 (1930), 188–99 (p. 191).

45   Dianina, *When Art Makes News*, p. 191.

46   Brumfield, *The Origins of Modernism*, p. 105.

47   *Ibid.,* pp. 77, 83.

9.1a and 9.1b Dmitry Stelletsky, north and south transept vaults, 1925–27. Paris: Saint-Serge Parish Church. Photograph © Nicola Kozicharow, CC BY 4.0.

9.2 Dmitry Stelletsky, gallery arch, 1925–27. Saint-Serge, Paris.
Photograph © Nicola Kozicharow, CC BY 4.0.

The patterns and shapes of the ornaments themselves at Saint-Serge are more comparable with motifs found in medieval manuscripts and embroideries. Stelletsky was familiar with such influences through his own research and possibly also the Exhibition of Old Russian Art, which took place in Moscow in 1913. Designs from this exhibition do seem to correspond with many of Stelletsky's: the ornament on the wall to the right of the inside doors at Saint-Serge is reminiscent of the border at the bottom of a page from a manuscript of the Four Evangelists (1593–95), and a sixteenth-century Apostolic Conversations manuscript has an undulating plant design close to that found in the north and south transept vaults.[48] Embroideries, too, may have had an impact on Stelletsky, such as a pattern from a phelonion from the seventeenth century — also from the exhibition — with small, spade-shaped flowers. As with architectural designs, Stelletsky generally drew upon sixteenth-century forms from various media to create his ornamental motifs.

Not all of Stelletsky's sources for ornaments were, however, necessarily even Russian. In recently discovered sketchbooks of Stelletsky's, several drawings of ornaments at the French medieval cathedrals of Chartres and Rouen, dated March 1927, indicate he was influenced by western sources for Saint-Serge as well.[49] This revelation reiterates the fact that Saint-Serge was far from the model of a Russian Orthodox church, but instead it represented Stelletsky's creative experimentation with his lexicon of Old Russian forms and knowledge of religious precedents, even un-Orthodox ones. It also suggests that empirical research was important to Stelletsky: in the absence of Old Russian churches in emigration, the observation of French ones would have to do.

Some sources were potentially more contemporary. The foliage on the wooden candle stand at Saint-Serge resembles the partitions in the Church of the Saviour Not Made by Hands at Abramtsevo (1881–82), which were most likely executed by Vasnetsov, who carved some of the floral motifs in the interior.[50] Stelletsky may have visited Abramtsevo, or at least known of the church through photographs. His brief time at Talashkino, too, may have had an effect. It is possible to link the stylised, plant-like ornaments on the vestibule ceiling in the narthex with some of the designs created at Talashkino, such as, for example, cushions by Tenisheva. Stelletsky, though sympathetic to the aims of Talashkino, had, for the most part, little interest in the aspects of folk design that captivated his contemporaries such as the *lubok* and *kustar* crafts, and medieval book illumination remained his chief source of inspiration. This difference in national source material gave his designs a more refined appearance than those of Maliutin's, for example.

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48   *Vystavka drevnerusskogo iskusstva ustroennaia v 1913 godu v oznamenovanie chestvovaniia 300-letiia tsarstvovaniia Doma Romanovykh* (Moscow: Imperatorskii Moskovskii Arkheologicheskii Institut Imeni Imperatora Nikolaia II, 1913), nos. 45 and 23.

49   There were four sketchbooks in total, which were in Stelletsky's possession when he died in 1947. Christie's London, *Important Russian Art* (catalogue, 24 November 2014), lot 7.

50   Eleonora Paston, *Abramtsevo: iskusstvo i zhizn'* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 2003), p. 359.

9.3 Dmitry Stelletsky, gallery balustrade, 1925–27. Saint-Serge Parish Church, Paris.
Photograph © Nicola Kozicharow, CC BY 4.0.

The stylisation of some of Stelletsky's designs, particularly on the balustrade of the gallery (fig. 9.3), even go beyond reference to Old Russian or national precedents and appear closer to the formal interests of modernist artists. The black leaves, which are simply stylised with a single blue line, are sharply juxtaposed against the bold golden yellow and playfully dance along the balustrade. This sense of play through shape, emphasis of colour contrasts through light and dark hues, and overall flatness of the ornaments through lack of modelling have a strong correlation to Matisse's interiors from 1908 onwards. In addition, the rhythmic curve of motifs on along the gallery and in the archways, as well as the juxtaposition of strong colours, resemble Matisse's ornamental arabesques in paintings such as *The Dessert: Harmony in Red* (State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg, 1908), which Stelletsky may have known from the collection of Sergei Shchukin in Moscow. Stelletsky's use of colour in the interior — and even, to an extent, in the bold greens, reds, and blues, in the iconostasis — also represents "a reduction of essentials", as Jack Flam put it with regard to Matisse's own use of colour.[51] This formal connection with Matisse underlines the fact that Stelletsky may not have been labelled a modernist by the avant-garde, but his association with the 'Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition' was perhaps more justified than previously thought. The expressive power of colour, although here used to spiritual effect, was of clear importance to Stelletsky. While he may have drawn inspiration from the use of bold colours such as red in Novgorod icons — as did, in fact, Matisse on his visit to Moscow in 1911 — the explosion of bright colour at Saint-Serge was not wedded to bygone sources, but rather showed the free play of imagination.[52]

Moreover, Stelletsky's marked, extensive use of these colourful motifs is virtually unprecedented in Orthodox Church architecture. Instead of mere decorative patterns, these ornaments play a dominant role in the overall design, filling the entire space of the narthex, gallery, and the large arches over the north and south transepts (fig. 9.4).[53] There is a spiritual significance to these forms, which Lev Zander, a professor at the Institute, described as "holy flowers and herbs".[54] Indeed the nonfigurative murals may have been a deliberate way to draw the worshippers' attention to the sacred images on the iconostasis. As much as Stelletsky was interested in Old Russian predecessors in church design, the customary figurative mural schemes typically found in such churches did not have a central place in Stelletsky's design. Even with comparison to Roerich's neo-Russian style wall paintings for the Trinity Cathedral, religious scenes and figures play a dominant role, and floral motifs are restricted to

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51 Jack Flam, *Matisse on Art* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), p. 36.

52 Iu. A. Rusakov, 'Matisse in Russia in the Autumn of 1911', trans. by John E. Bowlt, *The Burlington Magazine*, 117 (May 1975), 284–91, and Alison Hilton, 'Matisse in Moscow', *Art Journal*, 29 (Winter 1969–70), 166–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/775225

53 It should be noted that Stelletsky installed the gallery himself, according to Kotkavaara, *Progeny*, p. 254.

54 "райскими цветами и травами". Zander, 'V obiteli prepodobnago Sergiia', p. 131.

archways and lower walls. Stelletsky's more inventive use of space thus reflected a fresh, more modern approach to the way in which areas of the church were painted both in traditional Orthodox churches and the neo-Russian style.

9.4 Dmitry Stelletsky, narthex, 1925–27. Saint-Serge, Paris.
Photograph © Nicola Kozicharow, CC BY 4.0.

Stelletsky does not avoid figuration altogether: warrior saints and fathers of the church reside on the pillars supporting the vaults at the crossing in accordance with the tradition in Orthodox churches (and indeed, in Roerich's church).[55] A few scenes such as Noah's ark adorn the walls of the narthex, and painted saints on board, though few, line the walls of the nave. Stelletsky therefore does not completely deviate from tradition in these spaces, especially in decorating the bottom half of the walls with hanging cloth motifs, which echo those at bastions of Orthodox medieval architecture such as the Church of the Nativity at Ferapontov Monastery. Rather, it is through Stelletsky's incorporation of the non-Orthodox gothic architecture that he stepped further outside the canon.

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55   I would like to thank Richard Marks for first assisting me with identifying the iconography of Saint-Serge.

9.5 Dmitry Stelletsky, *Seraphim*, nave ceiling, 1925–27. Saint-Serge, Paris.
Photograph © Nicola Kozicharow, CC BY 4.0.

The way he integrated the long barrel-vaulted nave — an element not found in traditional Orthodox churches — perhaps jars the most with traditional Orthodox architecture and reflects the theatricality of the neo-Russian style. In each of the three vaults, he painted four seraphim.[56] Literally meaning "burning ones", they are angels who circle the throne of God and are ordinarily found in icon painting (fig. 9.5). The centrality given to seraphim is exceptional: they do appear in wall painting, as in the Church of the Nativity on the walls of the nave and keystones of the arches, and on wooden church ceilings in Northern Russia, but tend to complement more important scenes and figures rather than take up a large amount of space.[57] In Roerich's Trinity Cathedral, one large seraph appears on the walls as well. The seraph itself is a figure closely connected with Russian symbolism, and the subject of well-known painting by Vrubel (1904, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg). It is possible that Stelletsky was drawn to this theme through Vrubel, reflecting the dual influence of medieval and contemporary sources.

The seraphim's placement does loosely fit within the Orthodox canon. The ceiling of the nave constitutes one of the highest zones of Saint-Serge, where angels may be painted, and seraphim are the holiest beings in the Christian angelic hierarchy. In the iconography of the Virgin of the Sign, when the Virgin raises her hands to the heavens, seraphim or cherubim often circle above.[58] In this icon, as Alfredo Tradigo points out, "her fingers open in prayer like two wings, echoed here by those of the cherubim", thus the holy gesture is repeated in the form of the angels.[59] This iconography may have influenced Stelletsky's mural scheme, as the seraphim lead across the ceiling of the nave to the apse, where the Virgin of the Sign raises her arms towards them. This would certainly account for the unusual and extensive usage of the angels in such a holy area of the church.[60] The repetition of the seraphim in the vaults also forms a pattern, which leads into the central crossing, where the four evangelists are painted in their animal forms. The evangelists are often part of the dome in the Orthodox canon — or on the ceiling in, for example, Rublev's wall paintings at Vladimir Cathedral — and Stelletsky placed them in front of the iconostasis, where a dome would be. Such decisions resourcefully bend the rules, reflecting both a highly original use of space and a logical and knowledgeable use of the canon.

As per the classic approach of practitioners of the neo-Russian style in church architecture, Stelletsky's murals at Saint-Serge were shaped through a mixture of

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56   For other discussions of seraphim in church painting, see Chapter 2, p. 49 and Chapter 3, p. 76.

57   For a northern wooden church with such designs, see, for example, the early eighteenth-century Chapel of Archangel Michael in Kizhi, Karelia.

58   See, for example, the mid-sixteenth-century Virgin of the Sign icon in the State Historical Museum in Moscow. Alfredo Tradigo, *Icons and Saints of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, trans. by Stephen Sartarelli (Los Angeles, CA: J. P. Getty Museum, 2006), p. 173.

59   *Ibid.*

60   Several pages in one of Stelletsky's sketchbooks sold at Christie's are devoted to drawing seraphim, especially their wings, suggesting they might have proved difficult to execute. Christie's London (auction catalogue, 24 November 2014), lot 7.

national and non-Russian medieval and contemporary sources. While some of his contemporaries referred to the church as a perfect "copy" of an Old Russian church, Stelletsky's general approach could not be further from imitation.[61] He went beyond the canon of the Orthodox Church both in his amalgamation and reinterpretation of various influences and the way in which he creatively filled the space of the church. Indeed the building's unsuitability as a traditional Orthodox church necessitated compromise, but Stelletsky still failed to paint the space wholly in a way that was classically Orthodox, notably avoiding figurative scenes that normally occupy church walls and ceilings. The colour and interplay of his ornamental motifs, as well as their overall dominance, even found a counterpart in the work of modernist artists such as Matisse, suggesting that Stelletsky's work was not altogether rooted in the past, but, at least in this case, engaged with aesthetic approaches beyond Russia's borders. This fusion of modern and medieval, aesthetic and spiritual, and tradition and innovation in the wall paintings at Saint-Serge made Stelletsky an important contributor to the neo-Russian style in church architecture.

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61   See Iulia Reitlinger, quoted in Kotkavaara, *Progeny*, 259.

10. The Role of the 'Red Commissar' Nikolai Punin in the Rediscovery of Icons

Natalia Murray

Nikolai Punin (1888–1953) still remains an enigma both in Russia and the west, perceived by many as a 'red commissar', being the right hand of Anatoly Lunacharsky.[1] Punin's role in defining post-revolutionary art and his support for avant-garde artists (especially the Futurists) are much better known than his contribution to the rediscovery, study, and indeed preservation of Russian icons.[2] This chapter examines

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1   'Red Commissar' refers to Punin's honorary position of People's Commissar of the State Hermitage and the Russian Museum, which he was granted by the People's Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933). In this role Punin had to liaise between the museums' councils and the new Bolshevik government. Although he was never a member of the Bolshevik party, he was seen by many museum curators as the party's spy.

2   The principal literature on Punin as at the date of writing comprises the following: *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin*, ed. by Sidney Monas and Jennifer Greene Krupala, trans. by Jennifer Greene Krupala (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press; Amersham: Combined Academic, 2000); Nikolai Punin, *Mir svetel liubov'iu: Dnevniki, pis'ma*, ed. by Leonid A. Zykov (Moscow: Artist, Rezhisser, Teatr, 2000); John E. Bowlt, 'From Practice to Theory: Vladimir Tatlin and Nikolai Punin' in *Literature, Culture, and Society in the Modern Age: In Honor of Joseph Frank*, ed. by Edward J. Brown (Stanford: Department of Slavonic Studies, 1992), pp. 50–67; Natalia Murray, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin* (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Natalia Murray, 'No Future for the Futurists? Art of the Commune and the Quest for a New Art in Post-Revolutionary Russia', *The International Yearbook of Futurism Studies. Reactions to Futurism in Argentina, Armenia, Brazil, Egypt, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Japan, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, The Netherlands, USA*, ed. by Günter Berghaus, 4 (2014), 202–29; Larissa Zhadova, 'Un articolo sconosciuto di Punin', *Rassegna sovietica*, 37, 3 (May-June 1986); *Sovetskie khudozhniki. Izbrannie trudy o russkom i sovetskom izobrazitel'nom iskusstve*, ed. by Irina Punina (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1976); Nikolai Punin, 'Cycle of Lectures [Extracts], 1919', in John E. Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, revised edition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), pp. 170–76; 'Iskusstvo i Revolutsiia' (unpublished manuscript, N. Punin Archive, St Petersburg; fragment published in *Iskusstvo Leningrada*, 1989).

the origins and impact of Punin's interest in Russian icons, as well as his place among other Russian scholars who wrote about icons at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 1907, nineteen-year-old Punin entered the State University in St Petersburg. He studied law for one year, but soon gave up his pursuit of a political career and entered the historical-philological faculty. In St Petersburg State University, a history of art faculty had been officially founded as early as 1863, when, following a High Decree of Tsar Alexander II, the new faculty of Theory and History of Art was formed. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century, history of art in Russia was still closely linked with archaeology and philology. The strictly chronological, so-called 'iconographical' method, created in Russia by Nikodim Kondakov for studying Byzantine art, was used for all research into the history of art.[3] Thus, Old Russian icons and church relics were analysed strictly from a religious or archaeological perspective.

Punin's professor at the University, Dmitry Ainalov, was a specialist in Byzantine art. Like many of his contemporaries, Ainalov believed that art after the Renaissance was not worth studying. He marked Punin's final paper, 'Traces of antiquity in the landscapes of Giotto' (*Cherty antichnosti v peizazhakh Dzhotto*), as "pretty satisfactory", and commented that Punin should wait for the publication of Ainalov's book on church wall paintings from Novgorod, in which he also wrote about Giotto and the Byzantine mosaic artists. For Ainalov, his own book seemed to define the height of perfection to which his loyal student had to strive. Paradoxically, it was from this same book that a new approach to the history of art began. Ainalov and his students would now add their own personal observations to the otherwise rather dry academic papers, thus making them more accessible to a wider audience. Through this more subjective approach, the history of art was stepping out of the realm of science into the uncultivated field of popular, although still elitist, culture.

In 1913, Punin started work in the department of Old Russian Art at the Russian Museum in St Petersburg, which incorporated a Museum of Christian Relics (formerly part of the Imperial Academy of Arts) as its base. The recent purchase of the famous collection of Greek and Russian icons from Nikolai Likhachev had provided the Russian Museum with the largest collection of icons in Russia. That same year, Punin started writing articles and book reviews for the prestigious art journal *Apollon*. His first article was dedicated to the art of the Spiritual Mother of Russia, the Byzantine Empire. It was called 'On the problem of Byzantine art' and was full of metaphors

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3   Nikodim (or Nikodeme) Pavlovich Kondakov (1844–1925) was an art historian with special expertise in the history of Russian Christian icons. For more on Kondakov, see Chapter 8 of this volume. In 1876 he published the History of Byzantine Miniature Painting (N. P. Kondakov, *Istoriia vizantiiskogo iskusstva i ikonografii po miniaturam grecheskikh rukopisei* (Zapiski Imp. Novorossiiskogo Universitet, 21) (Odessa, 1876; second edition, Plovdiv, 2012), https://archive.org/details/kondakov), in which he used the old-fashioned chronological method for which he later became known. From 1888 he taught at St Petersburg University. From 1893 he was a member of the Russian Academy of Fine Arts, and from 1898 a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In 1895, together with Fedor Uspensky, he founded the Russian Archaeological Institute of Constantinople.

