

## Catalogue and Book Reviews



### KÜNSTLERMUSEEN

Die russische Avantgarde und ihre Museen für Moderne Kunst  
[ARTISTS' MUSEUMS]

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The Russian Avant Garde and their Museums for Modern Art]

Christiane Post

336 pp 118 color 217 mono illustrations

Dietrich Reimer Verlag, Berlin, 2012 49.00 €

ISBN 978-3-496-01470-6

Shortly after the October revolution in 1917, and with great fanfare, the Russian Avant Garde artists conceived and brought to life artists' museums which, as a rule were directed by the artists themselves. One generally sought for museums of the "new type" which furthered the revolutionary spirit. The professorial dissertation of the author, a Wuppertaler art historian, is a very sober, factual, rather dryly compiled, but carefully researched summary of the planning of these museums from 1918 to 1928 which, soon after, was followed by its demise.

In the 1930s, when another political wind was blowing, the Russian Avant Garde was banned to the storage depositories. The works were condemned as being "bourgeois and capitalistic". The recently founded contemporary art museums were closed and the works remained hidden until the 1990s. In the 1930s there were exhibitions which criticized the recently celebrated avant-garde as ignominious and given humiliating descriptions; it was not dissimilar to the defamation of the artistic currents in Nazi Germany. Photographs of the Soviet museums and exhibition halls in the Stalin era closes this publication without expressly drawing parallels to the "Degenerate Art" in Germany. But this is only one aspect.

The main aspect of the book consists of the debates and artistic concepts from 1918 to 1928 as the pioneering type of

contemporary art was created in the Soviet Union. It is well known that this could not be done without the permission of the Commissar of Enlightenment.

A map of the newly founded museums or with their complementary addition of newly acquired contemporary art (page 154) shows 36 cities ranging from Astrakhan to Zlatoust. In her research, the author relies on her own study of the documents in the Tretyakov Gallery or the State Archives for Literature and Art including the archives of the Russian Federation. The available source material was, as much as possible, exhausted either by the lists of the art funds or the lists of the museum committees. These committees consisted of Avant Garde artists who were instrumental in the acquisitions of works as long as they were published in the journal *Zhizn iskusstva* (*Artistic Life*) published in Petersburg. The author emphasizes the importance of the work of Andrei Krusanov's, *Russian Avant-Garde Futurist Revolution (1917-1921)* in two volumes, which was published in Moscow in 2003. The provincial museums also provided the author with information.

The centre of the book documents the meetings and debates at the beginning. Also noteworthy is the documentation of the acquisitions of individual museums. The basis of the acquisitions was the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (NARKOMPROS) list of 143 accepted artists in December of 1918. In the documentation section by Christiane Post, the selection was as follows: 53 colour reproductions of the acquisitions of the Moscow Museum of Artistic Culture later to be absorbed into the Tretyakov Gallery; 65 black and white reproductions of works from the Museum of Artistic Culture in Petrograd were later integrated into the Russian Museum. The rest of the documentation is also in black and white; 23 works in Vitebsk which was under the direction of Malevich from 1920 to 1922. (From 1923 he directed the Museum of Artistic Culture in Petrograd.) There were 21 works from the Art Museum in Samara, 13 works from the Gallery of Paintings in Astrakhan, 14 works from the Museum in Ekaterinburg, 26 works from the Museum of Painterly Culture in Nizni Novgorod, 8 works from the Museum of Painterly Culture in Kostroma, 9 works from the Museum of Painterly Culture in Tula; finally there are 16 paintings from the collection of the Art Museum in Yaroslavl. An authentic inventory list cites 25 works from the Museum of Modern Art in Smolensk. In total, there were 1,907 works of art acquired by the museum

commission between 1918 and 1920, according to a report of Aleksandr Rodcenko of November 1920 (page 222). According to the report of the commission's meeting of March 29, 1920, 1,200 paintings and drawings and 106 sculptures were acquired and then distributed to the different collections and museums at that date.

