

The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition

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The Avant-Garde Icon is a study of the relationship between Russian icons and Russian avant-garde art, covering from around 1870 to the death of Stalin in 1953. The concept of the project was initially inspired by the extremely powerful visual relationship that exists between the two genres, and efforts have been made in the book to ensure that this important aspect of the subject is preserved, by means of astute juxtapositions of reproductions that ‘speak for themselves’ (eg. pages 62-3, 90-1, 140-1). However, despite the powerful visual connection between the image-types, it remains a remarkable fact that, even among Russians, their close relationship has largely been overlooked and has received relatively little attention.¹ With the exception of passing references in books, and two or three brief articles in journals, the subject has never before been researched in depth and synthesised as a unified phenomenon with its own logic and narrative.² The book therefore covers thoroughly new territory.

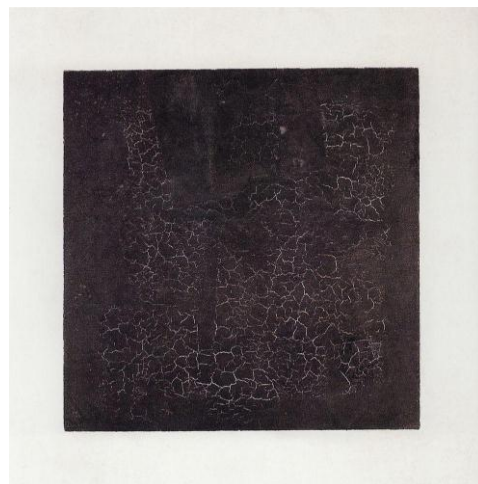
The immediate premise of the book is that the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century revival of interest in icons precipitated the development of avant-garde art in Russia, and conversely, that avant-garde artists legitimised their practice, and shaped its meaning, by locating its origins in the ancient tradition of icon painting. The process was a highly complex and nuanced one, and there are several instances, explored in detail in the book, in which religious imagery played an ambivalent role in the development of modernism in Russia. For instance, the late nineteenth-century paintings of Christ by Nikolai Ge and Ivan Kramskoi are often called ‘iconic’ - not only because they focus intensely on the image of Christ but also because they are frequently austere, symmetrical and centralised in their compositions; but they are thoroughly ‘western’ in the naturalism of their style and in their sentimental emotionalism, and should therefore also be seen to stem from a completely different ‘un-iconic’ background.³

¹ Although the argument lends itself well to visual representation, the only exhibition on the subject has been *Kazimir Malevich e le Sacre Icone Russe: Avanguardia e Tradizioni*, held at the Palazzo Forti, Verona, in 2000. The catalogue was published by Electa, Milan, 2000.

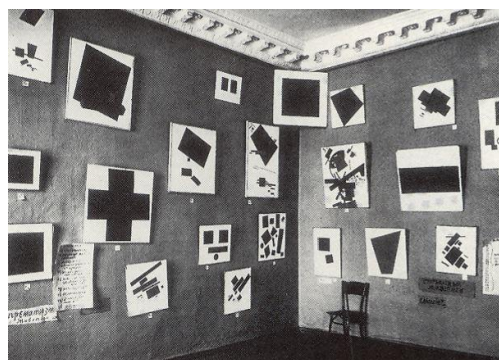
² For instance, Betz, M., ‘The Icon and Russian Modernism’ in *Art Forum*, XV, 10, 1977, pp. 38-45; Friedman M., ‘Icon Painting and Russian Popular Art as Sources of Some Works by Chagall’ in *The Journal of Jewish Art*, V, 1978, pp. 94-107; Bowlt, J., ‘Orthodoxy and the Avant-Garde: Sacred Images in the Work of Goncharova, Malevich, and Their Contemporaries’ in Brumfield and Velimirovic (eds.), *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, Cambridge U.P., 1991, pp. 145-150

³ Spira, A., *The Avant-Garde Icon*, p.34

A similar ambivalence surrounds Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915, Plate 1) - the epicentre of the book - which was not simply 'influenced' by icons; it was conceived *as an icon*; its definitive principle is its *iconicity*. Although the *Black Square* eschewed all dependence on external frames of reference (whether associated with iconography, form or colour), it also identified explicitly with icon painting by virtue of the fact that, when it was first exhibited, it was displayed across the corner of the room like an icon in a Russian Orthodox home (Plate 2). While the iconic associations of the *Black Square* have long been recognised, the sacramental implications of its original location, and the reasons for placing icons in this way, have often been glossed over (or simply undeveloped in favour of the painting's many other points of interest).⁴ In the same way, while the better known avant-garde artists that the book addresses (for instance Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov) have been covered in monographs and general studies of their period, the role of icons in their work is often neglected and sometimes underestimated.⁵ Most importantly, the essentially sacramental status of icons – for which there is no direct equivalent in the West – is often passed over in favour of their symbolic potential or a general signification of spirituality.⁶ Other artists whose work drew directly on icon painting - for instance, the Hungarian painter Béla Uitz, who spent most of his adult life in Moscow (where he worked with Aleksandr Rodchenko) and whose abstractions were based on specific icon types, and the composer Nikolai Obukhov, who designed the scores of his liturgical music in a quasi-Suprematist manner - are almost completely unknown.



1. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79.6 x 79.5 cms., Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



2. The Last Futurist Exhibition, '0.10', Petrograd, 1915.

Besides addressing the immediate relationship between icons and avant-garde art, *The Avant-Garde Icon* also operates at other levels. Firstly, it offers an introduction to the history of Russian art as a

⁴ Crone, R., and Moos, D., *Kazimir Malevich and the Climax of Disclosure*, Chicago U.P., 1991; Milner, J., *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry*, Yale U.P., London, 1996.

⁵ Zhadova, L., *Tatlin*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988; Sharp, J., *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natalia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde*, Cambridge U.P., 2006; Parton, A., *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde*, London, 1993.

⁶ Petrova, Y., 'Malevich's Suprematism and Religion' in *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2003, p. 91.

whole, albeit structured around the concept of iconicity. It opens with a survey of the Byzantine theology of imagery and explains the fundamentally sacramental status of icons, which was preserved over many centuries. Without grasping this aspect of icons, a true understanding of their significance is impossible. There then follows an analysis of the Russian adaptation and development of the Byzantine tradition of icon painting between the tenth and seventeenth centuries. Russia did not experience a 'Renaissance', as the West did. Indeed it was not until the eighteenth century that the Tsars first began to dissociate from the cultural conventions of Orthodox Russia in favour of developments in a western European manner. It is only with the help of this broad background, against which the national identity of Russia was seen (and made) to unfold, that the developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be understood; for it was precisely by associating with the ancient and archaic traditions which the avant-garde's westernising predecessors had rejected, that new generations of artists felt able to differentiate themselves from their immediate past and realise the cultural potential of their own time. In this context, *The Avant-Garde Icon* constitutes a study of the notion of national identity in Russia and of the legitimacy of that notion.

This 'use' of icons as a catalyst for the realisation of contemporary values at the turn of the twentieth century raises a further, more general, question: why do societies continue to be interested in outmoded forms of historic culture and what purposes do they implicitly require them to serve, in their own time? In this respect, while *The Avant-Garde Icon* is ostensibly a book about art history and Russia, it can also be viewed more widely and abstractly. For instance, by exploring the ways in which Russian society generated new cultural forms by reviewing its past, the book serves as a case-study of the complex and nuanced ways in which cultural conventions are formed and adapted to serve the impulses of human societies as a whole. Although a revival of interest in a historical period may seem to indicate a re-assessment of the objective significance of that period, there is also a case for reversing the equation and asking what new capacity or appetite it is in societies that causes the object of their apparent interest to resonate, and seem to present itself to them as a phenomenon worthy of their attention. With regard to medieval art, for instance, it is instructive to observe how the revival of interest in medieval architecture in eighteenth-century Britain precipitated (or was precipitated by?) a desire to dissociate from the domineering rationalism of the Enlightenment. In Russia, by contrast, the revival of interest in medieval architecture began as the rational adoption of just another western European convention (not unlike the neo-classical style); and it gave rise to a number of refined Gothic revival buildings - for instance, the Petrovsky Palace, Moscow, of 1776 and the Chesme Church, St. Petersburg, of 1780 (Plate 3) - despite the fact that the original Gothic style had never appeared in medieval Russia and could not therefore evoke associations and fragmented 'memories' of national history and identity as it did in western Europe. It was not until the function (rather than the appearance) of the medieval revival - *as an instrument of identity-formation* - was integrated into Russian culture that it began to manifest as a revival of

interest in the Byzantine style - which, of course, *had* appeared in medieval Russia and could therefore function as an instrument of identity-formation there, but had *not* appeared in the medieval West.