10.1 Nikolai Punin, c. 1919. Photograph © Punin Family Archive, St Petersburg, all rights reserved.
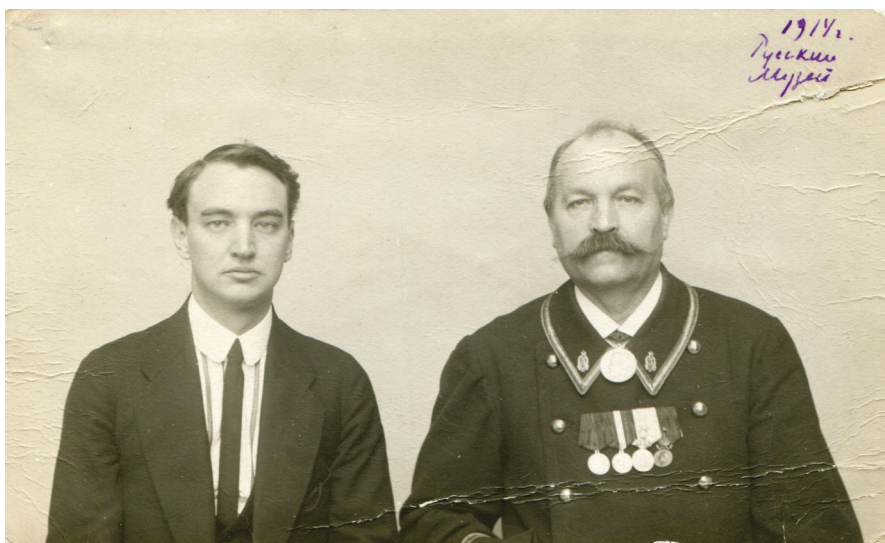
10.2 Nikolai Punin with Russian Museum guard, 1914.
Photograph © Punin Family Archive, St Petersburg, all rights reserved.

and romantic reminiscences. He believed that Byzantine art was "the most artistic of all arts", and that Constantinople was "the bath of oriental and Hellenistic traditions, in which Byzantine art was bathing, and a cradle, where the descendants of the previously mighty cultures were rocked to sleep".[4] These beautiful reminiscences were too picturesque for the dry academicians and too complicated and allegorical for the general public. But Punin was prepared, at least at the time, to be understood by a selective audience. He wrote in his article that the problem is that "we think about our everyday life too much to take time to understand the splendour of a cut sapphire."[5] He admired the people of ancient Byzantium, who could accept and feed this amazing culture for many centuries, and described Constantinople as a magical city where "the butcher would not sell a piece of meat without expressing his view on the greatness of the Virgin, which he had contemplated overnight, and where people would argue about the Holy Trinity, the birth and the holy nature of Jesus on the squares and in the shops".[6]

Between 1903 and 1904, the Trinity icon (fig. 1.3) by the legendary Russian artist, Andrei Rublev, had been cleaned for the first time. In 1913, the tercentenary year of the founding of the Romanov dynasty, an exhibition of newly restored icons called the Exhibition of Old Russian Art (*Vystavka drevnerusskogo iskusstva*) was held in Moscow.[7] After looking to the west for two hundred years, Russians were turning to their own traditions and heritage. This was the Russian Renaissance — "an awareness of Russian consciousness, revitalisation in philosophy, the sciences, literature, music, painting, theatre. What these years lived by and what they gave to the spiritual world would never die".[8] As Jane Sharp has explained:

> The shift in orientation from West to East in the decade that followed the revolution and Russo-Japanese war betrays this generation's different assumptions regarding the authority of Tsarist institutions. [Natalia] Goncharova and her colleagues were uniformly sensitive to their status as emissaries of Western culture, on the one hand, and as receptors for Western influence, on the other. They saw themselves not as serving the purpose of empire but as colonists subversively seeking to reverse the process of colonisation. To a large extent, their turn to the East was compensatory. Like the Slavophiles before them,

4   N. Punin, 'K probleme Vizantiiskogo iskusstva', *Apollon*, 3 (1913), 19, http://www.v-ivanov.it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon

5   *Ibid.*, p. 21. "мы слишком много смотрим на повседневную жизнь, чтобы понять великолепие граненого сапфира".

6   *Ibid.*, p. 23. "мясник не продавал мяса без того, чтобы не высказать какого-нибудь довода, который он придумал за ночь, о той или иной степени величания св. Девы", где на "площадях, в лавках, у ступеней храмов спорили о Триединой Ипостаси, о непорочном зачатии, о природе Иисуса".

7   For the catalogue, see: *Vystavka drevnerusskogo iskusstva v Moskve, ustroennaia v 1913 v oznamenovanie chestvovaniia 300-letiia tsarstvovaniia doma Romanovykh* (Moscow: Imperatorskii Moskovskii Arkheologicheskii Institut imeni Imperatora Nikolaia II, 1913).

8   W. Weidle, *Tri Rossii*, quoted in Roberta Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova. Poet and Prophet* (Los Angeles, CA: Figueroa Press, 2006, revised edition), p. 47.

the Muscovites sought to redefine an excessively Europeanized present and privileging Russia's prior assimilation of Byzantine and Eurasian cultural traditions.[9]

The twentieth century opened a new chapter in the study of the history of art, and Punin became one of the first researchers to write in its pages. It was only to be expected that this should inspire Punin's interest in and admiration of Old Russian icons. Along with Pavel Muratov and Nikolai Shchekotov, Punin became one of the first critics to reveal the unique aesthetic characteristics of Russian icons.[10] In his articles he aimed to engage the reader with their spiritual qualities.[11]

At the end of the nineteenth century there had also been a revival in collecting Russian icons, which in its turn encouraged a new wave of interest in this subject among artists and art critics. The discovery of a process which enabled restorers to remove darkened varnish and layers of soot from old icons revealed the most beautiful treasures. But the cleaning of these icons was not welcomed by everyone and soon became a highly controversial issue. The debate on icon cleaning brought Punin into conflict with the Latvian artist and art critic Voldemars Matvejs, who had argued against the intrusive restoration of icons. Matvejs believed that the restoration of old icons destroyed their texture (*faktura*); the old varnish and layers of soot that most were striving to get rid of, according to Matvejs, contributed to the mysterious appeal of old icons. He wrote:

> Cleaned icons have a ragged appearance; they look as if they were made to look like western European paintings — as a result icons disappear. The dark St Georges come

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9   Jane A. Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natal'ia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 24.

10 Pavel Muratov (1881–1950) was a Russian essayist, novelist, art historian, critic, and playwright. From 1906 until 1914 he worked at the Rumiantsev Museum in Moscow. He became friends with the writers Boris Zaitsev, Vladislav Khodasevich, and Nina Berberova (who called him "one of the most remarkable men I ever met"), as well as the artist Nikolai Ulianov. From 1906 he published in the journals *Vesy*, *Zolotoe runo*, and *Apollon*. He collaborated with Igor Grabar on the latter's *History of Russian Art* (1909–14), and in 1913–14 he helped publish the journal *Wisdom* (*Sofiia*), dedicated to early Russian art. After 1918, he helped Grabar restore cathedrals and was associated with the only bookshop in Moscow which remained unregulated by the state, The Writer's Library. Nikolai Mikhailovich Shchekotov (1884–1945) was an art historian, art critic, and artist. In 1910–11 Shchekotov studied ancient Russian art with the famous collector of Russian icons, Ilia Ostroukhov. In 1918 he began his career as a critic, publicist, and museum official. Shchekotov was a member of the collegium of the People's Commissariat of Education from 1918 to 1922, director of the Russian Historical Museum from 1921 to 1925, and director of the Tretyakov Gallery in 1925–26. He was a member of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia from 1923 to 1932.

11 See for example Nikolai Punin, 'Vystavka drevnerusskogo iskusstva (ustroennaia Moskovskim arkheologicheskim institutom)', *Apollon*, 5 (1913), 39–42, http://www.v-ivanov.it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon; Nikolai Punin, 'Novye priobreteniia Muzeia Imperatora Aleksandra III', *Apollon*, 6 (1913), 52–53, http://www.v-ivanov.it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon; Nikolai Punin, 'Zametki ob ikonakh iz sobraniia N. P. Likhacheva', in *Russkaia ikona, sbornik 1* (Petrograd: t-vo R. Golike i A. Vil'borg, 1914), pp. 21–47; Nikolai Punin, 'Ellinism i vostok v ikonopisi. Po povodu sobraniia ikon I. S. Ostroukhova i S. P. Riabushinskogo', in *Russkaia ikona, sbornik 3* (Petrograd: t-vo R. Golike i A. Vil'borg, 1914), pp. 181–97; Nikolai Punin, 'Andrei Rublev', *Apollon*, 2 (1915), 1–23, http://www.v-ivanov.it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon; Nikolai Punin, 'Vystavka tserkovnoi stariny v muzee Shtiglitsa', *Apollon*, 4–5 (1915), 93–94, http://www.v-ivanov.it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon.

to mind — with such a special dark surface, such play of brown and golden tones and sheen, dressed in gold and silver, — which one will never find either in paintings by Rembrandt, nor Leonardo, nor Ribera.[12]

Matvejs's declaration of the superiority of Russian icons over European art had its roots in the nineteenth century. The voice of the Slavophiles, who already in the 1830s had opposed westernisers in defence of a messianic nationalism, found a strong wave of support among the artistic intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

While Punin disagreed with Matvejs about the importance of cleaning old icons, he agreed with him on the question of the superiority of Old Russian art. In a letter to his future wife, Anna Arens, written in 1913, Punin proclaimed that icon painting was such a mature form of art that in front of it, "the whole of European art (perhaps only with the exception of the Renaissance) — looks like toys".[13] The Exhibition of Old Russian Art had the most profound effect on him. He wrote to Arens:

> If only people in St Petersburg knew what kind of treasures are buried in Moscow and what an icon is. In just one Virgin Mary from the Novikov church, which I saw today, such spiritual energy is concentrated, that if one takes the souls of all the heroines from the novels by Dostoevsky, Turgenev, and Pushkin, as well as the souls of the sisters Arens and the souls of the deepest women — even this synthesis would not exceed in its strength and depth this one icon.[14]

Punin dedicated his articles written in 1914 to Russian icons, which for him represented much more than just great works of art. He perceived them as a revelation, and as the highest ideal for the newly emerging Russian avant-garde. In his article of 1923, 'Review of new trends in the art of St Petersburg', Punin concluded that "the influence of Russian icons on [Vladimir] Tatlin is undoubtedly greater than the influence of Cézanne or Picasso upon him".[15] As John Milner confirms in his book on Tatlin:

> For Tatlin, as for [Kazimir] Malevich and [Natalia] Goncharova, the icon provided a living and Russian alternative to Western traditions. Their search for a Russian identity could find spatial systems in the icon that were not imported. Furthermore, many icons were pictorially superb, their painters' control complete and their emphasis upon materials crucial.[16]

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12 Voldemars Matvejs [Vladimir Markov], *Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh: faktura*, first published in 1914, reprinted in *Voldemars Matvejs. Statii, katalog proizvedenii, pis'ma, khronika deiatel'nosti "Soiuza Molodezhi"*, ed. by Irina Buzhinska (Riga: Neptuns, 2002), p. 54.

13 Punin, *Mir svetel liubov'iu*, Letter of 22 April 1913, p. 46. "[…] и уже, конечно, не забыть столь совершенного искусства, перед лицом которого вся Европа (за исключением, может быть, Ренессанса) — эстетические и часто дурные игрушки".

14 *Ibid.* "Если бы только кто-нибудь из петербуржцев знал, что за сокровища погребены в Москве и что такое вообще — икона. В одной Божьей Матери Новиковской церкви, которую я сегодня видел, сосредоточены такие души, что если бы взять души всех героинь Достоевского, Тургенева, Пушкина, души сестер Аренс, души тысяч самых глубоких женщин — то и этот синтез не превзойдет силою и глубиною эту одну икону."

15 N. Punin, 'Obzor novykh techenii v iskusstve Peterburga', *Russkoe Iskusstvo*, 1 (1923), 17–28.

16 John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 24.

Punin considered Tatlin to be "the only creative force capable of moving art out of the trenches of the old front line". He believed that "Tatlin gave, through his representational matter, a new form to the world. New form — high relief — is opposite to the past, it went outside all the limits of painting, it is a cloud of arrows — into the future, without looking back".[17] When, in 1916, Tatlin arrived in St Petersburg from Moscow, Punin described the excitement of Tatlin's visit by saying that they awaited him "as one awaits an event which could warrant expectations and move everything forward, as one awaits a leader".[18]

In 1914 Punin, by now an experienced clerk in the department of Old Russian Art, was promoted to become secretary of the Society for the Research of Old Russian Painting, and a member of the editing committee of the periodical *Russian Icon* (*Russkaia ikona*). Published six times a year, printed on lusciously thick paper, with thirty to thirty-five beautiful reproductions in each issue and a special font, this anthology of Russian icons was criticised by many contemporary critics for its focus on style and appearance rather than the quality of its contents. Thus, in his article dedicated to this periodical, Muratov wrote:

> The editors would have been better off if they had only included beautifully reproduced illustrations, without filling the big pages with strange colourless text. Who needs articles, which look as if they were taken from unreadable archaeological books, even if they are printed on fine thick paper with red vignettes?[19]

Muratov remarked that at least foreigners would be happy to look at this periodical, since, without being able to understand the text, they could appreciate the illustrations. However, the only article that Muratov considered worth reading in the first issue of *Russian Icon* was one by Punin on the icons in Likhachev's collection. He admired the emotional angle from which Punin had written it, but criticised it for being too shallow, and for its inability to give a true understanding of the significance of this renowned collection.[20]

In his article, Punin was only supposed to date and provide a brief description of the most remarkable icons from the Likhachev collection (which, by then, was in the permanent collection of the Russian Museum), but he could not avoid describing the Russian Orthodox spiritual aspect of the icons and their emotional impact on the viewer. Concentrating on Italian influences upon Russian icons, Punin once again

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17   Quoted in Antonina Izergina, 'Kvartira N 5. Glava iz vospominanii', *Panorama iskusstv*, 12 (1989), p. 194.

18   *Ibid.*, p. 193.

19   Pavel Muratov, 'Peterburgskaia russkaia ikona', *Sofiia*, 4 (1914), quoted in P. Muratov, *Drevnerusskaia zhivopis'. Istoriia otkrytiia i issledovaniia* (Moscow: Airis-Press, Laguna-Art, 2005), p. 348. "Редакция сделала бы лучше, если бы в самом деле ограничилась одними прекрасно выполненными произведениями, не заполняя больших страниц бесцветным случайным текстом. Кому нужны статьи, точно выхваченные из нечитаемых археологических трудов, напечатанные хотя бы и с красненькими виньетками, хотя бы и на негнущейся бумаге?"

20   *Ibid.*, p. 349.

stressed the importance of the Byzantine tradition in their development. He further described the historical and stylistic significance of these icons:

> An icon — one cannot forget — is not only an example of a certain style, not only an example of the power of the wealth of colour, but a certain content (substance), a certain part of eternity, the fulfilment of another life and another spiritual realm, different from the tradition which fed our artistic experiences so far.[21]

Punin stressed that one must see the spiritual side of icons before their historical or aesthetic significance. He finished his opus by saying that "the full description of this collection is still awaiting its author, we have no doubt about it — someone more attentive and less passionate".[22]

Not able to resist the powerful appeal of Russian icons, Punin wrote another article for this periodical, dedicated to the private collections of icons that belonged to the wealthy merchants Ilia Ostroukhov and Pavel Riabushinsky. Once again, in this article Punin pointed out the progression of Russian art from that of Byzantium: "A complicated artistic phenomenon in its own right — Byzantine art — could not avoid lending its complexity to Russian icon painting".[23]

Punin's most significant article on icons was written in 1915. It was dedicated to one of the most mysterious (and indeed canonised) Russian artists, Andrei Rublev.[24] The article first appeared in *Apollon*, and a year later it was published as a separate booklet and became one of the first descriptions of the artistic style of this unique artist, as well as of the tradition from which it was born. Punin admired Rublev both as a unique artist and as a humble monk — "a tender and strong flower, which has grown from the rich and fertile soil of the Orthodox East".[25] He wrote that the significance of Rublev for Russian art is expressed in "the purity and security of the ancient traditions which fed his art, which he made stronger and which he carried on into the next centuries".[26] In the beginning of his article Punin stressed that Russia, bordered by both east and west, had become "an extraordinary full cup of spiritual forces", for which the European and eastern traditions were equally important.[27] Both Byzantium and Europe influenced the development of Russian icons and frescoes, and, by the beginning of the fifteenth century, Russian art had gained "a new dress, upon which Byzantine and European Renaissance have already embroidered their patterns — its tender, classically beautiful ornamental attire".[28]

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21   N. Punin, 'Zametki ob ikonakh v sobranii N. P. Likhacheva', p. 23.

22   *Ibid.*, p. 47.

23   N. Punin, 'Ellinism i vostok v ikonopisi', p. 181.

24   N. Punin, 'Andrei Rublev', in N. N. Punin, *Russkoe i sovetskoe iskusstvo. Mastera russkogo iskusstva XIV-nachala XX veka. Sovetskie khudozhniki. Izbrannye trudy o russkom i sovetskom izobrazitel'nom iskusstve*, ed. by Irina Punina (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1976), p. 39.