The starting point of Christiane Post's thesis was Malevich's radical and critical treatise "About the Museum" which was published in February 1919 in *Iskusstvo Kommuny (Art of the Commune)*. The examination of the psychology of perception by Kandinsky was also an innovative effort. Above all, the exhibition concepts, the hanging of the pictures of the early art museums were forward looking and would have remained so if they had been given a longer life. In museology today the pioneering efforts in Berlin, Hanover, New York and Lodz are emphasized. Almost forgotten is the fact that the first museums for contemporary art were in Russia. This international context is scarcely indicated by the author. It is inevitable that a comparative international examination is desirable as would be an internet portal for the Russian Avant Garde in which all acquired, deposited, rediscovered, and dispersed works are listed. For this to happen, however, all archives must be open and accessible.

Stephan von Wiese, Berlin  
(Translated from the German  
by Robert E. Hiedemann)



## RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE – THE KHARDZHIEV COLLECTION

Guert Imanse and Frank van Lamoen with Anna Ostrovskaya and Elvie Casteleijn, et al.

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, October 2013

Published by na0.10 Amsterdam £52.50

552 pp 778 plates several mono illus

ISBN 978-94-6208-104-8

The story of the emigration of the Moscow art historian, Nikolai Khardzhiev, and his wife, Lidya Chaga, to Amsterdam in 1993 is widely known due to its extensive coverage in the art press at the time. It is also outlined in the opening pages

of this major publication of the inventory of Khardzhiev's collection of works of art. For with Khardzhiev and his wife came around 1,500 works of art and documents that he had been collecting since the 1930s either directly or indirectly from most of the artists of the avant-garde. This inventory contains the over 700 works of art that belonged to the Khardzhiev-Chaga Cultural Foundation and are now within the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. The documents – letters, photographs, press cuttings, artists' writings and so on – were put on microfiche and there are copies in the Stedelijk Museum and the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), Moscow, who are now also in possession of the original documents. A number of these texts were published in *Nikolai Khardzhiev, A Legacy Regained* in 2002 (Palace Editions and State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg).

Articles about Nikolai Khardzhiev open this volume, the authors – Michael Meylac, Elena Basner, and Sergey Sigey – commemorating the man and his passion for amassing a collection.

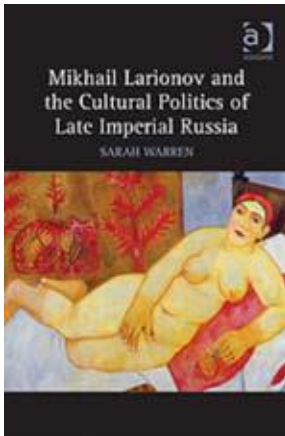
Most of the art collection consists of works on paper, although there are some paintings; those by Mikhail Matiushin make important contributions to the little-known work of this artist. Also important in the collection is the extensive number of drawings by Kazimir Malevich, notably in his late style. Mikhail Larionov is also richly represented by drawings, many on letters.

Khardzhiev began collecting works by the artists in view of his project initiated around 1930 to write a *History of Russian Futurism*. He had proposed such a study to Kazimir Malevich, for which he wrote his "Autobiographical Notes", and as with many other texts, Khardzhiev annotated them and wrote drafts for various sections of his book, especially those for literary Futurism (Mayakovsky, Kruchenykh). *The History of Russian Futurism* was never published but the material of, and for, it remains. The visual aspect of it can be assimilated by consulting this inventory.

*The Khardzhiev Collection* is compiled by artist alphabetically. A short introduction to the work of the artist by the Editors, Guert Imanse and Frank van Lamoen is followed by detailed cataloguing-in information for each work, illustrated, and documentation where it exists. These are high standard reproductions and easy to read so can be used as research documents.

This inventory of the collection of Nikolai Khardzhiev is an extremely valuable contribution to studies of the Russian Avant-Garde.

