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THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE OR AVANT-GARDE ART OF RUSSIA?

In my articles and books I more than once drew attention to the fact that the name the Russian avant-garde was conventionally registered in the second half of the 20th century under the influence of European Marxist intellectuals or those with Marxist leanings, who generated the myth of the 1920s that the October 1917 Revolution had given birth to the great avant-garde art. I am not going to repeat the claim that in fact the so-called Russian Futurism, likewise a conventional and not quite appropriate term, had caused the main breakthrough in world art before 1917, when it revised all the dominant codes from the Renaissance period. Neo-primitivism, Fauvist Cezannism, Cubo-Futurism, Suprematism, objectlessness, and Tatlin's "concrete abstraction" are all the major avant-garde accomplishments that were already in Russia before the revolutions of 1917. One can only say that the spread of Russia's achievements became possible due to the worldwide impact of Soviet history. The 1920s gave birth to at least three major innovative trends – the Organic School of Matyushin, Soviet Constructivism, and the analytical art of Filonov and his school.

Let us, however, go back to the problem of the name "Russian avant-garde" in order to challenge it from a different point of view.

To begin with, it would have made more sense to restore the name "left-wing art" to the innovative school that appeared in the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union, "left-wing" understood before the October

Revolution not in the political sense, but as distinguished from “right-wing”, conservative, routine academic art¹.

Now let us address the question of whether “left-wing art” in Russia and the Soviet Union was really “Russian”. To judge by the passport, within the Russian Empire all citizens were “Russians” of different faiths, in the Soviet Union, too, all citizens were Soviet of different ethnicity. For instance, Mavlevich was a Russian Roman Catholic prior to 1917, he said he was Ukrainian in the Soviet Union and Polish when he filled out questionnaires abroad.

Today, the words “rossiyanin” and “rossiisky” are used in linguistic practice in reference to non-Russian citizens of the Russian Federation, even though they are yet to be formalised in dictionaries. A constant desire to Russify all components of the Russian Federation, which is readily identified with Russia, is observed in government quarters and even among many members of the intelligentsia. I think this process started with Peter the Great and the establishment of the Russian Empire, which laid claim to the exclusive legacy of Old Rus’. It is indicative in this respect that the ambiguous “Russian” rather than the grammatically correct “Rosskii” serves as the adjective derived from “Russia”.

I have taken the liberty to bring up these lexical peculiarities not because of the pedantic desire to clear up some specific linguistic problems underpinning the dominant ideology in culture, among other spheres, which means that the same is true of art. No need to reiterate here that in art, pictorial art in particular, forms in different creative periods of different artists do not come *ex nihilo*. It sometimes seems to creators themselves that they create out of nothing. However, there has been no case when a work of art, consciously or not, has not used or transformed elements accumulated in its creative memory upon contact with reality and other creations. That is why I find the phrase “Russian avant-garde” inappropriate, despite the fact that it has become current as a “brand”, to use this horrible post-Soviet term, and that it will be hard to do without it. Just as “Cubism” is inadequate to define the maximum geometrism derived from Cezanne’s works, so “Russian avant-garde”, if we consider its components, is not reduced to the Russian elements alone. That is why it would make more sense to talk

¹ As early as 1922, when the first Soviet exhibition of all trends was held at the Van Diemen Gallery in Berlin, they spoke and wrote about the situation in arts of Russia precisely in those terms. Kseniya Boguslavskaya-Puni published a review of that exhibition in one of the Berlin newspapers under the title “Bolschewismus und Kunst”, in which she writes about the “right wing”, a “group of artists of the centre (Cezannists)” and objectless artists (see the second publication of that article and its translation into English in the catalogue *Die Russen in Berlin, 1910–1930*, Berlin, Stolz, 1995, pp. 42–50). The Swiss archive of the late Herman Berninger kept the typewritten French translation of Boguslavskaya’s article that I published in the *Petit journal de l’exposition Jean Pougny. 1892–1956*, Paris, Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1993. That French version was translated into English, see Jean-Claude Marcadé, “Ksenija Boguslavskaja (Pougny) on the ‘First Russian Exposition’ in Berlin, 1922” in: *For SK. In Celebration of the Life and Career of Simon Karlinsky*, Berkeley, Slavic Specialities, 1994, pp. 184–90.

about the “avant-garde of Russia” while bearing in mind the new understanding of the term “rossiisky” (Russian).