25   *Ibid.*

26   N. Punin, *Andrei Rublev* (Petrograd: Apollon, 1916), p. 23.

27   N. Punin, 'Andrei Rublev', in N. N. Punin, *Russkoe i sovetskoe iskusstvo*, p. 36.

28   *Ibid.*, p. 41. "подходит в одеянии обновленном, на котором византийско-европейское Возрождение вышило свои узоры, свой нежный, классически прекрасный орнаментальный убор".

Punin based his arguments about the style of Rublev's work on his most significant icon — the Trinity. Inspired by the heavenly beauty of this icon he wrote that it was:

> an icon of such God-inspired beauty, that we, like flowers towards the sun, raise our soul to it and in the triviality of our deathly desires cannot reject the thirst for knowing, finding, calling the name, which distinguished a genius in this world, who was elevated to such lonely, such tenderly-beautiful and pure heights.[29]

In his article Punin provided the most poetic description of Rublev's Trinity:

> No matter how long or how scrupulously one examines the icon of the Holy Trinity, its tender grace and inspired mystical energy do not stop exciting one's imagination. One can analyse its style in detail and even describe its content, but even after such analysis, there is something unspoken left, which gives this icon inexhaustible charm. As if life itself keeps feeding these lines, these faces, and every new day is reflected in this icon with its new light, new grief of daily affairs, and new melancholy of its death.[30]

Punin praised this unique icon as "a triumph of motionless contemplation, as if three souls, with equal plenitude of spirit and vision, came together to experience their humility and wisdom of life, full of suffering and sorrow".[31] Punin called Rublev "a genius, the light of the early period of our painting, a sun which dominated the horizon for at least hundred years […] a marvellous and delicate prophet of divine essences".[32] The article marked the end of Punin's research into Russian icons, although his attempts to find the true roots of the Russian artistic tradition never ended. He concluded with the statement that: "Art is not born in one day, art needs life and it needs the past, art can never live without traditions. Where are our traditions?"[33]

Already in 1915 Punin's writing was preoccupied with the problems of contemporary art. After the October Revolution, Punin, now a furious fighter for futurism, proclaimed: "We want new life and new culture […]. We are the polar opposite of the whole old world. We came in order not to renew it, but to destroy it, in order to create our new world."[34] But did he truly believe in the necessity of destroying traditional art? At the same time that he signed this bold proclamation, Punin was still trying to support icon painters in a remote village in central Russia, Mstera, where the whole population had historically been involved in painting icons.

After the Revolution, the sale and export of icons from villages in central Russia was banned, and many skilled artists lost their jobs. It was suggested that perhaps

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29   *Ibid.*"[…] икона такой боговдохновенной красоты, что мы, как цветы к солнцу, возносим к ней свою душу и в суете своих смертных желаний не можем отказаться от жажды узнать, найти, назвать имя, которое отмечало в мире гения, поднявшегося на столь одинокие, столь нежно-прекрасные и чистые вершины".

30   *Ibid.*, p. 48.

31   N. Punin, *Andrei Rublev* (Petrograd: Apollon, 1916), pp. 19–20.

32   *Ibid.*, p. 23.

33   N. Punin, 'Andrei Rublev', in N. N. Punin, *Russkoe i sovetskoe iskusstvo,* p. 48. "Искусство не родится в один день, искусству нужна жизнь и нужно прошлое, никакое искусство не живет без традиций. Где наши традиции?"

34   N. Punin, 'Vstrecha ob iskusstve', *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 5 (5 January 1919), 2.

these artists could use their skills and techniques to paint wooden toys, but since other villages in different parts of Russia were already specialising in toy making, starting this industry in Mstera meant "stealing their bread". Punin fought for their right to continue production of icons as works of art rather than subjects of a religious cult, arguing that there was no decree prohibiting the sale of icons.

In 1918, Lunacharsky appointed Punin as Head of the Visual Arts Department of the Petrograd People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (*Narkompros*) and as the Commissar of the Hermitage and Russian Museums. Lunarcharsky wrote in his article 'A Spoonful of Antidote': "Not for nothing does the fighting Futurist Punin sweat for all he is worth in order to save the traditions of icon painting in Mstera and is concerned about the prohibition of local authorities to export icons from Mstera […]".[35] At a meeting in the Lassal house, which took place in January 1919, and was dedicated to the relationship between old and new art, Lunacharsky pointed out that "not all old art is bourgeois and even if it is — not all of it is bad".[36] In his speech he stressed the participation of the working class in creating the eternal monuments in Egypt and Ancient Greece. But he also stated his belief that futurism is not the only alternative to the art of the past. Punin argued that "our aim is to revolutionise old art, which does not mean to make it futurist — it can be anything it wants to be, but it should be alive".[37] Already in 1919 the icon painting workshops in Mstera had been transformed into artistic workshops for workers, and the village factory, which was famous for producing *rizas* (or *oklads*) for icons, became a jewellery factory, which in Soviet times produced more than one million medals for the Second World War.[38]

Although he was unable to help to preserve icon painting in Mstera, Punin carried his faith in the importance of icons throughout his life. In his book *Tatlin. Against Cubism*, written in 1921, Punin proclaimed that Russian art, using its long tradition of a great feeling for materials, which comes from icon painting, was capable of making a great leap forward — beyond cubism itself.[39] At the same time, in his article 'In Moscow', Punin wrote: "The novelty of Tatlin's relief in comparison with the frescoes of Raphael lies only in the fact that the surface and texture and other elements are distilled by Tatlin to their essence; otherwise it is a continuous tradition. That is why we have nothing more to learn from Raphael" (fig. 10.3).[40] Despite his admiration for Russian icons, Punin felt that "only in front of Tatlin's reliefs one feels how insignificant the world is".[41]

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35   Anatoly Lunarcharsky, 'A Spoonful of Antidote' (*Lozhka protivoiadiia*), quoted in Wiktor Woroszylski, *The Life of Mayakovsky*, trans. by Boleslaw Taborski (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1972), p. 250.

36   Anatolii Lunarcharskii, 'Vstrecha v dome Lassalia', *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 5 (5 January 1919), p. 3.

37   N. Punin, 'Revolutsionnaia Mudrost", *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 6 (12 January 1919), p. 2.

38   *Riza* (Russian: риза, 'robe') or *oklad* (оклад, 'covered') is an icon cover, sometimes referred to as 'revetment' in English.

39   N. Punin, *Tatlin. Protiv kubizma* (St Petersburg: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1921), p. 28.

40   N. Punin, 'V Moskve (Pis'mo)', *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 10 (9 February 1919), p. 2.

41   Punin, *Mir svetel liubov'iu*, diary note of 23 October 1916, p. 103.

10.3 Vladimir Tatlin, *Painterly Relief. Collation of Materials*, 1914, iron, plaster, glass, asphalt. Whereabouts unknown. Photograph © Punin Family Archive, St Petersburg, all rights reserved.

In September 1932, Punin was invited to give lectures at the Academy of Arts in his native Leningrad. Since by then any mention of Russian icons, or the avant-garde, was already prohibited, in his lectures Punin had to concentrate on Renaissance art, as well as Academic art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Unwilling to accept these and other constraints of the increasingly brutal Soviet regime, Punin was arrested three times — in 1921, 1935, and 1949. Punin's daughter Irina wrote that when he was arrested in 1935, her father kissed the icon before he was taken away. His common law civil wife and lover, the poet Anna Akhmatova, dedicated one section of one of her most famous poems, *Requiem*, to Punin's arrest:

> They led you away at dawn
> I followed you like a mourner,
> In the dark front room the children were crying,
> On your lips was the icon's chill.
> The deathly sweat on your brow…Unforgettable! —
> I will be like the wives of the Streltsy,
> Howling under the Kremlin towers.[42]

Punin's major sin in the eyes of Soviet prosecutors was his unwillingness to accept and praise Soviet art, which was, after 1932, dominated by socialist realism. During the Second World War Punin was evacuated with the staff of the Academy of Arts, first to Samarkand, and then to Zagorsk monastery (formerly Sergiev Posad, where Rublev's Trinity was created) (fig. 10.4).[43] Historically this had been one of the main centres of the Russian Orthodox Church. But in the spring of 1928 the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU) began to build up a case against this spiritual centre, accusing it of counter-revolutionary activities.[44] On 12 May 1928 a letter was published in the *Workers' Newspaper* (*Rabochaia Gazeta*). In it a certain A. Lyass wrote: "All kinds of 'people of the past' — but mainly Grand Dukes, ladies-in-waiting, priests, and monks — have built themselves a hive at the so-called Trinity St Sergey [monastery]. If formerly the Grand Dukes protected the priests, now the priests are protecting the Grand Dukes […]".[45] He concluded his letter by saying that "this hive of Black Hundreds must be destroyed".[46]

A week later, OGPU carried out an extensive raid on the monastery and arrested a large group of priests and lay members. It marked the beginning of an unofficial war against the Church. Among those arrested was the priest, writer, and a former

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42 A. Akhmatova, *Requiem* (1935), quoted in Emma Gerstein, *Moscow Memoirs* (London: TheHarvill Press, 2004), p. 320.

43 Sergiev Posad was renamed 'Zagorsk' by the Soviet regime in 1930, after the death of the revolutionary Vladimir Zagorsky.

44 OGPU (or GPU) — Unified State Political Administration (Ob"edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie). OGPU was the secret political police from 1922 to 1934, then superseded by the NKVD, and which had been founded to fight political and economic counter-revolutionary activity.

45 Quoted in Vitaly Shentalinsky, *The KGB's Literary Archive*, trans. by J. Conquest (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), p. 102.

46 *Ibid.*

professor of the Spiritual Academy at the Trinity Sergius Monastery, Pavel Florensky, who is often described today as the Russian Leonardo da Vinci. Florensky, who was a mathematician, physicist, inventor, engineer, writer, and priest, was interrogated brutally by the Soviet secret police, kept in a cell in the Lubyanka, and then sent to the Solovki labour camp. Up to now there have been many legends about the end of his life, and even his children and grandchildren did not know for sure when and where he died. Only in the 1990s did the researcher Vitaly Shentalinsky find a narrow strip of paper in the KGB archives. On one side was typed "Florensky, Pavel Alexandrovich"; on the other, "To be shot, Florensky Pavel Alexandrovich", and a tick marked with a thick red pencil.[47]

Florensky, who was recently sanctified, was shot on 8 December 1937 in Solovki, which, ironically, was once a monastery in its own right. In one of his letters from Solovki he wrote:

> The universe is so organised that only at the price of suffering and persecution can the world be given anything. The more selfless the gift, the harsher the persecution, and the more severe the suffering. That is the law of life, its fundamental axiom […]. Greatness must pay for its gift in blood […].[48]

By then, Punin had perhaps already started paying for his particular form of "greatness", although he was at least still a free man. He longed for Samarkand, where he "did not feel the past so much".[49] But already in March 1944 he wrote in his diary that "there was something miraculous in the destiny that brought him to Zagorsk".[50]

Admiring icons and frescoes in this ancient centre of Russian Orthodoxy, Punin worried about the destiny of Soviet art. At the end of February 1944 Punin wrote in his diary: "I do not expect anything from life, but I do want to see good art".[51] In Soviet culture, dominated by socialist realism, Punin struggled to find this "good art":

> Our today's 'realism' (if I can use this term at all) — is like the rags of a completely worn out dress. It stinks of decomposition and mould.
>
> Soviet Realism, like a defeated army, should tear itself away from reality, and then we will see.
>
> It should stop groaning, and start suffering instead;
>
> It should stop holding on, and start walking;
>
> It should stop being enthusiastic, and start being content.
>
> Perhaps, most importantly it should be quiet, like Chekrygin's drawings or even quieter, calmer and more confident. Completely silent![52]

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47   *Ibid.*, p. 122.

48   *Ibid.*, p. 123.

49   Punin, *Mir svetel liubov'iu*, diary note of 24 February 1944, p. 373. Punin was evacuated to Samarkand during the Siege of Leningrad with the Academy of Arts.

50   *Ibid.*, diary note of 7 March 1944, p. 377.

51   *Ibid.*, diary note of 26 February 1944, p. 375.

52   *Ibid.*

10.4 Nikolai Punin. c. 1940. Photograph © Punin Family Archive, St Petersburg, all rights reserved.

Was it the silence of the Trinity by Andrei Rublev, which Punin had praised in 1915, for which he was now longing? In April 1944 he wrote in his diary that it is important to understand the true aim of art: "In our contemporary art, so-called realism has become the goal; method has been elevated to the level of a principle and has substituted for the goal itself. Nothing, except the death of art, could come from it. Make good art using any means you like, but just make good art."[53]

After Punin was arrested for the last time in 1949, condemned for refusing to cease lecturing on twentieth-century art and its links with Russian icons, he was sent to the Gulag for ten years. He spent the last years of his life in a camp beyond the Arctic Circle, in the Abez settlement. But, even there, in the cold damp barracks which accommodated two hundred people, together with his fellow-prisoner, the philosopher Lev Karsavin, Punin would give lectures to their less-educated inmates about the meaning and significance of the icon of the Virgin Mary of Vladimir, and about the twentieth-century icon, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (fig. 5.3).

Punin died in August 1953, a few months after Stalin's death. He was only sixty-four years old, but he had managed to fit several lives into this relatively short time — a colourful life in Imperial Russia, two revolutions, three arrests, two World Wars, the siege of Leningrad, and the Gulag. Back in 1940 Punin had written:

> It is such a happiness to be still alive; I did not expect this; I never thought that I would live for so long. Levushka [the pet-name for Lev] Bruni said to me a long time ago: 'What an amazing Guardian Angel you have.' Art does not want to part with me. It still needs me to preach it in front of the mad people who have lost it.[54]

For Punin the one and only thing, for the sake of which he lived and died, was art: "I am — the eternity and the destiny, something basic, everlasting and enduring, like art itself. I just do not want any system, no system at all, if possible. To be equal with life, to be part of it — a slice of it, made in art."[55]

In 1957, after the Twentieth Party Congress, and following the special request of his relatives, Punin was rehabilitated, but publication of his books and articles was still not permitted for a long time. Even when some of Punin's articles were finally published in 1976 in Moscow, they were heavily criticised by "those with authority" — "people in the system", as Punin used to call them — and nothing was available for a further ten years.[56]

For fifty years this most respected voice of Russian Futurism, the man of principle, principles which he never compromised, had been deliberately forgotten. But history likes justice and remembers its true heroes. In 1940 Punin wrote: "Art — is a very

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53   Punin, *Mir svetel liubov'iu*, diary note of 8 April 1944, p. 380.

54   Punin's letters to M. Golubeva, approx. 1940, in Punin, *Mir svetel liubov'iu*, p. 445.

55   *Ibid*., p. 436.

56   N. N. Punin, *Russkoe i sovetskoe iskusstvo. Mastera russkogo iskusstva XIV-nachala XX veka. Sovetskie khudozhniki. Izbrannye trudy o russkom i sovetskom izobrazitel'nom iskusstve*, ed. by Irina Punina (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1976).

personal thing — the most personal out of everything that is given to man in life. That is why the love of art is full of passion; it feels like the love of a woman: both have a great desire for eternity. To transform the present into the future — this is the true purpose of art."[57]

Punin carried his passionate love of icons and his strong belief in their impact on twentieth-century art throughout his life. Up until now Punin's impact on the development of the Russian avant-garde has been underestimated and his name was obliterated from most books on art history in Russia. His remarkable life serves as a reminder of the cruelty and injustice of the Communist system, which still, to this day, threatens to compromise the democratic freedoms which Russia claims to adopt. Russian icons and their preservation occupied an important part of Punin's rich life, giving him inspiration and lifting his spirits in the most difficult and challenging periods of his life.

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57   Punin's letters to M. Golubeva, approx. 1940, in Punin, *Mir svetel liubov'iu*, p. 438.

11. Ucha Japaridze, Lado Gudiashvili, and the Spiritual in Painting in Soviet Georgia

Jennifer Brewin

This chapter examines the career of the Soviet Georgian painter Ucha Japaridze (1906–88) (fig. 11.1) who, despite being little known in the west, was among Soviet Georgia's most successful artists in the Stalin and post-Stalin eras. The first reassessment of Japaridze's painting since his death, it offers a fresh analysis that investigates, in particular, themes of religion, spirituality, and mysticism that recurred in his painting throughout his career. It makes a case for examining his encounters with modernist currents in Russian, Georgian, and European painting and literature, including, in particular, the Symbolist movement, as sources of those themes. In doing so, it makes an initial step towards resurrecting the neglected history of Georgian artists' negotiation of modernist impulses, national cultural mythologies, and Soviet cultural dictates. At the same time, it helps to demonstrate the reach and endurance of modernism's legacy and of the spiritual as a source of imagery and ideas in Soviet painting, extending beyond Russia's borders and beyond the usual chronology of modernism and spiritual enquiry in Russian and Soviet art.