Patricia Railing PhD



## MIKHAIL LARIONOV AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

Sarah Warren

Ashgate Publishing Limited April 2013 £60

214 pp 24 mono 8 colour illustrations

ISBN 978-1-4094-4200-4 hardcover

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The turmoil which characterised early twentieth-century Russia enabled its avant-garde artists to engage with a culture defined by its pluralism. This led to radical innovative work which not only challenged the conventional artistic strictures but also the broader social orthodoxies of Tsarist Russia. Arguably the most paradigmatic figure of this era is Mikhail Larionov, a vivacious and provocative artist, whose radical rebellious oeuvre truly defines the cultural criticism of Russian modernism. Sarah Warren's *Mikhail Larionov and the Cultural Politics of Late Imperial Russia* examines the vast range of Larionov's work, from painting to performance, from book illustration to curatorial projects, in the period between the 1905 revolution and 1914, the outbreak of the First World War, in order to reveal an artist with an inherent aim of social dissent.

The author examines specific works by Larionov in the context of the cultural idiosyncrasies of late Imperial Russia. She emphasises his understanding of and challenge to significant social concepts related to Russia's fundamental crisis of identity during this period. Thus she enters largely unexplored art-historical territory; considering Larionov's work in relation to issues of empire and nationality, autocracy and democracy, the role of Russian Orthodox Christianity in contemporary modern life, and "the people" versus the intelligentsia, fundamental aspects which dominated every corner of cultural production. Moreover, Warren poses penetrating questions against the usual art historical analysis of Larionov's modernism as an example of contemporary nostalgia for Russia's folk past thus conforming to the "primitive" framework of his Western European contemporaries, such as Gauguin or Matisse. Instead,

she explores Larionov's engagement with a specifically Russian cultural conception, supplying an insightful analysis of his creative ideals within the context of the contemporary understanding of "Russianness" and its largely collective desire to adopt a "Eurasian" identity. Thus she explores how Larionov both handled and questioned Russia's confused conceptions of nationalism and modernism. Further, her study demonstrates how Larionov's exhibitions, debates and performances were of far greater significance than a mere imitation of Italian Futurism. Rather, such activities signified the culmination of the artist's radical primitivist aesthetic, one which imbued his modernism with a thoroughly Russian feel, exploiting certain tensions over defining a national collective identity, whilst simultaneously challenging and resisting the imperial attempts to adapt the prevalent cultural revivalism for its own goals. Hence she successfully illustrates how Larionov engages in a broad cultural dialogue that hinges on an ultimate challenge against autocratic rule.

Warren begins her text by demonstrating, through the examination of the works *Gypsy of Tiraspol* (1909), *Katsap Venus* (1912), and the lithographic series, *An Imaginary Voyage to Turkey* (1911), how Larionov, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, both fits in to and yet redefines the Orientalist art historical interpretation. He is able to adopt these two opposing positions through the ultimate "Russianness" of his artistic execution. By engaging with the innovations of European modernism within the context of Russia's confused national identity, he is able to create works which both exploit contemporary Russian cultural tensions and are exemplary depictions of avant-garde modernism.

Following this, Warren explores how Larionov redefined the concept of a "modern" aesthetic through the adoption of an artistic language permeated with primitive symbolism, and how both through this and through his early curatorial work he simultaneously radically opposed the autocratic promotion of revivalism. Warren does this by examining Larionov's innovative curating of his own Exhibition of Original Icon [Patterns] and *Lubki*, (1913), arranged at the same time as the Second All-Russian Exhibition of Handicraft, and other imperial exhibitions, which were put on to celebrate the tercentenary of the Romanov dynasty, demonstrating how Larionov's exhibition acted as a reactionary response to the fundamental framework of autocratically defined art and culture promotion. For whilst the imperial exhibition aimed to reassert the fundamental dominance of Russian nationalism over the empire, Larionov's exhibition, she argues, in contrast, promoted the notion that the imperial understanding of nationalism was inherently false. Consequently Larionov posed a fundamental challenge to the imperial definition and presentation of "folk" art and indeed

what the concept of the “folk” itself meant. Moreover, Larionov paired his Exhibition of Original Icon [Patterns] and *Lubki* with an exhibition of his own radical modernism, the Target Exhibition, showcasing his innovative “Rayist” works, which thus imbued his modernist aesthetic with the primal depth of archaic primitivism, and further challenged the validity of autocratic rule.