I want to sum up the theses I set forth in my book about *The Russian Avant-garde between 1907 and 1927* that have not yet been presented in Russian. I postulate “geographical” differences when writing about artists hailing from the Russian Empire. There was always rivalry between Moscow and St Petersburg that found expression in the aesthetic make-up and different artistic styles. In this respect, in the catalogue of Diaghilev’s “Exhibition of Russian Art” in Paris in 1906 Alexander Benois identified “two utterly different trends” in contemporary art: “The St Petersburg World of Art, being at times somewhat literary, gives preference to refined sensations characteristic of the periods of great finesse, finds pleasure in charming strolls into the past and preaches the cult of the intimate, precious and exotic.”¹

Benois contrasts this “art of St Petersburg” with the “art of Moscow, which originates primarily in the works of the great decorator Vrubel” and “tends to be more decorative and largely purely painterly”².

Of course, these oppositions, at times too generalised and reductive, should be nuanced in every particular case. However, in the left-wing art of Russia one can observe different signal and iconographic lines and distinguishing features that owe their specificity to the different cultural traditions of the places where they took shape.

If we apply this distinction between the “St Petersburg” and “Moscow” schools to the left-wing art of Russia, it could be traced in the countless creative elements of the protagonists of these schools. Let me take but one example. In Chinese ink drawings made by Puni in 1916–7 we find the emblems of St Petersburg, the capital on the Neva, a city of ghosts, wandering shadows, doubles and hallucinations which have inhabited it since the times of Pushkin’s and Gogol’s stories and flowed through the dreary stairs and dark corners of Dostoevsky to the weird labyrinths of Andrei Bely. With his stunningly fluent strokes Puni conveyed bits of street and house interiors. There is some special tonality here, characteristic only of Puni, a world formed of superposed abstract planes and scraps of reality, all of it splintering, “running” and faltering in dreamlike space. In contrast to this world, Kandinsky produced works of Moscow picturesqueness, such as *Colourful Life*, and left behind the well-known hymn to Moscow in his memoirs.

One cannot sidestep the wholesale involvement of the Ukrainian School in the so-called “Russian” avant-garde. Let it be remembered that the so-called “Russian Futurism” (another inappropriate term!) originated with the Burliuk brothers in Ukraine. Many protagonists of left-wing art

¹ A. Benois, “Préface”, *Salon d’Automne. Exposition de l’Art Russe*, Paris, 1906, p. 11, see the Russian translation in my article “Saint Petersburg as the Main Axis of Modernity” in *Saint Petersburg. A Window on Russia 1900–1935*, St Petersburg: Feniks, 1997, p. 208.

² *Ibid.*

manifested in their works impulses stemming from the territory called *Malorossia* under the tsarist regime; the most graphic examples are the Burliuks, Malevich, Tatlin, Larionov, Alexandra Exter, Archipenko and Sonia Delaunay.

Every country produces artists forever marked by the sunlight of that particular land, the contours of its landscapes, forms and colours of the surrounding world (architecture, fabrics, household utensils, folklore rituals and so on), as well as the religious and cultural weave that pervades their creative thought from childhood. This mix determines the specificity of “national” art and accounts for the fact that a mature artist working in a different country noticeably differs from his/her counterparts of the host country. Suffice it to remember the numerous examples, including El Greco, Picasso, Kandinsky, Archipenko, Sonia Delaunay and Marc Chagall.

Who would have thought to make Picasso a French painter, even though he wholly belongs to the history of French painting? Now is Kandinsky not a Russian artist in Germany or France? Does it make any difference to know that and write about that, of course, not because of narrow nationalist or – *horribile dictu!* – socio-biological or ethnic considerations, but so as the better to understand their works. Or perhaps one should confine oneself to the horizontal reading of art products.