The Soviet regime sought to achieve a secular, atheist society and it thus became increasingly difficult for artists to engage with religious or spiritual themes. Once socialist realism was declared the official formula for the arts in the Soviet Union in 1934, Soviet painting was required to operate within a defined set of state-approved parameters. Painters were to portray Soviet life as if the state's socialist (and secular) utopia of tomorrow had already been realised today; thus there could be little room for religious content, or, at least, for positive portrayals of religious practice in Soviet life. Nevertheless, just as secular rule did not translate to a fully atheist society, these

limitations did not mean the absence of all religious content or of the spiritual in Soviet art. In certain periods, when it was deemed to be politically beneficial (for example, during the Second World War and following the failures of Nikita Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign of 1958–64), the Soviet regime strategically tolerated public religious observance. But even during its most aggressive crackdowns on religion, when public religious activity was vastly diminished throughout the Soviet Union, religious belief did not disappear, especially within rural communities and among older generations.[1] Where secularisation limited religious expression and practice, it brought 'not a loss of religion, but religious change' — change in the ways religiosity manifested itself, but not its disappearance.[2] Cultural traditions rooted in abandoned practices remained a part of daily life even as they became disassociated from their religious roots.[3] As a result, painting could evoke memories of and associations with religion or suggest the sacred while excluding explicit reference to religion, especially when depicting rural life. Many artists, moreover, continued to draw on the lessons of religious art and of artists who had concerned themselves with spiritual enquiry in previous decades, and used imagery with religious or spiritual associations in constructing their vision of life in the Soviet Union. Japaridze, as this chapter will argue, is one such artist.

My investigation takes as its starting point the collection of Japaridze's work preserved in the artist's former studio in Tbilisi, maintained as a house museum under the aegis of the Georgian National Museum. It examines the treasures of this important, but little-known collection, including previously unstudied early sketchbooks and mature works, and analyses them in conjunction with biographical and contextual evidence drawn from the memoirs of contemporaries and the accounts of several Soviet biographers. Its first task is to redress gaps in Soviet accounts of Japaridze's career that are concerned primarily with charting and celebrating his contributions to the canon of Soviet socialist realism.[4] Placing particular emphasis on the nostalgic

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1   On religiosity and secularisation in the Soviet Union, see Catherine Wanner, ed, *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) and Heather J. Coleman, 'Atheism versus Secularization? Religion in Soviet Russia, 1917–1961' (Review), *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 1, 3 (Summer 2000) (New Series), 547–58. On the persistence of religious belief and observance in Russian peasant communities in the 1930s, see 'Religion' in Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 204–13.

2   Catherine Wanner, 'Introduction', in *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine,* pp. 1–26 (p. 9).

3   As Sheila Fitzpatrick comments regarding Russian peasant life following agricultural collectivisation in 1929–31: 'The longterm effect of the Soviet assault on religion was to strip away much of the Orthodox veneer that had covered the pre-Christian religion of the Russian peasantry, leaving most of the basic folk rituals and beliefs intact.' Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, p. 207.

4   For Soviet monographs on Japaridze see: Andrei Lebedev, *Ucha Malakievich Dzhaparidze* (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1982); Lidia Zlatkevich, *Ucha Dzhaparidze — khudozhnik i pedagog*, ed. by

portraits of traditional life in rural Georgia for which Japaridze became known in the 1950s and 60s, Soviet authors presented Japaridze as a committed, life-long adherent of socialist realism, the patriotic creator of a lyrical, romantic vision of life in Soviet Georgia. This characterisation is fair with respect to sections of Japaridze's artistic production, but these accounts disregard works and information that do not fit as easily into the narrative of his development as a socialist realist painter. In particular, they pay little attention to his early contacts with Tiflis's early twentieth-century avant-garde or to evidence of these encounters in his painting.[5] As a result, Japaridze's engagement with artistic and literary influences associated with the culture of the *fin-de-siècle*, and, in particular, the Symbolist movement, have been underplayed, as have religious and spiritual themes present in his painting. I set out here to resurrect the history of that encounter and, in doing so, to resituate Japaridze's mature painting within the contacts and contexts of his formative years.

It is not the aim of this chapter to argue that Japaridze was not a socialist realist painter, or that he was a Symbolist or otherwise modernist and dissident painter whose work somehow passed without notice under the radar of the Soviet censor. However, as a result of his engagement with pre-Revolutionary and modernist trends, he produced a body of painting which increasingly trod a path between conformity and dissidence. His art remained within the bounds of the acceptable, while also gently criticising the regime, by presenting a subtly pessimistic view of the transformation of rural life in Georgia under Soviet rule. In that sense, its closest analogy is to be found in the Village Prose movement, a literary movement that appeared during the 1950s and 1960s and existed within the official culture of the era, yet expressed regret for a traditional way of life that its authors felt had been lost.[6] In some instances the nostalgic mood of Japaridze's representations of rural Georgia simply reflected the sentimental turn which socialist realism took as a whole in the post-War years. Yet in others Japaridze presented more sinister visions of Soviet life, many of which drew imagery directly from his early encounters with the Symbolist movement. The impact of these earlier encounters on Japaridze's mature painting is evidenced by the frequent recurrence of imagery from early works, almost verbatim, in paintings of the 1950s onwards.

Lado Gudiashvili (Tbilisi: Ganatleba, 1980); Igor Urushadze, *Ucha Dzhaparidze* (Tbilisi: Zaria Vostoka, 1958); and Nodar Dzhanberidze, *Ucha Dzhaparidze* (Tbilisi: Khelovneba, 1980).

5   The city of Tiflis was renamed Tbilisi in 1936.

6   On the Russian Village Prose movement, see: Kathleen F. Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); G. A. Tsvetov, *Russkaia derevenskaia proza: evoliutsiia, zhanry, geroi: uchebnoe posobie* (St Petersburg: St Petersburg State University Press, 1992); A. Bol'shakova, *Russkaia derevenskaia proza XX veka: kod prochteniia* (Shumen: Aksios, 2002).
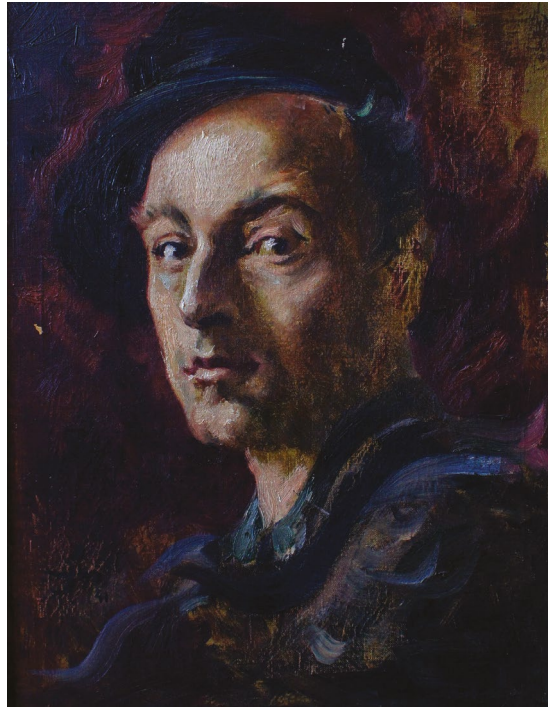
11.1 Ucha Japaridze, *Self-Portrait*, 1941. Ink on paper, 21 x 15 cm. Ucha Japaridze House Museum, Tbilisi. Photograph © Georgian National Museum, all rights reserved.

11.2 Lado Gudiashvili. 1910s. Photograph. Konstantin Zanisi. The National Parliamentary Library of Georgia. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gudiashvili_Lado_recto.jpg

11.3 Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky, View of Tiflis in the early 1900s. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:View_of_ Havlabar_(Tbilisi),_in_the_early_1900s,_Sergei_Mikhailovich_Prokudin-Gorskii.jpg

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first revives the history of Japaridze's interaction with representatives of the Symbolist movement in Georgia, above all, the literary society known as the Blue Horns (*Tsisperi qantselebi*) and the painter Lado Gudiashvili (1896–1980) (fig. 11.2). It explores evidence of this encounter in Japaridze's artistic output between 1925 and 1935, much of which is examined here for the first time. I then turn to Japaridze's continued engagement with Symbolist sources and imagery and the prevalence of themes of religion, spirituality, and the occult in his mature painting. I examine the intimate representations of life in rural Georgia with which Japaridze's name became synonymous in the post-War period, focusing in particular on his representation firstly of animals and livestock, and secondly, of women. In Symbolist iconography, both are associated with the visualisation of the spiritual, the magical: that which is beyond everyday reality. As we will see, in Japaridze's painting, they frequently evoke heightened emotional and psychological states explored in Symbolist art and literature, including fear, anguish, distress, apprehension or grief, or they carry associations of the divine. Through the introduction of these motifs and the employment of certain pictorial devices that counter canonical forms of socialist realism, ostensibly harmonious pastoral scenes become deeply ambiguous, sometimes even dark and unsettling.

Becoming an Artist in Early Soviet Georgia

Japaridze's childhood and teenage years coincided with the dramatic and unprecedented transformation of cultural and intellectual life in Georgia's capital that took place in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Georgia, and Tiflis (fig. 11.3) in particular, being situated at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, had been home to an extraordinarily diverse multi-ethnic population throughout its long history. For centuries its demographic had incorporated large communities of Persians, Armenians, and Russians, as well as Georgians and other national groups, many of whom were drawn to the city for trade. Moreover, invasions and occupations by powerful neighbours, including the Persian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires, had inevitably led aspects of occupying powers' cultural traditions and religious practices (as well as their peoples) to be absorbed and integrated into modern Georgian culture.[7] In the 1910s and 1920s, however, Tiflis became still more cosmopolitan when the city suddenly became a sanctuary for Russian and European artists, writers, and intellectuals seeking refuge from the ravages of revolution and war to the north and

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7   For a history of Georgia prior to Sovietisation, including the cultural impact of successive occupations, see 'Part One: The Rise and Fall of the Georgian Monarchies' and 'Part Two: Georgia in the Russian Empire', in Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994) (second edition, first edition published 1988), pp. 3–181. Suny, for example, discusses the cultural dominance of the occupying Ottoman Turks in Eastern Georgia and of Iranian power in Western Georgia from the mid-sixteenth century until the end of the seventeenth century, and to that of Imperial Russia thereafter (pp. 48, 52).

west.[8] In addition to its already cacophonous jumble of ethnic and cultural identities, a bustling new avant-garde community of writers and artists of various inclinations colonised the city, founding journals, holding events, and opening taverns where they could meet to discuss the latest movements in European, Russian, and Georgian art, literature, and philosophy. Well-known Russian artists, writers, and intellectuals including Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vasily Kamensky, Igor Terentev, Iuri Degen, Sergei Gorodetsky, and Vera and Sergei Sudeikin all became visitors or temporary residents of this 'fantastic city' whose sudden cultural flourishing peaked during Georgia's brief independence from Imperial Russian and subsequently Soviet rule between 1918 and 1921.[9]

Through the arrival of these figures, as well as the activities of Georgia's own emerging cadres of modernist artists and writers, a whole new vocabulary of intellectual thought and political, philosophical, literary, and artistic ideas appeared in Georgia. The arrival of European and Russian literary and artistic movements, including Symbolism and Futurism, as well as the currents of Romanticism still prevailing across Europe and Russia (with its fascination, in particular, with all things 'oriental'), were reshaping the ways both Georgians and foreigners conceived of and represented Georgia and Georgian culture. These transformations formed the unique intellectual environment in which Japaridze found himself as a young aspiring painter.

Japaridze moved to Tiflis to study painting only in 1922, a year after the Bolsheviks had taken control of Georgia and established the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in February 1921. Thus he arrived in the city only after anticipation of Bolshevik hostility had dispersed part of its vibrant intellectual community. As such, he has been assumed to have little or nothing connecting him with the cultural flourishing of pre-1921 Tiflis. He belongs to the first generation of Georgian painters educated under Soviet power, those graduating amidst the upheaval of Stalin's First Five-Year Plan and Cultural Revolution when organisations such as the Association of Artists of the Revolution (AKhR, 1928–32) in Moscow, and the Georgian Association of Revolutionary Artists (SARMA, 1929–32), were demanding the proletarianisation of the arts and declaring their opposition to the 'bourgeois', 'decadent' avant-garde movements of the preceding decades.[10]

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8   On cultural life in Tiflis in this period, see Tat'iana Nikol'skaia, *'Fantasticheskii gorod': russkaia kul'turnaia zhizn' Tbilisi (1917–1921)* (Moscow: Fifth Country, 2000); Luigi Magarotto, Marzio Marzaduri, *et al.*, *L'Avanguardia a Tiflis: studi, ricerche, cronache, testimonianze, documenti* (Venice: University of Venice, 1982); and Harsha Ram's extended review of Nikol'skaia's volume: 'Modernism on the Periphery: Literary Life in Post-revolutionary Tbilisi', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 5, 2 (Spring 2004), 367–82, https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2004.0030

9   The Georgian modernist writer and publicist Grigol Robakidze wrote that Tiflis in this period had become a "fantastical city" and Paolo Iashvili referred in his poetry to "fantastic Tiflis". The phrase was adopted in the title of a recent study of avant-garde activity in early twentieth-century Tiflis: Nikol'skaia, *'Fantasticheskii gorod'.*

10   The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR, 1922–28) gradually increased its dominance over artistic activity in Russia over the period of its existence. In 1928 it remodelled itself as the Union-wide Association of Artists of the Revolution (AKhR, 1928–32), and began to oversee

Indeed, Japaridze's immediate and consistent success in Soviet Georgia has reinforced notions of his distance from Georgia's pre-Soviet avant-garde. Even as he was finishing his studies at Tiflis's Academy of Arts (established 1922), his works shown at SARMA's exhibitions in 1930 and 1931 were attracting praise in the local press.[11] By 1936, following three years' work experience in Moscow and boasting a network of useful contacts in the Soviet capital, he returned to Tiflis to be given a teaching post at the Academy alongside his former teachers — a position that he retained throughout his career. By that time Japaridze had adopted a realist style of painting compatible with the gradually crystallising demands of socialist realism, and he was contributing canvases to Stalin's personality cult, answering demands from Transcaucasian Party Secretary Lavrenty Beria for works illustrating Beria's new, highly falsified history of Stalin's role in the Bolshevik conquest of Transcaucasia.[12] In the post-War period he earned further fame fulfilling several high-profile commissions, including eight-metre-long frescoes for Tbilisi's branch of the Institute of Marx-Engels-Lenin. These commissions, along with numerous state prizes, positions of authority, and the large personal exhibitions with which he was honoured (in Moscow in 1963, in Tbilisi in 1948, 1961, 1968, and 1970, and in his home village of Gari in 1962) affirmed his enduring position as a leading figure of Soviet Georgia's artistic establishment, and reinforced assumptions about his distance from Georgia's pre-Soviet avant-garde.

Nevertheless, a mass of visual and biographical evidence also attests to Japaridze's extensive engagement with that avant-garde community, a significant contingent of

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the establishment of local branches of AKhR across the Soviet Union. The Tiflis branch (later, All-Georgian Republican Centre) of AKhR (REVMAS, *Revoliutsiis mkhatvarta asotsiatsia*) was initiated in 1928 by Georgian artists Mosei and Irakli Toidze, who had become members of AKhRR in Moscow in 1927. However, archival records suggest that the branch only formalised its activities and gained approval for its membership from AKhR's central bureau for the administration of its branches in 1930. It existed until 1931, before being subsumed into the more dominant Georgian Association of Revolutionary Artists (SARMA, *Sakartvelos asotsiatsia revoliutsionur mkhatvarta*) following orders from Glaviskusstva (RGALI, f. 2941, op. 1, ed. khr. 197 and 198). There were also further branches of AKhR inside the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (GSSR). Notably, AKhRR's documentation also refers to branches outside of Russia prior to its re-branding as AKhR, including in Tashkent as early as 1925, and in Batumi, the port and capital of the Achar ASSR, which was part of the Georgian SSR, in 1926. The Batumi organisation later became the Achar SSR branch of AKhR, reportedly organised under the supervision of AKhRR founder-member, Boris Ioganson, in 1927 (RGALI, f. 2941, op. 1, ed. khr. 179, st. 1; f. 2943, op. 1, ed. khr. 193, l. 15).

11   The Academy was in a state of flux in this period, undergoing several reorganisations and changes of name in the space of a few years. Established in 1922 as the Georgian Academy of Arts, in 1929–31 it became the Higher Art and Technical Institute, based on Moscow's art institute of the same name (*Vysshii Khudozhestvenno-Tekhnicheskii Institut* (*Vkhutein*), 1926–29, formerly *Vkhutemas*, the Higher Art and Technical Studios (*Vysshie khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie* (*Vkhutemas*), 1920–26)). In 1931 it was closed and replaced with a Faculty of Fine Arts within Tbilisi Pedagogical Institute, but was reinstated as the independent Tbilisi State Academy of Fine Arts in February 1933. For praise of Japaridze's painting in the contemporary press, see V. Sokol, 'SARMA', *Na rubezhe vostoka*, 9–10 (1930), p. 119.