Through her thorough examination of Larionov’s character and oeuvre in this ultimately Russian context, Warren enlightens the reader, and reveals an artist the depth of whose social critique has perhaps largely been undiscovered or at least unrevealed.

Warren continues by considering how Larionov specifically imbued his work with primitive spiritualism. She gives a detailed analysis concerning both Larionov’s adoption of the ontology of the icon in the visual presentation of his Rayist works, attempting to imbue them with transcendental depth, and the artist’s collaboration with the Russian Futurist poets Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov, in their search for the primal origins of language, frequently found in glossolalic and mystical sects, and resulting in “trans-sense” *zaum*. Thus Warren demonstrates how Larionov appealed to the need for representations of Russian nationality whilst simultaneously challenging the imperial folk revivalist conception.

Finally Warren considers the significance of Larionov’s performative activities, in particular his painting of Rayist and abstract designs on his and others’ faces, which they then paraded around the streets of Moscow. In the existing literature, Larionov’s face-painting is largely treated as an act of radical confrontation, a combination of Italian Futurist strategies and common “hooliganism”. Warren extends this notion by arguing that his provocative and shameless adoption of Italian futurist agitation has a further significance – it constitutes a continuation of his desire to integrate the primitive into a redefined modern collective identity. She contends that Larionov’s various performances, whether on the streets, or at public debates or indeed in cabarets, demonstrated his desire to achieve a genuine manifestation of an authentic Russian identity through the collapse of the distinctions between representation and presence which fundamentally relied on archaic spiritualism.

Overall, Warren’s book offers a stimulating, thorough, and engaging presentation of both Larionov’s character and his early career as an artist within the cultural complexities of his working environment. It provides the reader with detailed information and invaluable insight concerning the imperial Russian cultural context, woven into a complex, convincing argument and complemented with the appropriate visual tools to allow him or her to reach their own conclusions.

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### VLADIMIR LEBEDEV 1891-1967

Masha Koval, Nicoletta Misler, Carlos Pérez, Françoise Lévêque, Vladimir Lébedev

Fundación Juan March, Madrid, June – September 2012

276 pp. many colour plates 15.00€

ISBN: 978-84-7075-598-9

As a painter, Vladimir Lebedev is best known for his non-objective panels of the early 1920s, but his engagement as a poster designer for the ROSTA Windows and his illustrations of children’s books from the same period into the mid 1930s are where he really excelled as a graphic artist. Indeed, the exhibition and its catalogue are largely devoted to Lebedev’s book and poster creation, the one for children and the other for the immediate post-Revolutionary population, 70% of which was illiterate. Vladimir Lebedev’s images appealed to the purely visual in order to convey stories for the imagination in the world of the circus or of animals, while his poster messages turned on the political and, usually, the satirical.

The catalogue articles place particular emphasis on Lebedev’s hundreds of published illustrations, and they are situated within the social and political context which inspired them. Lebedev’s posters made the social turmoil of an impoverished Russian economy from just before 1920 visible, his satirical “take” often close to the cartoon, and also close to political commentary. His book illustrations also convey close observation of the world but that of the minds of children; such was his commitment that he was head of Children’s Books for the State Publishing House until the onset of Socialist Realism in the early 1930s. From that time Lebedev became an “outsider” in the Stalinist regime, his art relegated to still lifes and sardonic portraits, especially of children who seem to be bewildered in their “ideological” pink dresses holding bouquets of “ideological” pink flowers.