So, I distinguish a very influential and important “Ukrainian School” in the art of historical Russia, and also Oriental trends, among which the “Armenian School” stands out thanks to its luminaries G.B. Yakulov and M.S. Saryan, plus one more phenomenon such as the Tashkent “Masters of the New Orient”.

I won’t be able to show in detail within the framework of this report how all those non-Russian schools within the left-wing art of Russia or at its periphery bear the mark of a specific space, light, colour gamut and forms of traditional art of their land.

I will only cite a few general examples. Take the Suprematism of Malevich and that of his followers in Russia. If you compare Liubov Popova’s Suprematism with that of Malevich, you will see that space is not free in Popova’s pictures and shapes are fast to the painting surface whereas Malevich’s quadrangles, rectangles and circles hover like planets ready to take off.

The question of space is, beyond doubt, connected with geography. To my mind, the most Russian of all Russian artists, Filonov, packs the picture space to utmost tension. I cannot but recall here the Russian forest, which, as V. O. Kliuchevsky pointed out, had such a crucial influence on the formation of Russian mentality and Russian Orthodox spirituality in particular¹.

¹ “Kliuchevsky starts his survey with the forest, pointing out the great role that the forest played in the history of Russia. Up to the second half of the 18th century most of the Russian people lived in the forested zone. The forest rendered economic, political and even ethical services to the Russian man. It replaced mountains and castles, serving as a most reliable shelter for the Russian man against external enemies. The Russian state could consolidate itself only in the north, far away from Kiev, under the cover of forests from the side of the steppe. At the same time, despite

Another example is the work of Alexandra Exter of Kiev, who is indisputably a major representative of the Ukrainian School in the left-wing art of Russia. I was stunned to read a certain well-known Russian art student arguing that Exter joined a Moscow group of artists as a “cosmopolitan”! I would only like to cite two excerpts from G.F. Kovalenko’s monumental two-volume monograph that would show the absurdity of such assertions better than any discourse:

“Most of Alexandra Exter’s life is connected with Kiev and Ukraine. She travelled a lot and lived for long in Paris and Moscow, Rome and St Petersburg. Yet she always returned: she had her house, workshop and her famous studio in Kiev. When she had to leave Kiev forever, she would organize her household in Paris exactly as she had had it in Kiev. There would be many bright Ukrainian rugs, embroideries, ceramics and icons there.

“However, it is not even a matter of these things which were so dear to her heart and with which Exter lived all her life. Another thing is more important – Kiev very early and, one could say, forever became one of the main and invariable protagonists of her painting: its outlines, landscapes and architecture made themselves felt not only in her Kiev cityscapes, but in the unfathomable way they transformed most of her city motifs, be they of Paris, Genoa or Florence”¹.

Now as regards Exter’s objectless pictures that are full of “nostalgia over youth in Kiev and the impressions of Ukrainian folk art that never left the artist”: “Take a closer look and you can see that the crenelated figures are reminiscent of the flower cup slits characteristic of peasant paintings, the curves of narrow strips, the resilient lines of their stems; triangles, trapezoids and diamonds, their corners and aspect ratio, their proportions and spatial rhythms all obviously echo Ukrainian ornaments; and, of course, the life of colour is full-blooded, unrestrained and resounding, as if the very soul of the folk master has been inherited by the 20th-century artist who tends to test everything with algebra”².

Now about the other, Oriental elements, the Orient and its landscapes and traditions, the religious and cultural origins of which are sometimes rooted in the days of yore. Take Yakulov and Saryan, sons of the great

its services, the forest was always hard on the Russian man: it threatened with wild beasts and robbers, and it was difficult to win new areas for farming from it. The Russian man’s unfriendly and careless attitude to the forest manifests itself in that he has peopled it with all sorts of fears: monsters, and other representatives of ‘evil forces’.” N. V. Solmanidina. *Kliuchevsky o roli prirody kak sotsialnogo fona i potentsiala formirovaniya russkogo naroda i ego mentalnosti* (Kliuchevsky on the Role of Nature as a Social Background and Potential for the Formation of the Russian People and Their Mentality).