12   Lavrentii Beria, *K voprosu ob istorii bol'shevistskikh organizatsii v Zakavkaz'e* ('On the question of the History of Bolshevik Organisations in Transcaucasia'. Report of the meeting of the Tiflis Party Organisation, 21–22 July 1935) (Moscow: Partizdat, 1935).

which continued to be active in Tiflis for at least a decade after the arrival of Bolshevik power, including the Blue Horns. This also included Gudiashvili, who taught Japaridze at the Academy and became his friend and mentor from that period onwards. Soviet scholarship tended to overlook the importance of these encounters — Japaridze's early contact with Gudiashvili was presented as little more than an unfortunate period during which his work briefly strayed into "arbitrary proportions" and "hypertrophy of form".[13] Though some Soviet texts mention in passing Japaridze's personal connections with members of the Blue Horns association, no serious enquiry into his professional engagement with their writing has been offered. Moreover, in post-Soviet Georgia, painters of the Stalin era have attracted little interest among scholars.[14]

Since the late 1980s, flourishing western scholarship on socialist realism in literature, music, and the arts has demonstrated the complexity of the Stalinist cultural project, despite its aesthetic retrospection and tragic implications for intellectual and personal freedoms, and made a clear case for its further study. Pioneering studies by Boris Groys, Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, Irina Gutkin, and others have transformed our understanding of socialist realism, elucidating its mechanisms and explaining its cultural origins in both the preceding avant-garde movements and the intellectual currents of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[15] Since the majority of this scholarship focuses on the artists and institutions and the political machinery operating in Moscow, at the Soviet centre, however, an examination of artistic activity on the Soviet periphery is much needed, not least in Georgia's case in light of the limited scholarship concerning the republic to date, and Georgia's special significance as the place of Stalin's birth.[16]

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13   See Lebedev, *Ucha Malakievich Dzhaparidze*, p. 9 and Zlatkevich, *Ucha Dzhaparidze*, p. 22.

14   To my knowledge, post-Soviet scholarship concerning Japaridze is limited to a single short article in Georgian on Japaridze's book illustration: Mariam Gachechiladze, 'Ucha Japaridze — tsignis mkhatvari', *Mtsignobari '06* (2006), 169–84.

15   See: Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000. First published 1981); Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. by Jesse M. Savage (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007); Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. by Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic, 1890–1934* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999); *Socialist Realism without Shores*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Lahusen Thomas (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1997). For a new analysis of socialist realism as a strand of modernism, see Petre Petrov, *Automatic for the Masses: The Death of the Author and the Birth of Socialist Realism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

16   There exists a small but growing body of scholarship concerned with art in the former socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe in the second half of the twentieth century. For a useful introduction to this field see: *East Art Map: Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe*, ed. by the Slovenian artists' group IRWIN (London: Afterall, 2006). In the early 1990s two brief articles and an exhibition catalogue published in English offered high-level surveys of artistic activity across each of the Soviet Union's national republics and regions. See Musya Glants, '"From the Southern Mountains to the Northern Seas": Painting in the Republics in the Early Soviet Period', and Milka Bliznakov, 'International Modernism or Socialist Realism: Soviet Architecture in the Eastern Republics' in *New Perspectives on Russian and Soviet Artistic Culture: 4th World Congress for Soviet and East European Studies: Selected Papers*, ed. by John Norman (New York; Basingstoke: St Martin's Press; Macmillan Press, 1994),

Irina Gutkin has demonstrated the important role that Russian Symbolist philosophers and writers including Vladimir Solovev (1853–1900) and Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949) played in the genesis of socialist realism and socialist realist language.[17] The Symbolists were engaged with theories concerning the occult, meaning a tangible higher realm existing beyond the visible, material reality, and with the idea that the observable world is made up of signs which can be decoded by the artist to reveal a higher reality. Responding to Solovev's theurgic aesthetics assigning artists and poets with the task of transfiguring the world through "the possession of the religious idea", Ivanov developed his theory of the mythological properties of artistic language.[18] He proposed Symbolist poetic language, in which the ordinary language of empirical, material things, as distinguishable from the poetic-metaphorical language of a higher, spiritual plane, would be the penultimate linguistic stage in an evolution towards a mythological language in which material and spiritual realities are synthesised. As Gutkin shows, socialist realist language represents a realisation of Ivanov's prediction in that it constructs Soviet reality through a set of carefully controlled myths that conflate two realms — a beautiful mythologised present and future. Its vocabulary was made up of "a limited menu of positive and negative epithets, depending on whether it signified something belonging to the Soviet future-like world or the old, capitalist world", and every word was "bonded together into a rigid system of politically correct correspondences […] coded to officially sanctioned mythologems", ensuring absolute control over the way they were read.[19] The cultural myths this language employed then served "as grids of perception through which […]

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pp. 95–111 and pp. 112–30, and Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Soviet Socialist Realist Painting 1930s–1960s: Paintings from Russia, the Ukraine, Belorussia, Uzbekistan, Kirgizia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova selected in the USSR* (exh. cat., The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1992). For recent scholarship concerning art in Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus see: Aliya Abykaeva Nurteevna de Tiesenhausen, 'Socialist Realist Orientalism?: Depictions of Soviet Central Asia 1930s–1950s' (unpublished PhD thesis, The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2010); Cloé Drieu, *Fictions nationales: cinéma, empire et nation en Ouzbékistan (1919–1937)* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2013); Vardan Azatyan, 'On the Ruins of the Soviet Past: Some Thoughts on Religion, Nationalism and Artistic Avant-Gardes in Armenia', *Springerin*, 4 (2008), https://springerin.at/en/2008/4/uber-die-ruinen-der-sowjetischen-vergangenheit/; Vardan Azatyan, 'Disintegrating Progress: Bolshevism, National Modernism, and the Emergence of Contemporary Art Practices in Armenia', *ARTMargins*, 1, 1 (February 2012), 62–87, https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_a_00004

17 Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic*. See in particular Chapter 2, Part 4, 'Myth and Socialist Realism: Symbolic Language, the Soviet Novel, and the Formation of Collective Consciousness', pp. 64–80. See also Gutkin, 'The Magic of Words: Symbolism, Futurism, Socialist Realism', in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 225–46. Although Gutkin was the first to offer a comprehensive study of the cultural origins of socialist realism, including Stalinist culture's appropriation of the ideas of the Russian Symbolists, Groys, Clark, and others also acknowledge the importance of these ideas as well as the centrality of occult themes in the genesis of socialist realism.

18 Vladimir Solovev, "Tri rechi v pamiat' Dostoevskogo," in his *Sobranie sochinenii v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow, 1988), quoted in Gutkin, 'The Magic of Words: Symbolism, Futurism, Socialist Realism', in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. by Rosenthal, p. 226.

19 Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic*, pp. 68–69.

so-called reality" was presented.[20] Through the continual repetition of this vocabulary of stock myths, presented through political rhetoric, literature, and visual culture, the people's cognition of those myths was automated so that they entered the Soviet citizen's subconscious and came to form the lens through which reality was perceived (or, following Dobrenko's argument, the material from which socialist reality was produced).[21]

In some of his artistic production from the Stalin era, and more explicitly during the post-Stalin era, Japaridze increasingly eluded this rigid system of signs by interspersing imagery and symbols drawn from Symbolist art and literature, and from Georgia's particular national cultural mythology, in his portraits of Soviet Georgia. As has been noted before, despite the rigidity of socialist realism's vocabulary of stock myths and images, since symbols could "have several meanings, even at the same time, and […] can often be used ambiguously", artists and writers could harness "the multivalence of literature's [and visual culture's] iconic signs" to convey meanings outside of the official viewpoint.[22] The relatively liberal climate of the post-Stalin years in particular allowed for a looser definition of socialist realism which drew on an increasingly broad range of sources that could be combined to create even greater ambiguities in their interpretation. In Japaridze's case, because national cultural myths were as entrenched as Soviet myths in Georgians' conception of reality (helped by Soviet nationalities policies that encouraged the preservation and popularisation of Georgian cultural heritage), symbols could often be read ambiguously as responding either to Georgian national or Soviet myth systems (or both), thus giving rise to multiple meanings.[23] Moreover, since socialist realist language itself drew heavily on Christian and occult themes and imagery (for example, the supernatural abilities with which, as Groys, Clark, and others have observed, Stalin or other heroes and villains were imbued in countless socialist realist novels), there was scope for experimenting with mystical and occult themes pervading in Romantic and Symbolist visions of Georgia.[24] As I

20   *Ibid.*, p. 72.

21   Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, pp. 44–45; 'Chapter 1: Socialism as Will and Representation' in Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, pp. 1–74.

22   Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, p. 12.

23   Nino Nanava has shown how Georgian intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries consistently drew on myths and symbols of Georgia's primordial past, both religious and secular, in articulating a conceptualisation of the modern Georgian nation that in turn filtered as fact into Georgian national self-conception. See Nino Nanava, 'Conceptualising the Georgian Nation: The Modern Intellectual Discourse of Georgian Identity' (unpublished PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London, 2005). For an introduction to the Soviet nationalities policy and the Soviet government's systematic promotion of the distinct national cultures of each of the officially designated Soviet nationalities see: Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

24   Scholars have long noted socialist realism's appropriation of Christian religious imagery, not least in the Lenin and Stalin personality cults. On the fantastical and superhuman abilities of heroes (including Stalin) and villains in socialist realist literature, see Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, pp. 59–72 and 'Chapter 6: The Sense of Reality in the Heroic Age' in Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 136–59. On the

argue here, while enjoying the pragmatic support of the State, extended to him in part due to the Georgian public's emotional investment in Japaridze's painting as the visualisation of their own national feeling, Japaridze, like many artists in the post-Stalin era, inhabited a space between artistic conformity and dissent.

Fantastic City: Japaridze and Tiflis in the 1910s and 1920s

The Blue Horns association, which included poets Paolo Iashvili and Titsian Tabidze, was a prominent feature of Tiflis's cultural community in the late 1910s and 1920s. Formed under the mentorship of the Georgian writer and publicist, Grigol Robakidze, in the Georgian city of Kutaisi in 1916 (relocating to Tiflis in 1919), it was Georgia's first home-grown modernist literary organisation. Many of the group's members were returning to Georgia following studies in St Petersburg, France, and Germany, and brought with them knowledge of contemporary European literary and intellectual movements. Although their interests were eclectic (several of them, like Gudiashvili, also participated in Futurist activities) they were united, above all, by their allegiance to contemporary Symbolist and Decadent movements sweeping Europe and Russia.[25] By engaging with these movements they were the first to break with the strict linguistic forms that had governed Georgian literature before them. They adopted European Symbolism's concern with the expression of intense emotional and psychological experiences and its prevailing themes of love, death, anguish, and unrequited desire. Moreover, they shared the European Symbolists' belief in a higher spiritual realm that the poet or artist could communicate to the reader or viewer through a system of symbols. Their writing adopted common Symbolist visual motifs and sources — otherworldly creatures, virginal maidens, tormented demons — as well as Symbolism's debt to Greek mythological and biblical sources.

However, the Blue Horns were not concerned simply with importing the innovations of their European colleagues to Georgia. Instead they sought to establish a modern literary canon that was rooted in Georgia's own national cultural mythology. Their poetry and prose exploring Symbolist preoccupations of love, anguish, and death was set in the malarial marshes of Georgia's lowlands or against the vast peaks of the Caucasus mountains, and populated with imagery mined from Georgia's unique cultural history. References abound to Georgia's powerful medieval dynasties and famous chivalric traditions, to the poetry of Shota Rustaveli (Georgia's twelfth-century national bard), and the country's multifarious religious beliefs and practices. Moreover, the Blue Horns' adoption of imagery from Greek mythology held specific connections to Georgia's cultural ancestry, due to the extensive cultural influence

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influence of occult ideas in Soviet culture, including Maxim Gorky's interest in quasi-occult, quasi-scientific theories of thought transference and its potential for controlling the minds of the Soviet masses, see Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*.

25 The Blue Horns also translated Futurist works from Russian and Italian, and Iashvili Italianised his first name, Pavle, to Paolo in homage to the Italian Futurists. See Donald Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia: A History* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000. First published Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 231 and 257.

Ancient Greece asserted over the proto-Georgian kingdom of Colchis (which occupied the western territories of modern Georgia). In turn, Transcaucasia claimed a prominent place in the ancient Greek imagination as the exotic, untamed land of Prometheus and Jason and the Argonauts. As such, the Blue Horns' engagement with mythological sources had particular significance in their construction of their own and Georgian national identities. For example, the group's meeting place, the Kimerioni café, took its name from Greek mythology's *chimera*, a monstrous fire-breathing hybrid creature usually represented as part lion and part goat, with a snake for a tail. Since the *chimera* was fabled to inhabit Asia Minor, a territory that to the Greek imagination, like Colchis, represented the wild, exotic lands of an unknown east, the choice of name reflects the self-orientalising, self-exoticising vision of Georgia that the Blue Horns cultivated in their writing.[26] This exoticisation of Georgian identity is of particular interest in considering Japaridze's relationship with the Blue Horns writers, and his representation of Georgia in the Stalin and post-Stalin eras.

Japaridze's connections with the Blue Horns predated his relocation to Tiflis in 1922. His brothers, twins Grigol and Lado, had been active members of the society since the year of its formation in 1916. As such, Japaridze, who was only nine years old when it formed, was surely familiar with its ideas and members from a young age. Indeed Japaridze's father, who was also a published writer, reportedly held frequent literary evenings at the family home and kept an extensive library, making it probable that Japaridze was well versed in the latest literary and artistic movements in Europe and Russia by the time he entered his teens.[27] While there is no specific written record of Japaridze's professional interactions with the group in the 1920s, the absence of such records is not conclusive evidence that they did not take place. Instead, the denouncement (and in several cases, murder) of many of the Blue Horns writers in the Great Terror of 1937–38 offers plentiful explanation as to why any such connections might have been suppressed. It is clear that Japaridze was close with the group at least by the mid-1930s, as he later recalled how Titsian Tabidze and Iashvili would often visit him in Moscow in the 1930s to "wander the streets" and "talk about art" together.[28] These friendships in the 1930s, and connections via his brothers and Gudiashvili, suggest a professional interaction in the 1920s and early 1930s that is also reflected in Japaridze's painting.

Like Japaridze's brothers, Gudiashvili was a close collaborator of the Blue Horns from the group's inception.[29] His painting during the 1910s and 1920s is known for

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26   The group's name was also a reflection of its marriage of European Symbolism's aesthetic innovations and imagery rooted in Georgia's unique culture and geography. As Titsian Tabidze explained, 'blue' stood for azure skies, romantic dreaming, and the establishment of a powerful kingdom. 'Horns' referred to the traditional Georgian drinking vessel, citing both a national and ethnic dimension and, as Tabidze declared, carrying associations of drunkenness as a means of stimulating intuition and facilitating comprehension of the mysteries of the universe. Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia*, p. 231.

27   Urushadze, *Ucha Dzhaparidze*, p. 6.

28   Zlatkevich, *Ucha Dzhaparidze*, p. 29.

29   Having first met Galaktion Tabidze in 1915, a year before the society was formed, while both were contributors to Ioseb Imedashvili's journal *Theatre and Life* (*Teatri da tskhovreba*), Gudiashvili quickly developed close and lasting friendships with many of the group's members. He became their constant

its eclectic blend of influences and references, with debts to sources as disparate as Georgian ecclesiastical wall-painting, Persian miniature painting, the beguiling portraits of the Jewish-Italian painter and sculptor Amadeo Modigliani (whom he met during a period of residence in Paris from 1920 until 1925), and the anatomical distortions of Art Deco design. However, his most sustained engagement was with the Blue Horns. Like the group's poetry and prose, Gudiashvili's painting of the period is replete with Symbolism's magic and mysticism, yet uniquely Georgian in its imagery. Numerous paintings present sinister visions of Tiflis's destitute underclasses in which the city's carousing *kintos* (petty tradesmen), often lustful and demonic in appearance, mingle with the criminals and fallen women of Ortachala, the city's impoverished bohemian district. An insipid palette and distorted, un-naturalistic treatment of space and form imbues them with an eerie, unreal quality. Other works conjure strange exotic landscapes inhabited by bewitching, otherworldly nudes, nymphs, and virgins surrounded by lush foliage and magical creatures, all lit up in the ethereal glow of twilight. Marrying Symbolism's exotica with Georgian settings, works such as *Green Woman* (*Spring*) (1920), *Virgin in the Mountains* (1923), and *In the Waves of Tskhenistsqali* (1925) offer visual analogies to the poetry of Titsian Tabidze, who claimed to put "Hafisz roses in Prudhomme's vase, Baudelaire's poisonous flowers in Besiki's garden".[30]

Georgia's rich history of spiritual traditions is a central wellspring of the Blue Horns' and Gudiashvili's imagery. Although the history of Christianity in Georgia stretches back as far as the fourth century, the country has also played host to a panoply of other traditions, each of which has seeped into a cultural mythology of modern Georgia. Islam and Islamic cultural traditions became a part of Georgian life during Persian and Ottoman occupations in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries and continue to colour Georgian culture today. Similarly, the pre-Christian pagan beliefs and practices of the proto-Georgian kingdom of Iberia occupy an important place in modern Georgia's identity, not least due to the fusion of pagan and Christian beliefs and practices that is still observed in Georgia's remote, north-eastern regions such as Khevsureti and Pshavi.[31]

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companion in the late 1910s and 1920s, attending the various literary salons emerging in Tiflis. Later, Gudiashvili recalled how he spent "almost every day" in their company. Their shared friendship and aesthetic vision is reflected in Gudiashvili's artistic formulation of and illustrations for the group's journal *Dreaming Gazelles* (*Meotsnebe niamorebi*, 1919–22 and 1922–24) as well as his fantastical murals decorating the Kimerioni café. *Lado Gudiashvili: kniga vospominani; stat'i; iz perepiski; sovremenniki o khudozhnike*, ed. by L. Sh. Gagua (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1987), p. 101. On Gudiashvili's painting during the 1910s and 1920s see John E. Bowlt, 'Lado Gudiashvili', in *L'Avanguardia a Tiflis: studi, ricerche, cronache, testimonianze, documenti*, ed. by Luigi Magarotto, Marzio Marzaduri, and Giovanna Pagani Cesa (Venice: Università degli Studi di Venezia, 1982).