In addition to the very interesting texts on Lebedev’s poster art by Nicoletta Misler and on the artist’s children’s books by Carlos Pérez and Françoise Lévêque – the latter Director of one of the main lenders to the exhibition, the Paris library of children’s books, the Bibliothèque l’Heure Joyeuse – there is

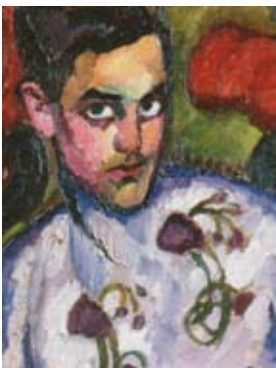


a historical survey of Lebedev's artistic creativity by Masha Koval. She provides an excellent introduction to the various aspects of Lebedev's work in the context of his interests – horses, boxing, the circus, for example – and in the context of a changing Russia.

The richness of Lebedev's books for children is also shown thanks to the American collection of Merrill C. Berman, noted for its extensive holdings of early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-gardes.

And, as usual for their catalogues, the Fundación Juan March includes period writings by the artist and other relevant texts, making the catalogue an extremely useful research publication.

Patricia Railing PhD



## THE BIG CHANGE

Revolutions in Russian Painting 1895-1917

Sjeng Schiejen, Curator & Editor, et al.

188 pp mono and col illus. 87 col plates 34.95€

Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, Holland

12 March – 11 August 2013

ISBN 978 90 72251 626

Over the last decades, most studies devoted to Russian Avant-Garde painting have necessarily referred to the influences from modernist Parisian and Italian styles in particular as a means of situating the extraordinary innovations of the Russian painters in their artistic contexts. As the exhibition curator and catalogue editor, Sjeng Schiejen, points out, however, artistic culture in Russia from around 1900 was itself highly innovative and the initial context in which the young Russian artists began their studies. This exhibition was conceived to show early avant-garde painting within its artistic setting in Russia, and what becomes obvious was the high standard of the craft of painting and the enormous diversity in the art of painting itself.

The earliest 20<sup>th</sup> century painting in Russia belonged, as in Europe, to Symbolism in its many guises. In Russia it was called the Silver Age and it was permeated by the emergence

of new world views, from science to psychology to spiritual philosophies sometimes leading to mysticism. These were often touched in one way or another by “Slavism”, the discovery of a national heritage made up of many cultural groups and traditions whose expression could be seen in the objects sold in every market town.

Typical of Silver Age art was painting that integrated, say, scientific theories of light – as in the canvases of Arkhip Kuizni or Nicholai Roerich – with spiritual philosophy of the real but knowable only through nature and light. The young painters were thus imbued with science and the craft of painting but, themselves exploring new world views, moved from the landscape to the farmyard or the city street. There they saw light and colour through theories of optical vision, such as Mikhail Larionov's Rayism of 1912-1913, or P. Konchalovsky's canvases based on complementary colours and other optical phenomena. Other artists combined light theory with the craft of painting where objects were transformed into the textures of paints, not unlike the earlier painters such as Korovin, Serov, or Vrubel. In the new art, however, the landscape disappeared, as did the spiritual philosophy, and they were replaced by the material, the urban or low life, often augmented by the purely decorative of peasant crafts.

Spiritual philosophy, integrated with a scrutiny of feeling as a means of entering the world and the use of colour and line to depict this was the deepest impulse in the work of Vasily Kandinsky. For his part, Kazimir Malevich began with the science of vision in light and colour to culminate in non-objective Suprematism which the artist transformed into a vision of the universe. Through light and universal forces he made cosmic reality visible, and he called it a philosophy of the real.

The Russian Avant-Garde can be said to be a continuation of questions being asked by Silver Age painters, poets and philosophers, all of whom were seeking a new world view and a means of expressing it.

These remarks are inspired by the paintings and by the articles in the catalogue – E. Petrova, “Towards the Avant-Garde: Russian Art at the Turn of the Twentieth Century”, S. Scheijen, “A Rowdy Camp – Jack of Diamonds between Left and Right”, N. Mislér, “Mikhail Vrubel, Pavel Filonov and the Birth of Russian Psychoanalysis”, J. Bowlt, “The Samovar and the Chasm”, and A. Winestein, “A Life for Art” – all of them making new contributions to this as-yet uncharted connection between the old and the new between 1900 and 1920. It is unfortunate that the entries on each of the painters were not focused on making direct links amongst the artists. What is fortunate is that to the well-known works from the State Russian Museum and the State Tretiakov Gallery, the exhibition was made up of seldom-seen works from other Russian museums, the Ryazan Region Fine

Arts Museum and the State Museum-Reserve Rostov Kremlin, complemented by works from the Russian Archives of Literature and Art in Moscow.