<http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/v-o-klyuchevskiy-o-rol-i-prirody-kak-sotsialnogo-fona-i-potentsiala-formirovaniya-russkogo-naroda-i-ego-mentalnosti#ixzz3F7XX7o64>

¹ Georgy Kovalenko. *Alexandra Exter*, Moscow: Moscow Museum of Modern Art, 2010, vol. 1, p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

Armenia. Although both belong to the history of the art of Russia, their works are outside its mainstream. From early on Saryan, with the energy of his sign and colour system, stood apart from the often anaemic paintings of his “Blue Rose” associates and I am convinced that Saryan played a paramount role in his Moscow friend Pavel Kuznetsov’s shift towards the Orient and Matisse in his works after 1910. All shades of blue in Saryan are very remote from the bluishness of the “Blue Rose” artists and go back to the dominant blue of polychrome Armenian miniatures. The place accorded to trees in Saryan’s pictures brings to mind the place, importance and interpretation of the Tree of Life in old Armenian art.

As for Yakulov, everything about him sets him apart from the other protagonists of the painting school of Russia. Incidentally, Georgy Bogdanovich refused to join any group of left-wing art; the only exception was his active theoretical involvement in founding imaginism (together with Yesenin). Yakulov’s singularity found expression not only in his Oriental themes or exotic subjects. He transformed all the formal subject elements, which he borrowed from classical art, the Renaissance, be it in the colour optical experiments of Orphism or in conveying the storm and “glassiness” of the modern crowd, with the help of his early artistic illumination, namely, “the idea that the difference between cultures consisted in the difference of lights” and also with the help of penetrating the multifaceted aspects of Chinese art. That is why his “Chinese linear graphicity” and the watercolour transparency of the “moist spectrum of China”, as he wrote about his famous *The Races* at the Tretyakov Gallery, are so stunning.

I want now to draw your attention to the activity of the artists of the “Russian East” from the Siberian regions to the Sea of Aral, the Transcaucasia and the Caucasus, where the great world cultures – the dominant Muslim, Christian, Tibetan and Chinese – come into contact to this day. The famous collection of the Igor Savitsky Museum in Nukus, Uzbekistan, contains gems by representatives of that periphery of the left-wing art of the Russian Orient and still awaits comprehensive study. To name a few, there is the art of Mikhail Kurzin (1888–1957), Viktor Ufimtsev (1899–1964), Ural Tansykbaev (1904–1964), Nikolai Karakhan (1900–1970) or the better-known Alexander Volkov (1886–1957).

Of course, Oriental themes leap to the eye. They are exotic to the Europeans. But this is not the point. Schematic outlines, the bright sun prism and Chinese linearity preponderate in the works of Mikhail Kurzin. To judge by the ardent force of red, blue, brown and green accurately and compactly dovetailed into one another, Viktor Ufimtsev produces the impression of a lesson of Matisse seen through the prism of Saryan.

Pictures by Alexander Volkov, Ural Tansykbaev and Nikolai Karakhan oscillate between primitivism, Fauvist Cezannism and the colour energy characteristic of those parts where surrounding household things generously share their multicoloured opulence.

My report was in part caused by the observation of the present-day tendency in Russian historiographic studies to Russify all cultural and artistic manifestations, no matter what they are, and ignore outside influences and roots. Misguided patriotism usually does not welcome free-living versatility, cultural osmosis or unique creative processes. The co-existence of heterogeneous extraneous sources in this culture in no way diminishes its grandeur, and it is not worthy of the rules of true science to deliberately ignore or assimilate them. That is why I personally replace the name “Russian avant-garde” with the more appropriate term “left-wing art of Russia” or “left-wing art in Russia” of the first quarter of the 20th century.