30   The Georgian poet, politician, and diplomat, Besarion Zakarias dze Gabashvili, commonly known as Besiki (1750–91). Titsian Tabidze, quoted in Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia*, p. 239.

31   There is some debate as to whether pagan beliefs and practices have been retained from these early pre-fourth century origins, or whether these regions in fact adopted Christianity soon after its arrival in lowland Iberia but have since unwittingly diverged from certain Christian practices and beliefs during the thirteenth through to the seventeenth centuries as waves of Mongol, Turkish, and Persian invasions cut them off from Christian centres in the Georgian lowlands. See Kevin Tuite, 'Highland

Twentieth-century perceptions of Georgia's spiritual traditions have been shaped to a significant degree by nineteenth-century intellectuals' representation of them. As Susan Layton has shown, Russian Romantic writers including Lermontov, Pushkin, and Bestuzhev-Marlinsky presented an image of Georgia that emphasised Muslim and pagan 'oriental' elements of her spiritual and cultural identity.[32] They constructed Georgia as both Asiatic and feminine, wild, and irrational — vis-à-vis a civilised, rational, male Russia — to produce a narrative legitimising Russia's annexation and 'protection' of Georgia. They advanced a "dualistic construct of woman": Georgia, personified through their female characters, was "an intensely good figure (the innocent virgin, the devoted mother)" yet "liable to metamorphose into a fiend (the murderess, the sorceress, the temptress)".[33] Drawing on Islamic and pagan motifs in realising the latter incarnation in particular, these writers created a vision of Georgia that was beautiful and desirable, yet also dangerous and unpredictable — a land to be loved, but also controlled. These Russian writers and their Georgian followers, such as Ilia Chavchavadze, Grigol Orbeliani, and Nikoloz Baratashvili provided a vocabulary for constructing Georgian identity with reference to her spiritual and cultural traditions that the Blue Horns, Gudiashvili, and ultimately Japaridze would adapt to their own visions of Georgia and Georgian-ness.[34]

Ucha Japaridze and Symbolism in Georgia

Japaridze's early works and sketchbooks of the 1920s and early 1930s abound with the otherworldly imagery of the Symbolist movement, including motifs particular to Gudiashvili's and the Blue Horns' markedly Georgian brand of Symbolism. However, such imagery was often more mystical than spiritual. For example, Japaridze's sketchbooks feature fantastical beasts familiar from Georgian mythology: majestic pheasants, howling wolves, and rearing stallions. These appear alongside 'oriental' princes and menacing demons with grotesquely distorted, laughing faces indebted to the carnivalesque, erotic imagery of Gudiashvili's painting, inspired in turn by that of Sergei Sudeikin, the Russian Symbolist painter known for his fantastical decorations adorning St Petersburg's Stray Dog cabaret, and Gudiashvili's collaborator on the murals decorating the Kimerioni café. In addition, watercolour illustrations of contemplative, virginal maidens in long draping dresses recall the forlorn maidens

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Georgian paganism — archaism or innovation?' Review of Zurab K'ik'nadze, *Kartuli mitologia, I: jvari da saq'mo* (Kutaisi: Gelati Academy of Sciences, 1996), *Annual of the Society for the Study of the Caucasus*, 6–7 (1994–96), 79–91.

32   Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); see Chapter 11, 'Georgia as an Oriental Woman', pp. 192–212.

33   Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire*, p. 193.

34   Georgian Romantic writers' conceptualisations of Georgia's relationship with her Imperial coloniser were, however, constructed in particular and distinct ways. See Harsha Ram and Zaza Shatirishvili, 'Romantic Topography and the Dilemma of Empire: The Caucasus in the Dialogue of Georgian and Russian Poetry', *The Russian Review*, 63, 1 (January 2004), 1–25.

of Galaktion Tabidze's early poetry and the Pre-Raphaelites in England.[35] Favoured Symbolist themes of death, mourning, and despair are similarly abundant: on one page a skull embraces the artist's disembodied head as if delivering a kiss of death. Other illustrations present mourning figures kneeling at gravesides, their bodies bent in grief or arched to the sky in despair, while one shows stooping crows that metamorphose into mourners.

Numerous pictures from this period reflect Japaridze's engagement with Gudiashvili's painting and Symbolist themes more broadly. An early pastel image, *Sleeping Shepherd* (1935) (fig. 11.4), for example, demonstrates the breadth of Symbolist sources to which he was responding. Ostensibly a realist picture, the image, in which a shepherd reclines against a twisting, knotted tree overhanging the bank of a river, unites a familiar set of motifs. In presenting the figure asleep in the landscape it aligns itself with the Symbolists' interest in the cognitive possibilities of dreaming, which they associated with accessing higher spiritual planes. It recalls representations of dreaming in the works of the Russian Symbolist painters of the Blue Rose group, such as Petr Utkin's *The Dream* (1905), as well as the reclining *kintos* of Gudiashvili's *Dreamers of Ortachala* (1920).[36] The curve and twist of Japaridze's shepherd's elongated body, moreover, his narrow waist, broad shoulders, slender limbs and arched neck clearly emulate the willowy figures of Gudiashvili's *kintos*. Their distorted forms introduce otherworldly strangeness that contributes to the sense of their dream-world setting, and impart a divine quality through stylisation of form comparable to that found in Byzantine and Orthodox mural painting. The work's azure palette, moreover, aligns it with the Symbolists' association of the colour blue with spiritual realms.

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35   Japaridze would have been familiar with the work of the Pre-Raphaelites through his contact with the Blue Horns and Gudiashvili since the Russian Symbolists, of whom the Blue Horns were followers and colleagues, acknowledged the Pre-Raphaelites as an important influence. Japaridze might also have been familiar with the coverage of the movement in the Russian periodical press, beginning in 1863 with Russian critic Dmitry Grigorevich's extended report in *The Russian Herald*, 'Paintings by English Artists at London Exhibitions in 1862' (Dmitrii Grigorevich, 'Kartiny angliiskikh zhivopistsev na vystavkakh 1862 goda v Londone', *Russkii vestnik*, 43 (1863), 31–92). Coverage of the Pre-Raphaelites peaked at the turn of the century. For example, Sergei Diaghilev's journal, *The World of Art* (*Mir iskusstva*), published extensive reviews of the Pre-Raphaelites' activities. John Ruskin's 'Pre-Raphaelitism' was translated into Russian by Olga Soloveva, the wife of Russian Symbolist philosopher Vladimir Solovev, and published in *The World of Art* in 1900. See 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*, ed. by Christiana Payne and William Vaughan (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2004), pp. 203–23, and Anna Poznanskaia, 'The Pre-Raphaelites in Russia', *The Tretyakov Gallery Magazine*, 39, 2 (2013), http://www.tretyakovgallerymagazine.com/articles/%E2%84%962-2013-39/pre-raphaelites-russia

36   An oil version of *Dreamers of Ortachala*, dated 1920, was sold at Sotheby's in 2009 (Russian Art Evening Sale, Sotheby's, London, 8 June 2009, lot 21). It seems more likely that this was painted in the 1940s after a sketch of 1920; if so, it would have been the latter that likely came to the attention of Japaridze.

11.4 Ucha Japaridze, *Sleeping Shepherd*, 1935. Pastel on paper, 17 x 30cm. Ucha Japaridze House Museum, Tbilisi. Photograph © Georgian National Museum, all rights reserved.

A pair of buffalo that wallow in the river near Japaridze's shepherd also connects the image with Symbolist precedents. Buffalo feature frequently in Symbolist art and literature in light of their meaning in various religious traditions, in which they often embody masculine potency and fertility. Indeed, Japaridze's buffalo recall the wallowing beasts (buffalo and horses) which appear in Gudiashvili's *Green Nymphs* (1925), *In the Waves of Tskhenistsquali* (1925), and *Buffalo Tandem* (1931), which in turn make reference to other Russian and European Symbolist sources. In Gudiashvili's *Green Nymphs*, an otherworldly female nude perches on the back of a buffalo wading in swirling waters, while another nymph swims at its side. The image calls to mind the myth of the Rape of Europa, in which Zeus disguises himself as a tame bull in order to gain Europa's trust, abduct and rape her — a subject also treated by Valentin Serov in 1910. Gudiashvili's *In the Waves of Tskhenistsquali*, meanwhile, presents another naked beauty floating on her back in a river, this time flanked by a pair of red horses. As well as bringing to mind Hamlet's Ophelia — a favourite subject of the Russian Symbolists and the English Pre-Raphaelites alike — Gudiashvili's image clearly refers to Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin's seminal Symbolist painting, *Bathing of a Red Horse* (1912), in which adolescent male nudes and red and white horses are presented bathing in a clear blue pool.[37]

Beyond their shared subject matter, Japaridze's painting also bears compositional similarities with each of these works. The animals presented in each are viewed from a high vantage point causing them to appear suspended in the flattened space of the surrounding water, rather than on its surface. The plane of the water's surface is disconnected from the naturalistic space rendered in the remainder of each picture so that the animals seem to inhabit an alternate realm. Elliptical compositions produced by the curve of the water's edge in both Petrov-Vodkin's and Japaridze's images and in Gudiashvili's *Buffalo Tandem*, moreover, make this division between the separate planes still more pronounced. In Japaridze's picture, as a result, the animals are read as belonging to the domain of the shepherd's dream, rather than to his waking reality.

It has been suggested that the elliptical composition of Petrov-Vodkin's *Bathing of a Red Horse* refers to the distortions produced in frescoes adorning the domed ceilings of Byzantine and Russian Orthodox churches. Indeed, Gudiashvili's and Petrov-Vodkin's engagement with the formal devices of ecclesiastical mural painting is widely

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37 *Tskhenistsquali* is the name of a river that runs through western Georgia. Notably its name translates literally as 'water of horses'. As such, Gudiashvili's image is not simply one of horses bathing. Instead it represents a symbolic vision reflecting the river's mythology. They also resemble horses appearing in Gudiashvili's *Portrait of Galaktion Tabidze and "Blue Horses"* (1919), which was painted in response to Tabidze's poem of that name. Tabidze's poem in turn was written with reference to the English painter (and disciple of the Pre-Raphaelites) Walter Crane's painting, *Horses of Neptune* (1892), in which Neptune rides the crest of a huge wave made up of dozens of galloping horses. In Tabidze's poem the thundering speed of the galloping horses is employed to reflect the sense of rushing time that is experienced by a person mourning a recent death; the rushing water and powerful horses in Gudiashvili's *In the Waves of Tskhenistsquali* reassert the image's reference to the tragic death of Ophelia, and its engagement with Symbolist ideas.

acknowledged. Japaridze's picture reflects comparable debts to Christian art (whether in direct reference to ecclesiastical sources, or absorbed indirectly via contemporaries such as Gudiashvili and Petrov-Vodkin), not only in its elliptical composition, but also in the Byzantine stylisation apparent in the delicately drawn hands and feet and linear facial features of Japaridze's shepherd, his saint-like head bowed and presented in profile.

In addition to the extensive evidence of Japaridze's engagement with Symbolist precedents and aesthetics in these early works and sketchbooks, five pages from these early sketchbooks are of special interest, in appearing to represent an attempt to develop a system of symbolic imagery through which spiritual, emotional, and psychological experiences could be communicated. Each of the five pages presents a set of two images side by side on a single page: a pencil portrait on one side (four self-portraits and a fifth, likely of the artist's fiancée, Margarita), and beside it a watercolour image that appears symbolically to visualise the portrait subject's inner experience or emotional condition.[38] Subtle variations in the sitters' facial expressions indicate emotional or psychological states that are reiterated in the accompanying watercolour image. In one, for example, the artist's head is tilted to one side, resting on his palm, and his eyelids droop heavily over his eyes, intimating lethargy or fatigue. Beside it is a picture of a haystack (fig. 11.5), apparently unrelated. However, there is a compelling visual correspondence between the two images. Like the artist's head resting in his hand, the haystack leans at almost the same angle onto a bowed stick, which is propped against it and looks close to snapping under its weight. The juxtaposition, then, reads as an attempt to visualise the weight of the portrait-subject's emotional or psychological experience in the otherwise banal, everyday form of the haystack. In that sense it sets an important precedent for considering the psychological and spiritual symbolism in Japaridze's painting in subsequent decades.

The remaining pairings operate in a similar way. A second, as in the first example, is connected through visual-spatial correspondences — the strength and dynamism of the artist's portrait, now drawn in profile, is reiterated in the image of an ancient tree whose gnarled branches seem to strive forward in the same way as the portrait. The remaining three watercolours, however, respond to their accompanying portraits through more explicit symbolic narratives. In a watercolour alongside one self-portrait, for example, the artist is attacked by a winged demon, which envelops him with large black-green wings, coiling its body around his. The demon binds the artist's wrists with one large hand, preventing him from accepting the palette and brush offered to him by the figure of a woman who emerges spirit-like from the clouds. This battle between good and evil narrates the internal conflict reflected in the accompanying portrait, in which the artist grasps his temple with one hand in apparent despair as he looks out at the viewer. It plays with classical sources, but also with Symbolism's preoccupation

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38   The five images run across two small sketchbooks, and are dated between 1926 and 1928, although several of them occupy successive pages and were made within weeks of each other.

with apocalyptic and transcendental themes and its romantic dramatisation of the duty of the artist. Most obviously, it brings to mind Mikhail Lermontov's poem, *The Demon*, and Vrubel's famous *Demon* series of paintings (figs. 2.7 and 2.17; also see figs. 2.8 and 2.14) re-envisaging Lermontov's subject as a tormented soul, a fallen angel struggling to reconcile his humanity with the wild destructive passions that deny him peace, understanding, and belonging. Indeed, Japaridze's pair of images, which embodies exactly such a struggle, makes explicit reference to Vrubel in various aspects of its formal resolution, recalling in particular the latter's *Demon Cast Down* (1902) (fig. 2.17) in its contortion of the artist's and the demon's consumptive, sinewy bodies, the dark, swirling, enveloping forms of the demon's wings, the image's sublime backdrop of snow-capped mountains and looming skies, and its ethereal palette of purples and blues.[39]

In a final example, a portrait of the artist's fiancée, Margarita (fig. 11.6), is presented alongside an image of a white horse standing atop a rocky cliff. The horse's body is stretched back as if braced against a powerful wind that arches a nearby tree and makes its foliage, and the horse's mane, flow horizontally on the air. The sky swirls with clouds, except for a patch of clear, still sky, yellow with the glow of a setting sun, illuminating a winding mountain path leading up to a medieval Georgian church on a distant hilltop. In the foreground a second horse rears on its hind legs and three large rocks stand immovable on the cliff edge. The image incorporates various Symbolist themes: its concern with the sublime and nature's power, with creatures of ancient myth and medieval legend, and the forces of the mystical, magical and supernatural. Visual correspondences between the white horse and Margarita's pale portrait, both presented in profile, facing the viewer's left, and both with delicate, feminine eyes looking straight ahead, position the image as an allegory of Margarita's character. As such, the horse's colour and dynamic stance evoke qualities of purity and steadfastness, while this impression of its durability is reiterated in the rocks in the foreground of the scene. The sense of stillness and calm that surrounds the distant church, then, embodies the peace brought by her Christian faith, while the trinity of boulders associates her Christian faith with her steadfastness and resolve.

These pairs of images offer evidence of Japaridze's engagement with Symbolist themes of the mystical, magical, and spiritual. However, they also reflect an early attempt to communicate spiritual and psychological experiences through the imagery of everyday rural Georgian life or, vice-versa, to instil the everyday with intense emotional tension or spiritual feeling.

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39 Both Lermontov and Vrubel were widely known in Georgia at this time. Specifically, Japaridze would likely have seen Vrubel's illustrations to special editions of Lermontov's works commissioned for and published in 1891 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the poet's birth. He also likely saw Vrubel's works reproduced in Russian *fin-de-siècle* periodicals and in person during a visit to Moscow in 1925. For further analysis of Vrubel's demon paintings, see Chapter 2 of this volume.

11.5 Ucha Japaridze, untitled self-portrait and watercolour, unnumbered sketchbook, 1928 (Haystack). Ucha Japaridze House Museum, Tbilisi. Photograph © Georgian National Museum, all rights reserved.

11.6 Ucha Japaridze, untitled portrait and watercolour, unnumbered sketchbook, 1926 (Margarita). Ucha Japaridze House Museum, Tbilisi. Photograph © Georgian National Museum, all rights reserved.

