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Russia reclaims Goncharova as her own

Tretyakov Gallery exhibition seeks to redress damage done by fakes and faulty scholarship to the Russian avant-garde artist's work

By Sophia Kishkovsky
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The most extensive ever retrospective in Russia, at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, of avant-garde pioneer Natalia Goncharova ("Natalia Goncharova: East and West", until 16 February), has strengthened Russia's claim to the legacy of the movement that shaped 20th century art but has also engendered a market riddled with fakes. The exhibition has also been presented as a rebuttal to two books on the artist, by French and British art historians, that attracted widespread criticism in Russian scholarly circles.

"We thought that these authors should have come to the Tretyakov gallery and studied our collections and archives," says Irina Lebedeva, the museum's general director and an expert on the Russian avant-garde, at the opening of the exhibition. "Since they didn't come, we have doubts about the level of scholarship."

In her comment, Lebedeva refers to Natalia Goncharova: Between Tradition and Modernity, a catalogue raisonné by Denise Bazetoux, a French art historian, and Goncharova: The Art and Design of Natalia Goncharova, by the British scholar Anthony Parton. After their publication in 2011, experts at the Tretyakov and elsewhere responded with press conferences and statements saying that the books contained many images of fakes that have skewed both the scholarly study of the artist and sales of her work.

Goncharova and her husband Mikhail Larionov left the country in 1915 to work with Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, intending to return. However, after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, they altered their plans and remained in France until their deaths in the 1960s. Both became French citizens.

In the 1980s, Larionov's second wife, Alexandra Tomilina, made the unusual decision to donate the archive and all of the works by her late husband and Goncharova in her possession to the Soviet Union. After a sojourn at the Soviet embassy in Paris, they made it to Moscow and the curators at the Tretyakov have been cataloguing and studying them ever since.

Irina Vakar, one of the curators of the Goncharova exhibition, says: "Our exhibition is the result of years of work." She cites the hundreds of works on display in the exhibition, from paintings influenced by Russian icons, medieval European religious art and intimations of impending apocalypse, to scenes that resemble Cézanne and Gauguin, delicate images of Spanish ladies in chantilly lace head coverings, and a section devoted to her theatrical and avant-garde clothing designs.



Natalia Goncharova, Self-portrait with yellow lilies, 1907-08.
Photo: State Tretyakov Gallery



The exhibition include works that were donated by Tomilina as well as loans from private collections, the Centre Pompidou, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and Cologne's Ludwig Museum. Vakar says curators from those museums told her that they were willing to lend paintings for this exhibition that they don't usually release because "they know that [Goncharova's] reputation is at risk".

James Butterwick, a London dealer in Russian art, lectured on the threats to Goncharova's legacy at the Tretyakov in November (following a similar lecture in London last spring). He supports the actions of German police who seized 1,000 Russian avant-garde fakes in Germany in June. "It is a systematic attempt to fool people," he told The Art Newspaper in April, referring to the number of Goncharova and other Russian avant-garde fakes on the market. Butterwick calls the Tretyakov's Goncharova exhibition "one of the finest exhibitions it has been my privilege to view".

Andrey Sarabyanov, a leading Russian expert on the avant-garde, says the exhibition "[reveals] completely new facets of the artist", but that the multitude of styles that have not previously been seen by a broad audience makes it likely that "even more fakes will now appear". He says: "The situation with the Russian avant-garde is so bad, that it's hard to say it can get worse. There are so many fakes."

Sarabyanov says that he and other experts are now concerned about fakes they believe they have spotted in the catalogue of an exhibition called "Russian Avant-garde—From Cubo-Futurism to Suprematism" that opened at the Casa del Mantegna in Mantua, Italy on 30 November 2013 and runs until 23 February.

Russia research on the avant-garde will become more accessible when the Tate publishes an English translation of a two-volume set about Malevich compiled by Vakar and Tatyana Mikhienko that was first published in Moscow by Sarabyanov in 2004. It will be released towards the end of the run of a Malevich retrospective that is due to open at Tate Modern in the summer of 2014.