Patricia Railing PhD



## THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE SIBERIA AND THE EAST

John E. Bowlt, Nicoletta Misler, Evgenia Petrova, editors, et al.  
Palazzo Strozzi, Florence 27 Sept 2013-19 Jan 2014 45€  
319 pp mono illus and col plates  
Skira editore, Milan; Sue Bond Public Relations, England  
ISBN 978 88-572-2151-9 (softcover)

Orientalism, in its many guises as cultures “to the East”, was becoming the fascination of both Europeans and Russians as of at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With the expansion of trade and of empires going both East and South, cultures were discovered from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artefacts, from decorated utensils to the ritual dance, were being imported to major cities in Europe and Russia, with the music of the gamelan, for example, introducing new tonalities into Western music. These major cities – Paris, London, Munich, Berlin, St. Petersburg – had by now created museums, from the ethnographic to the British Museum itself, and in them artists were discovering beauty and craftsmanship they had never seen before. This all contributed to new world views, complemented as it was by the literature of religions and poetry that also came from the East.

To explore the effects of these events on very late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian Modernist art and artists is the subject of the exhibition, *The Russian Avant-Garde Siberia and The East*, and its catalogue.

The catalogue is an extremely rich resource of articles by 18 scholars who consider the history of how foreign cultures entered Russian awareness from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The exhibition is arranged according to the grand tour of 1890-1891 of the young Tsarevich, Crown Prince Nicholas, who travelled to royal courts

from Greece to India, Ceylon, Siam, Japan and China, returning to St. Petersburg over the Siberian steppes; the articles trace this history. Bearing gifts of the finest materials and craftsmanship from these cultures, these works were the occasion for a great exhibition in 1893, while objects from the many ethnographic expeditions to nomadic tribes across Siberia were put on display in a specially created museum, the Ethnographic Museum.

So from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists had all of this material available to them.

Pointed out by several authors is the fact that numerous artists living in Moscow or St. Petersburg were of various ethnic origins such as Georgian or Armenian, or were born on borders with other cultures such as Turkey. This gave rise to a particular awareness either of their “non-Russianness” or, on the other hand, of an indigenous Slavism, something distinct from Western cultures. These are among the factors that played in to the Neo-Primitivism of artists such as Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, and others from around 1910.

What is striking, then, is the essentially ethnographic nature of the catalogue articles. For other than incorporating, say, a Persian miniature or a Japanese print into a work of art, a toy-beast, depicting shamanistic moods or capturing the heat and colours of a hot climate, there is very little evidence of influence on Russian Modernism from other artistic, creative traditions. One exception would be the influence on Neo-Primitivism of the shop sign or the inclusion of writing on the painting (as from folk prints, the *lubok*), these works also using a flat space and bold, flat figures drawn from the traditional models. Another exception could be the use of an indigenous mask to depict a modern face. But the latter is episodic, while the fantastic Oriental costumes designed by Leon Bakst for performances of oriental subject matter such as *Scheherazade* had a different aim: to bring the East to the West.

It cannot be denied that in the works exhibited – about 150, of which about 30 are ethnographic – there are a multiplicity of references to the ancient “Rus”, to the non-Russian or to indigenous cultures in Russian Modernism and the Avant-Garde. But most of the painting was initially cast in Western academic traditions, to be followed by those of Gauguin, Matisse or Cubism; the particular styles of artists such as Pavel Filonov or Vladimir Burliuk have a history of their own. Looking East – or South or North – may belong more to new ways of understanding the world and reality itself. It is this that informs Russian Modernism.

Patricia Railing PhD