Animals and Psychological Symbolism
in Japaridze's Mature Painting

Soviet art history has perceived Japaridze's many images of Georgia's rural livestock as an elemental component of a lyrical, romantic, patriotic vision of the country, embodying the timeless calm of Georgia as a rural idyll.[40] However, an examination of these images demonstrates that Japaridze's animals frequently express alarm, conflict, or anguish, or, through certain pictorial devices or symbolic associations, are imbued with a sense of the sacred or divine. They appear to express something beyond the physical world, to embody psychological or spiritual content that connects them with Symbolist concerns, and in doing so present subtexts that run counter to the optimism and harmony of canonical socialist realism.

Soviet art historian Andrei Lebedev alluded to the psychological intensity of these images, noting that they capture the "inner world" of the animals depicted.[41] Of one canvas (*Waiting*, 1956), for example, he observes that the poses of the cattle "express such fatigue that it seems that no human strength could get the animals up".[42] The impression of overwhelming physical exhaustion Lebedev observes here is apparent in a whole series of Japaridze's images of Georgian animals. *Nikortsminda* (1972), for example, is a pastoral scene in which a pair of cattle draws a cart so heavily laden with straw that its cargo engulfs their hind legs and fills the majority of the picture space.[43] Its underlying narrative is one of weighty physical and psychological burden. Another work (*Single Combat*, 1956), presents a scuffle between a calf and a goat kid which, Lebedev comments, "masterfully reveals the stubbornness and cockiness of goat kids".[44] Yet Lebedev's comment ignores its compelling subtext of unequal conflict. A comparable sense of violence and discord is apparent in a series of still-life paintings, including *Still-life With a Bird and a Dish* (1935) and *Game* (1967). These works are striking in their overwhelming starkness, which focuses attention on the animals' violent deaths, on the unnatural angle of their broken necks, presenting a metaphor for human violence and mortality. They have little in common with the images of abundance associated with canonical socialist realist still-life.

Several of these works draw on familiar Symbolist motifs to evoke particular psychological or spiritual states. Both *Nikortsminda* and *Waiting*, for example, use the natural world to reinforce a sense of unease: in *Waiting*, thick, billowing clouds roll into the picture frame behind the cattle, augmenting the impression of foreboding suggested in the work's title (which might also be translated as 'expectation'). In *Nikortsminda*, the colossal form of a mountain in the distance echoes the great mass of the cart's burden, amplifying the impression of its scale. In the visual language of socialist realism, directional light illuminating the cattle from a point directly ahead

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40   See, for example: Lebedev, *Ucha Malakievich Dzhaparidze*, p. 34.
41   *Ibid.*
42   *Ibid.*, p. 23.
43   Nikortsminda is a village in Upper Racha.
44   Lebedev, *Ucha Malakievich Dzhaparidze*, p. 22.

of them implies their symbolic, even sacred, struggle towards a brighter future, of Georgia's striving forward. However, the struggle Japaridze portrays is tragically impeded by the enormity of the burden on the animal's shoulders, on the shoulders of the Georgian people. Instead of the bright light of dawn illuminating a glorious communist future, low, golden, directional light in Japaridze's image indicates the coming dusk, with its own metaphorical implications of death, decay, and darkness. In that sense the image inverts socialist realism's controlled visual language, replacing its vocabulary of awe and optimism with opposing symbols and signs drawn from Symbolist aesthetics.

A 1939 oil study entitled *Small Aurochs* is of particular interest in this sense. In it, an aurochs calf appears to writhe in distress. Its neck is stretched back awkwardly and alarmingly against its body like the game in Japaridze's still-life paintings. Its back is tense and arched and its legs seem to buck beneath it. Even the flicks of its fur appear to reiterate the violence of its movement. Its turmoil is further extenuated by the starkness of the image in which the animal is harshly lit against an indistinct, muddy ground. A tightly enclosed picture space contributes further to a sense of tension and claustrophobia. The choice of the aurochs, moreover, an already extinct ancient ancestor of modern domestic cattle and the archetype of a noble, untameable wild beast, connects the image with the Symbolists' reverence for the wild, and makes the reduction of the animal to a state of helpless anguish all the more poignant.

Notably, this disquieting image reappears two years later, in a portrait of the artist's wife. In this painting (*Margarita Sleeping*, 1941) (fig. 11.7), which is notably neglected in Soviet writing on Japaridze, Margarita is pictured sitting, apparently on the floor in a dark corner of the artist's studio. Her knees are drawn tightly to her chest with her hands clamped over them and her head rests dolefully against the wall. Her eyes are closed and her face is sombre and expressionless. Despite the work's title, her upright foetal pose hardly suggests sleep. Instead, filling the bulk of the picture space, it expresses the same claustrophobic tension as *Small Aurochs*. Moreover, the appearance of *Small Aurochs*, reproduced in the top right corner of the portrait, functions in the same way as the watercolour-portrait juxtapositions in Japaridze's early sketchbooks: the distress visible in the animal's writhing body reiterates the torment expressed in the image of the women curled up on the bare floor. As in the earlier pairings, a host of visual correspondences between the two images confirm their dialogue. They are united by their shared palette of murky browns, their oppressive composition and harsh directional lighting casting dark, muddy shadows. The identical positioning of the woman's and the animal's heads also unites the images: each tilts away from the viewer, starkly exposing the throat, creating an alarming dual image of vulnerability whose violence is further evoked in flashes of red paint that appear through each canvas. The bare flesh of the woman's arms, legs, and feet reiterates a child-like vulnerability that is echoed in the image of the fledgling animal. In that sense they bring to mind themes of ritual sacrifice, and inevitably evoke the slaughter and sacrifice of the Stalinist Purges of the years immediately preceding the work's completion.
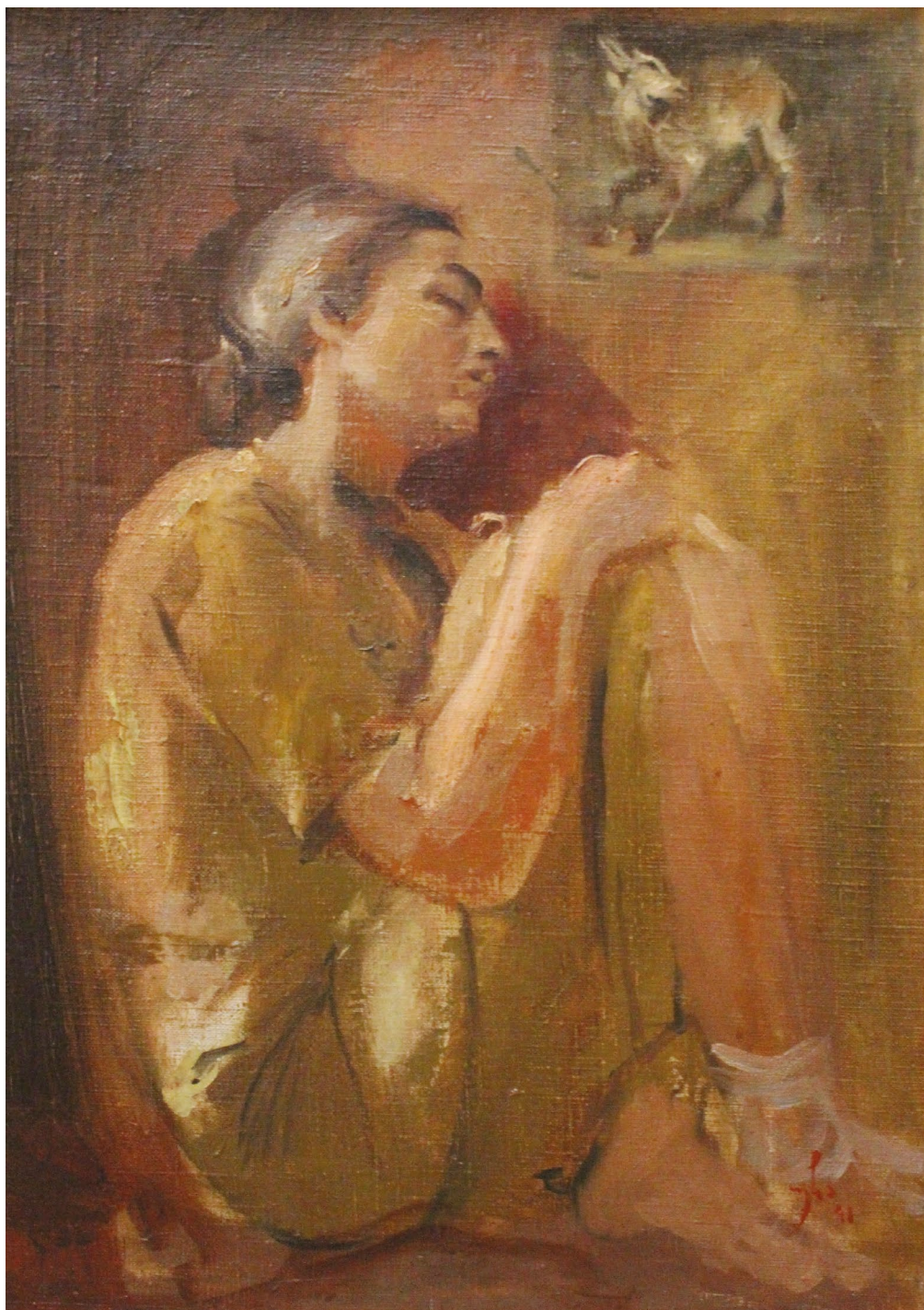
11.7 Ucha Japaridze, *Margarita Sleeping*, 1941. Oil on canvas, 52 x 38 cm. National Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi. Photograph © Georgian National Museum, all rights reserved.

11.8 Ucha Japaridze, unnumbered drawing, unnumbered sketchbook. Pencil and chalk on paper. Ucha Japaridze House Museum, Tbilisi (sketch for *In the Field*, 1930. Oil on canvas. 70 x 100 cm. Ucha Japaridze House Museum, Tbilisi.) Photograph © Georgian National Museum, all rights reserved.

The imagery occurring in almost all of the mature works discussed here finds prototypes in Japaridze's early sketchbooks, suggesting that the genesis of their ideas often occurred decades before their realisation, during the artist's encounter with Symbolism in Georgia. *Small Aurochs* finds a clear precedent in a twisted, deer-like creature in an early sketchbook. Similarly, a pencil sketch for a painting titled *In the Field* (1930) (fig. 11.8), in which the figure of a peasant man drinking deeply from an urn is differentiated in red chalk from an otherwise grey-scale background, presents a probable early incarnation of the demonic character we find in a much later canvas, *Thirst* (1983), discussed later in this chapter. Moreover, two versions of a composition titled 'Solitude', produced nearly fifty years apart in 1930 and 1977 respectively, demonstrate Japaridze's mature engagement with the concerns of his youth. The title itself makes reference to a central theme of several Georgian Symbolists, for which one-time Blue Horn Galaktion Tabidze was nicknamed a "chevalier in the order of loneliness" by his cousin, Titsian. In each version, a solitary buffalo, raising its head up, sends a moan out into a dark, brooding sky and appears to break itself free from a wooden plough resting on its shoulders. Produced at the very beginning and end of the artist's career, these images clearly reflect his continued engagement with the Symbolist trope of the solitary, tormented soul most famously embodied in Vrubel's demons, and with its conception of animals and the natural world as conduits for the expression of the spiritual.

"Georgia as an Oriental Woman"[45]

Japaridze's representations of women and the feminine respond to constructs of woman in the Romantic and Symbolist traditions and to Georgia's own cultural mythology of woman. Women have occupied an unusually prominent place in Georgian history, and conceptions of woman as a result of this history are an important part of the nation's cultural mythology. A woman, St Nino, for example, is credited with introducing Christianity to Iberia in the fourth century. Queen Tamar, moreover, who ruled Georgia between 1184 and 1213, oversaw a Golden Age in the country's history during which Georgia achieved massive territorial expansion, increased economic and military power, and a flourishing in literature, art, and architecture. She is often conceived of as the nation's spiritual mother.

    These specifically Georgian models of female virtue embody characteristics different to the construction of woman within the Romantic and Symbolist traditions. As touched on with respect to Russian Romantic literature, in Symbolist iconography, woman often occupies an ambiguous space between beautiful object of desire — the pure, innocent, vulnerable, virginal maiden, sensitive, spiritual, and self-sacrificing — and the demonic seductress, fiendish, untrustworthy, and dangerous. She takes the form of earthly women — the fallen woman, prostitute, or madwoman (as in many of the Pre-Raphaelites' canvases) — or is based on the female protagonists of Greek mythology (sirens, goddesses, nymphs, and harpies). In either guise these constructions are based

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45   Heading borrowed from Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire*.

in conventionally female attributes viewed from a male vantage point. Male writers and painters represent woman — as the embodiment of the spiritual — via 'feminine' qualities including physical beauty, serenity, loyalty, and gentleness.

In Georgia's cultural mythology, however, woman, represented in the models of St Nino and Tamar, often embodies both traditionally male and female virtues. Although Tamar is celebrated in medieval Georgian chronicles in terms of gendered female virtues including piety, generosity, and beauty, she is also admired for her military prowess and is even referred to as a "King of Kings". Moreover, Nestan Darejan, the heroine of Rustaveli's twelfth-century poem *Knight in the Panther's Skin* (which has been described as a "moral codex of Feudal Georgia"), is said to have been modelled on Tamar's image.[46] In addition to 'feminine' attributes of beauty and loyalty, she displays conventionally 'masculine' qualities of courage, resolve, and stoicism rarely attached to women in Symbolist and Romantic literature and art. These models of woman in Georgia, together with conceptualisations of woman in Georgian religious and secular culture, ranging from the female deities of pagan Georgia to notions of women's roles in Soviet society, contribute to a tapestry of associations defining to the feminine in Georgia that inform Japaridze's painting.

Some images of women in Japaridze's early sketchbooks clearly respond to European Symbolism's model of woman. In one undated watercolour (probably late 1920s) (fig. 11.9) a beautiful figure clothed in white, with what appear to be wings folded behind her back, floats on a white cloud. A large crescent moon hangs in the night sky. In her hand is a willowy branch, perhaps borrowing from classical representations of the laurel branch as a symbol of peace, protection of the purity of one's soul, or psychic sensitivity. The curve of the branch over her head, together with that of the large crescent moon, form a protective space around her, while sweeping pencil lines and swirls of blue paint in the sky indicate an encircling gale. In that sense she is the archetypal maiden of European Symbolism: serene, pure, contemplative, desirable, and otherworldly in her supernatural stillness.

Decades later, in 1966, Japaridze returned to a similar conceptualisation of woman in a series of works made in connection with the celebration of the eight-hundredth anniversary of Rustaveli's birth. He made a series of portraits of Nestan Darejan and a set of book illustrations to *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, both of which drew on Symbolist aesthetics (and on Vrubel in particular) and emphasise occult themes found in Rustaveli's masterpiece. In the poem, Nestan is kidnapped and held captive by several supernatural villains, first by *devis* — demonic ogre-like creatures dwelling in the caves of remote mountains — and then by the Kadji — the dangerous sorcerers of the impenetrable city of Kadjeti. Japaridze made two large graphic portraits of Nestan. *Nestan in White* (1966, Georgian National Museum) (fig. 11.10) depicted Nestan in an ornate white gown during her first meeting with her love, the knight, Tariel. In *Nestan in Black* (1966), the princess's dress and veil turns black to reflect her grief as she languishes without hope of escape, imprisoned in a high tower by the Kadji.

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46   N. Berdzenishvili, *Sakartvelos istoriis sakitkhebi*, Vol. V (Tbilisi, 1966) in Nanava, 'Conceptualising the Georgian Nation,' p. 45.

11.9 Ucha Japaridze, untitled watercolour, unnumbered sketchbook. Probably late 1920s. Ucha Japaridze House Museum, Tbilisi. Photograph © Georgian National Museum, all rights reserved.

