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Russian Avant-Garde Rediscovered



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 Admirers of twentieth-century art are faced with an extraordinary situation. From the 1990s to today [2003] the art market has been flooded with previously unknown works from various trends of the Russian Avant-Garde. These are not by some third-rate, forgotten painters, but by such famous masters as Kandinsky, Malevich, Chagall, Tatlin, Lentulov, Exter, Udaltsova and many others. These are not some discarded canvases tucked away in studio closets (though these have also turned up), but often museum pieces that could have graced the walls of any collection.

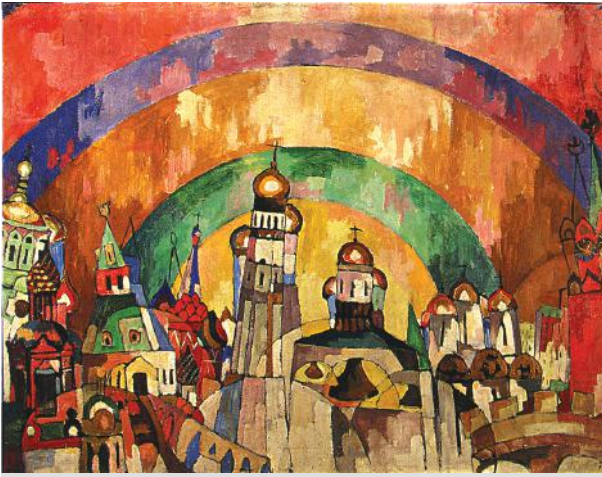
The art market is in confusion. World prices of the Russian twentieth century works are not as high today as, say, twenty years ago. Another wave of avant-garde art can probably set them even lower and threaten the interests of collectors who have invested heavily in them. There is a temptation to declare these works forgeries, especially since they “came out of nowhere” only to form a mass of “avant-garde without provenance”. Everyone remembers (at least from catalogues) exhibitions of phoney Larionov works held in Europe some 15 years ago, which caused a major scandal and ended in a court case [by the city of Geneva]. Burnt child dreads the fire. New finds face a boycott and collectors intimidate each other. Modern market demands are still huge, but is it so easy to land a sheer fake?

Despite all the dangers, I suppose, we should think positive, not panic. Let us recall how our modern studies progressed. Forty years ago (I know this from my bitter experience) the primary goal for us was to reach the storerooms of our own Soviet museums.

Art experts of the new generation can hardly remember that! To penetrate the seven seals of the Russian Museum basement where pictures by the likes of Malevich had little chance of being seen even by experts, let alone the public, was our wildest dream. Later there came the turn of provincial museums and barely accessible private collections. A superb book where many provincial masterpieces were first published is appropriately entitled *The Unknown Avant-Garde* (by A. Sarabianov). And now we approach another “avant-garde layer” whose origins have still to be revealed. As if an Atlantis emerges before our very eyes, opening up to us boundless opportunities.

The appearance of a wealth of these paintings (albeit including transitory things) is of crucial importance if we are to understand the nature of modern trends. How did an artist proceed in the nineteenth century? From study to picture. On completion of one a new subject was chosen, and he started from the beginning – studies from nature, compositional sketches etc.

Modern painters followed an utterly different path. For instance, the evolution of Aristarkh Lentulov (I mention him because his works seem to prevail among new finds!) had to do not with separate key works but rather with *series of works* united by a broad theme. Each series was a *flow of works* succeeding each other, something like a chain smoker lighting a new fag with an old one. Occasionally a canvas was preceded by a drawing or watercolour, but more often a new composition was conceived within its predecessor. Motifs and devices did not belong to a single subject but to



A. Lentulov, *Heavenly Toll (The Sky. Decorative Moscow)*, 1915. Tempera, Oil and bronze paint on canvas, 98 x 129 cm. Collection of I. S. Isadzhanov, Moscow: The State Museum Fund: Yaroslavl Art Museum.



I. Mashkov, *Still Life with Bananas*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 103 x 133 cm. The State Museum Fund: Ivanovo Regional Museum: Yaroslavl Art Museum.

the entire cycle, while canvases “ramified” from each other as kaleidoscope patterns do.

Clearly, in order to appreciate a painter’s art we need not only his towering achievements but a living *body of his works*, even including numerous failures. Newly discovered Lentulov pieces allow us to reconsider his predilection for Russian churches and belfries throughout the 1910s. At the outset it was a fascination with folk architecture pervaded with the primitivist pathos of the “Knave of Diamonds” group. The late 1910s were already something different, for all their links to the earlier period. At the end of World War I Russia suffered one defeat after another. Lentulov now strove to create his artistic apotheosis of Russia which he found in the solemn “chorales” of medieval architecture, especially of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with its triumphant spirituality. Some of these “chorales” are joined by colourful skies raising even loftier arches and vaults above the church domes.

As for other masters, their complete oeuvre (both successes and failures) is no less significant. The “artistic streams” of Marc Chagall form an inimitable unity of paintings and numerous graphic pieces in gouache or ink. For decades his characters such as the old fiddler travelled from drawings to pictures and came back transformed in gouache. But what about such “streams” in the output of Mashkov, Kandinsky or Tatlin? In dozens of Ilya Mashkov’s compositions (also of varied quality) we can trace how his treatment of a bunch of grapes (or even a single berry) changed from heaped masses of colour to “carvings in malachite and jaspers”. Vladimir Tatlin’s “chains of works” resemble scaffolding where his celebrated masterpieces were created from different elements, including less successful ones. Vasily Kandinsky’s abstract

works of genius can be set alongside his salon depictions of “mystical snakes” or “ladies in crinolines, linked to his abstract pieces by some inner bond still to be disclosed. Some of those could well have been proclaimed fakes by pundits of today, because – “what have they got to do with Kandinsky”?

When a universal deluge engulfs the earth, only some peaks rise above, indicating the direction of mountain ranges. But when the waters recede it becomes clear that slopes, passes, gorges and lowlands also exist. They are not as glittering as the snow-white peaks, but they do offer a lively variety of forms.

All of us art historians, taught to appreciate masterpieces, are used to them. This approach has its advantages, for masterpieces reflect certain profound laws which define artistic development. Its flaws are also obvious. If we dislike a Tatlin (as it happens), it might not seem like a Tatlin at all, since Tatlin is known as a great draughtsman, but that thing out there!...

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