11.10 Ucha Japaridze, *Nestan in White*, 1966. Tempera on paper, 56 x 42 cm., Ucha Japaridze House Museum, Tbilisi. Photograph © Georgian National Museum, all rights reserved.
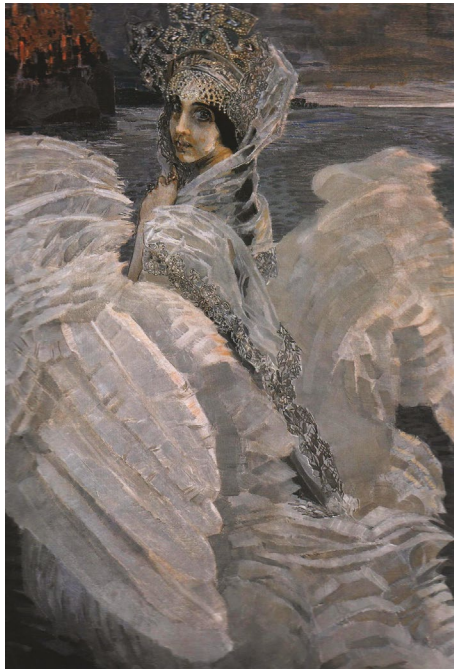
11.11 Mikhail Vrubel, *Swan Princess*, 1900. Oil on canvas, 142.5 x 93.5 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons. wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tsarevna-Lebed_by_Mikhail_Vrubel.jpg

Nestan in White (and several further preparatory versions of this work) make clear reference to Vrubel's *Swan Princess* (1901, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) (fig. 11.11). Vrubel's painting presents a vision of Odette, the princess from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, who, cursed by an evil sorcerer, is turned into a swan. Her story and Nestan's have much in common. Like Nestan, Odette is the victim of evils inflicted by supernatural forces, a beautiful princess saved by the enduring love of her prince (or, in Nestan's case, her knight). Japaridze's *Nestan in White* is united with Vrubel's canvas in its composition and palette. Nestan, like Vrubel's Odette, is dressed in a full-skirted white dress and veil. Her skirt fills one half of the picture space, billowing out in rich folds of satin-like fabric decorated with tiny white flowers recalling the amorphous feathery forms of the dress-cum-wings engulfing Odette. Nestan's long dark braided hair and delicate facial features mirror those of Vrubel's princess, as do her decorative headdress (though hers is more modest than Odette's) and her veil. The formal resolution of Japaridze's image also united it with Vrubel's. The folds of Nestan's dress and the pleats of draped fabric laid across her left arm, for example, mirror the fragmented, mosaic-like forms of fabric and feathers in Vrubel's image. Moreover, Japaridze creates an impression of crispness and translucency in the fabric of Nestan's veil through angular lines that closely echo Vrubel's treatment of the same material. The overwhelming lapis-lazuli glow of Japaridze's image supplies a heavenly quality that is comparable to the magical purple hues of Vrubel's equally monochrome palette, while ecclesiastical wall paintings of Georgian saints visible behind Japaridze's Nestan reiterate her purity and even divinity.[47]

It is not only in works on literary subjects, however, but also in a series of mature paintings concerned with life in rural Georgia, that Symbolist motifs and devices merge with models for the feminine found in Georgian culture. In several paintings, for example, female protagonists are imbued with symbolic motifs that connect them with women's roles in Georgian society, and her image in Georgian cultural mythology. In particular, in works such as *Mother's Contemplation* (1945), *Woman with a Jug* (1955), and *Mother — Native Regions* (1957), two aspects of women's identity in Georgian culture are stressed: firstly, motherhood and the image of 'Mother Georgia' (*kartlis deda*), the Georgian incarnation of the Soviet 'mother of the homeland' (*rodina-mat'*) — a female personification of the nation rooted in the conglomerate image of Tamar, St Nino,

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47   Japaridze's 1966 book illustrations of Nestan are equally indebted to Vrubel, and equally concerned with the occult and mystical aspects of Rustaveli's poem. One etching depicts Nestan held hostage in the tower, reacting to a letter received from another character, P'hatman, who tells of Tariel's plans to rescue her, and his distress at her captivity. In reflecting Nestan's distress and agitation, Japaridze presents her with several overlapping faces, so that she appears at once to be reading the letter and looking around her in several different directions. This gives the image a sinister quality that seems to refer to the dark magic of the Kadji's sorcerey. Although the date of acquisition cannot be known, Japaridze owned several books and albums on Vrubel's painting, including a large reproduction of *The Swan Princess*, which remain in the artist's library at his studio in Tbilisi.

Nestan, *rodina-mat'*, and ancient divinities from the pagan Great Mother goddess Nana and the divine Sophia; secondly, Japaridze's women also appear to refer to practices of mourning in Georgian culture, and to women's traditional role in Georgian society as the leaders of mourning.

Discussing the culturally traditional role of Georgian women as "proclaimers of suffering" in Georgian communities and the nation as a whole (grounded partly in historical religious practices), Lauren Ninoshvili has demonstrated how in post-Soviet Georgia women's public performances of personal grief and political anger have seen women adopt the "stylistic, gestural, and discursive-interpretive conventions" of the traditional funeral lament — wailing rites known as *khmit nat'irali* (voiced weeping).[48] Japaridze's women, through certain symbolic details and pictorial devices, appear similarly to draw on these conventions. Personifications of motherland became commonplace in the visual culture of the late Stalin era, when the image of *rodina-mat'* became an important symbol of Soviet resistance and losses in the Second World War. She, and her national republican incarnations, were envisaged not only as figureheads of national mourning, but also as formidable protectors of the Motherland — enormous, robust, and armed, prepared to defend her citizens and land.[49]

Japaridze's symbolic personifications of Georgia, however, have little in common with these towering maternal warriors. Instead, the gestures of the solitary female figures in *Mother's Contemplation*, *Woman with a Jug*, and *Mother — Native Regions* evoke the conventions of mourning that Ninoshvili observes in wailing rites, whereby female mourners "cup their hands at their mouths or muffle their sobs with handkerchiefs" or "clutch their heads in a gesture of despair and disbelief".[50] In each painting the head of the woman portrayed is bowed slightly, a hand is raised to her mouth, and her face is marked with a solemn, contemplative expression. Each figure, moreover, is positioned at ninety degrees to the viewer, in a static contemplative pose that recalls the representation of saints in Byzantine and Orthodox icons and frescoes, and the Russian religious Symbolist paintings of Mikhail Nesterov, in whose work the same

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48   For discussion of these rituals, see Lauren Ninoshvili, '"Wailing in the Cities": Media, Modernity, and the Metamorphosis of Georgian Women's Expressive Labor', *Music & Politics*, 6, 2 (Summer 2012), https://doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0006.202. Similar rites, taking place in Ancient Armenia, are also described in Charles Burney and David Marshall Lang, *The Peoples of the Hills: Ancient Ararat and Caucasus* (London: Phoenix Press, 1971).

49   At the time of its unveiling in 1967, the Stalingrad (now Volgograd) statue was the tallest statue in the world. For a fascinating discussion of the particular symbolism of the *Mother Albania* monument which presides over the National Martyrs Cemetery of Albania in Tirana (constructed in 1972), see Raino Isto, '"We Raise Our Eyes and Feel as if She Rules the Sky": The Mother Albania Monument and the Visualization of National History' in *Lapidari*, ed. by Vincent W. J. van Gerven Oei (New York: Punctum, 2015), pp. 73–80.

50   Ninoshvili, 'Wailing in the Cities', p. 3.

device is a constant motif. By drawing on these devices Japaridze reiterates the spiritual authority of his figures as saint-like, spiritual guardians of the Georgian nation.

Through their visual associations with Christian saints, with motherhood, and mourning, Japaridze's women bring to mind the image of Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498–99), in which the Madonna cradles the dead body of Christ in her arms — a representation of personal grief that embodies the mourning of the Christian community at large. They depart from the *Pietà*, however, in that here the absence of reference to a child delivers the narrative of loss. This becomes most apparent through a comparison of *Mother's Contemplation* with the earlier *Friends of Youth* (1939). The two works are almost identical in composition and subject. The same peasant woman stands in the landscape, with one hand raised towards her mouth, apparently in thought. The only significant difference is the appearance in *Friends of Youth* of an elderly male peasant, standing before a basket of apples. His disappearance reminds us of the mass disappearance of men from wartime Georgia, while the basket, a common symbol of fertility and regeneration, reiterates the repercussions of those losses for Georgia's prospects of replenishment and renewal. As a personification of Georgia, then, this mother also personifies the nation's mourning.

Japaridze's *Mother — Native Regions*, too, has more aligning it with the 'mother-mourner' of *Mother's Contemplation* than with canonical Soviet motherland images. 'Mother,' here, is the artist's own elderly mother. However, details in the work make clear that she also embodies a more universal image of Georgian motherhood identified in the previous examples. As in those examples, she does not adopt the powerful, standing pose of traditional Soviet personifications of motherland. She sits, instead, on a hillside under the shade of a tree, surveying the valley below. Pursed lips and a hand she raises to her mouth connect her with gestural conventions of mourning, as does her traditional black mourning dress, while her representation in profile imbues her again with a saint-like quality. As she looks down into the valley below — a swathe of parched yellow-orange land scattered with electricity pylons and large new farm buildings and scarred with paths recently cut by combine harvesters — she appears to lament Georgia's physical transformation under Soviet rule.

In terms of visual precedents, this painting cites the work of another of Japaridze's former professors — David Kakabadze's (1889–1952) *Imereti — My Mother* (1918) (fig. 11.12). The two works share subject matter and compositional resolution. In *Imereti*, the artist's mother is, like Japaridze's, seated on a hillside under a tree, against a native landscape. In both works, her pose is static and saint-like in full profile. She wears modest dress and a contemplative expression. The two works are also united in their shared debts to various Symbolist sources. As well as the women's poses, decorative, minutely painted foliage and flowers in the foreground of each canvas recall both the work of Nesterov and the Pre-Raphaelites. The employment of symbolic objects, moreover, further aligns the paintings with Symbolist sources.

11.12 David Kakabadze, *Imereti — My Mother*, 1918. Oil on canvas. 137 x 153 cm. Art Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi. Photograph © Georgian National Museum, all rights reserved.

With the help of these objects, divergent personifications of Georgia are presented. In place of the sword usually wielded by official Soviet incarnations of motherland, for example, Japaridze's mother is presented with a closed umbrella propped against her knee. The umbrella, a portent of coming adversity met with resigned forbearance that contrasts with the aggressive defiance of Soviet motherland images, positions her as both a lamenter of past losses and an anticipator of future hardship. By contrast, a tightly bound ball of wool rests at Kakabadze's mother's feet. She entwines it in her fingers and begins to weave a cloth like the delicate shawl laid across her knees. Produced in the years of Georgia's independence, Kakabadze's *Mother* thus appears as a holy 'mother-creator', a saintly source of Georgian beauty and regeneration, where Japaridze's post-War 'mother-mourner' is a grieving, politically impotent, though morally resolute Madonna.

In the final two decades of Japaridze's career he returned again to occult themes, transforming rural genre scenes into dark, nightmarish visions. A series of genre

canvases including *Visiting the Tea Grower* (1971), *Thirst* (1983), and the earlier, unfinished *Girl from Khevsureti* (1965), for example, share a strange, unnatural palette uniting bright scarlet with pale violet, lemon yellow, teal, murky blue-grey and black, imbuing their portrayal of life in rural Georgia with a sickly, hallucinatory aura that has more in common with the painting of Sudeikin or Gudiashvili than with canonical socialist realist constructions of Soviet reality.[51]

Representations of women in these works draw on the dichotomous constructions of woman belonging to the Symbolist tradition, and of the spiritual construction of Georgia found in Russian (and Georgian) Romantic literature. In *Thirst*, a woman in a summer dress and headscarf cups her hands at a well for a man to drink. It is an everyday rural scene in which, in line with socialist realist visual language of productive, domestic harmony, the woman provides care for a man who has likely just returned from the field. But there is something unnerving and vampirish about the image. The man appears to force the woman's hands (or rather, her wrists) towards his mouth. His flesh and clothing are strangely red: a devil-like scarlet form contrasted against the sickly, jade tinge of her seemingly blood-drained face and arms. Grotesquely stylised, sharp, angular facial features confirm his demonic persona. Finally, a dagger stowed in the man's belt introduces further violent associations. Next to the innocence and purity symbolised in the woman's bare arms, legs, and feet, and in light of the well's altar-like appearance, it invokes associations of ritual sacrifice previously observed in *Margarita Sleeping*. In that sense, in its reference to pagan practices still performed in certain remote mountainous regions of Georgia it plays on Asiatic, exotic, non-Christian elements of Georgian culture, in order to transform an image of harmonious, productive rural life, familial kinship, and motherly female virtue compatible with the language of socialist realism into a nightmarish vision of violence, desire, and female submission to male lust.

In *Girl from Khevsureti*, Soviet life also appears transformed through reference to the occult and the demonic. Set in Khevsureti, a stronghold of paganism in twentieth-century Georgia, it evokes exotic, Asiatic aspects of Georgian culture through the figure of a local woman. Notably, Khevsureti's unique religious culture is characterised by a binary system of beliefs in which men, considered the 'purest' section of the society (with shamans and mediums as the purest among them), lead the spiritual life of the community. At the opposite end of the scale, women, and particularly those of child-bearing age, are considered the least pure and are relegated figuratively and literally to the periphery of the community, since contact with them is believed to risk the pollution of the male community.[52]

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51   In its resemblance to the artificially coloured, low-quality photographs found in many contemporary Soviet publications, this palette might also be taken to refer to the artificiality of official representations of Soviet reality.

52   Characterisation of the findings of Georges Charachidzé, published in *Le système religieux de la Géorgie païnne: analyse structurale d'une civilization* (Paris: François Maspero, 1968), developed by Zurab K'ik'nadze in *Kartuli mitologia*, and summarised in Tuite, 'Highland Georgian paganism', p. 83.

Through a series of associations, the woman portrayed here embodies the demonisation of women in pagan Khevsureti. Her face, directed slightly away from the viewer, is completely obscured with black paint whose dark tone suggests a supernatural, demonic darkness blacker than her veil. She embraces a young man beside her. The embrace, and the veiled face pressed into the male figure's throat, have the same ghoulish, unnatural quality as the encounter portrayed in *Thirst*, their unnaturalness reiterated, as in *Thirst*, in the sickly greenish-yellow colour of the man's face. He in turn appears static, as if powerless to move away, reasserting a sense of a supernatural power held over him by the woman. As in *Thirst*, a palette of teal, lemon yellow, lilac, scarlet, and black imparts an aura of the phantasmagorical that encourages associations with witchcraft or black magic, while the colourful, patterned fabric of the woman's dress and apron tie her further to an exotic, Asiatic identity. These works reflect Japaridze's deliberate appropriation of Asiatic and non-Christian elements of Georgian culture in order to transform images of life in Soviet Georgia into something dark and sinister.

In *Girl from Khevsureti*, then, Japaridze imbues an ostensibly ethnographic subject with connotations of mysticism and magic grounded in the non-Christian spiritual traditions of the region presented. The result is an image that has more in common with the Symbolist tradition, and with Romantic writers' dichotomous visions of Georgia as at once a desirable beauty and a dangerous Asiatic other, than with the wholesome, optimistic language of socialist realism. In that sense, these works belong to a trend in the late Soviet period whereby "after Stalin's death, occult and related themes were used counter-culturally to criticise Soviet reality".[53]

Conclusion

Drawing on the visual vocabulary of the Symbolist movement, and evoking national cultural myths (moulded through Russian and Georgian Romantic visions of Georgia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), Japaridze constructed a portrait of Georgian reality that played on the ambiguities afforded by the collision of Soviet and Georgian national myth systems. In the post-War years in particular, Christian and other spiritual imagery informed images of life in rural Georgia that find their best analogy in the Soviet Village Prose movement of the 1950s and 1960s: produced and permitted within the official cultural climate of the relatively liberal post-Stalin epoch, they gently criticise Soviet realities and yearn for a lost way of life. Resurrecting favourite Symbolist motifs, including, in particular, imagery associated with the occult, and repurposing ideas explored in his youth, Japaridze's visions of life in Soviet Georgia were transformed still further in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Scenes, ostensibly pastoral but unshakably disturbing, seemed to reflect a growing mood of dissent in Georgia that would eventually contribute to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

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53   Rosenthal, *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, p. 28.

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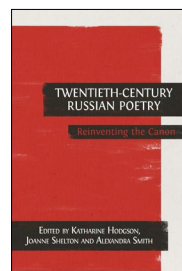
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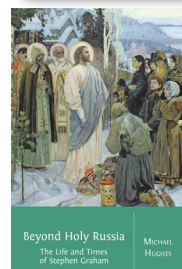*Edited by Katharine Hodgson, Joanne Shelton
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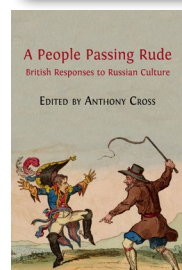
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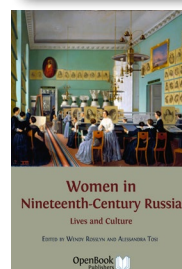
Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art
New Perspectives

Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharow (eds.)

In 1911 Vasily Kandinsky published the first edition of 'On the Spiritual in Art', a landmark modernist treatise in which he sought to reframe the meaning of art and the true role of the artist. For many artists of late Imperial Russia – a culture deeply influenced by the regime's adoption of Byzantine Orthodoxy centuries before – questions of religion and spirituality were of paramount importance. As artists and the wider art community experimented with new ideas and interpretations at the dawn of the twentieth century, their relationship with 'the spiritual' – broadly defined – was inextricably linked to their roles as pioneers of modernism.

This diverse collection of essays introduces new and stimulating approaches to the ongoing debate as to how Russian artistic modernism engaged with questions of spirituality in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. Ten chapters from emerging and established voices offer new perspectives on Kandinsky and other familiar names, such as Kazimir Malevich, Mikhail Larionov, and Natalia Goncharova, and introduce less well-known figures, such as the Georgian artists Ucha Japaridze and Lado Gudiashvili, and the craftswoman and art promoter Aleksandra Pogosskaia.

Prefaced by a lively and informative introduction by Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharow that sets these perspectives in their historical and critical context, *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art: New Perspectives* enriches our understanding of the modernist period and breaks new ground in its re-examination of the role of religion and spirituality in the visual arts in late Imperial Russia. Of interest to historians and enthusiasts of Russian art, culture, and religion, and those of international modernism and the avant-garde, it offers innovative readings of a history only partially explored, revealing uncharted corners and challenging long-held assumptions.

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