While medieval architecture was re-evaluated at this period because it was seen to carry associations of national identity, other aspects of medieval culture - for instance the stylisations of medieval imagery - were still too alien to be deemed valuable. It was not until well into the nineteenth century that the appreciation of medieval stylisation was considered to be meaningful experience, when it paralleled the development of the contemporary art of the time (Impressionism and Post-Impressionism) through its own periods of stylisation towards

abstraction. Having said this, it is noteworthy that although the Cubists, a generation later, found a precedent for their penchant for fragmented angular forms in African art, they showed no interest whatsoever in the angularity of Gothic art (with the exception of Robert Delaunay); this was precisely because of the association of Gothic art with nationality, historicity and religiosity, all of which they were seeking to avoid in the name of modernist independence - unlike their Russian contemporaries. It was only the German Expressionists (Emile Nolde, Max Pechstein and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff) who used their medieval heritage - for instance, the rough style and technique of medieval woodcutting - to precipitate and legitimise their own form of nationalistic avant-gardism.⁷

A similar 'use' of medieval art can be said to have occurred in Russia. Although the reappraisal of ancient icon painting in the early nineteenth century was surely the sign of an objective interest in the history of icon painting *per se*, it was also a sign of its own time, reflecting and realising an impulse to precipitate cultural change. Napoleon's attack on Moscow in 1812 had the double effect of shattering the Russian idealisation of the West, and of exposing Russians to the ideas that led to the French Revolution. As a result of this profound and unprecedented shock, forms of culture that supported nationalistic and popular values were urgently required in Russia. The icon painting tradition, which had no representation in the West, served this purpose perfectly and was heralded as such.⁸ In the decades that followed, the religious, spiritual, artistic and political associations of icons were progressively excavated, and icons were revisited and reconceived as legitimising precedents for the development of new traditions in these fields. *The Avant-Garde Icon* analyses each of these associations, their aims and effects.



3. Chesme Church, St. Petersburg, Yury Velten, 1780

⁷ As highlighted by Hans Goltz in the exhibition *Der expressionistische Holzschnitt* in Munich in 1918, and described in the accompanying catalogue.

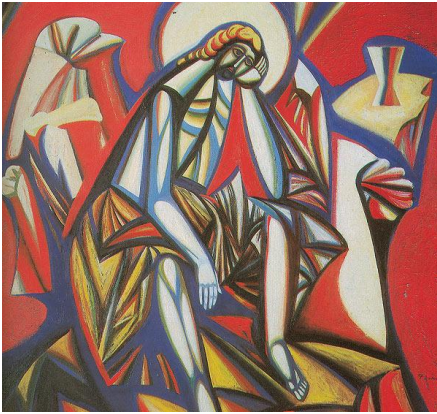
⁸ Although the work of Cimabue, Duccio and Giotto is clearly indebted to Byzantine icons, it is *not* sacramental. On the contrary, Catholic theologians considered the supposed sacramentality of icons to be idolatrous, requiring their images to be narrative, didactic and ultimately emotive. Besides the Eucharist, the role of popular sacramentality in Catholic lands was performed by relics. See *The Avant-Garde Icon*, p. 15.

While the revival of interest in icons was used by avant-garde artists to bring a sense of nationality, popularity, historicity and (in some cases) sanctity to their work, it also provided a further unique element, absent from other traditions of medieval revivalism, that did not simply precipitate the development of modern art; it precipitated the *consummation and demise of art*. Because icons were perceived not so much as ‘works of art’ to be ‘appreciated’ and ‘understood’, but as absolute religious objects with which to commune (on the grounds of their sacramentality), any work of art that aspired to identify with icons aspired to transcend its own identity as a ‘work of art’. Malevich embraced this eventuality, as did the Soviet state after the 1917 Revolution when art or easel painting *for its own sake* was abolished. For both parties, art ceased to be valid as a self-sufficient medium of self-expression. For Malevich the transcendence of art signified the liberation of individuals from the mediation of art, enabling them to commune with the sources of creativity as a direct and spontaneous function of life itself - that is to say, *unmediated* by art, or im-mediately; it amounted to the realisation of a spiritual freedom. For the Soviet regime on the other hand, artistic endeavour was increasingly subject to, and sublimated in, the design of utilitarian phenomena such as functional objects and political propaganda. In both cases, art ceased to exist *as a self-sufficient phenomenon*; to all intents and purposes, it had died.

Because the ‘afterlife’ of avant-garde art in Russia was sabotaged by the Soviet control of cultural life, preventing it from taking its own natural course as it seemed to be doing in the West, it was unclear whether self-expressive art had died a ‘natural death’ (evolving organically towards self-transcendence as Malevich had claimed) or whether it had been ‘murdered’ by the state. Certainly, the fact that all such art was subsequently suppressed by the state gave the impression that it was the latter. However, in the 1960s, when the ‘thaw’ began under Nikita Khrushchev and the first communities of unofficial artists began to form, it was shown to have been attempted - but failed - murder. By slow degrees underground artists began to produce and show their work (mostly to each other, in their own studios). And following an illegal exhibition of unofficial art in a forest opening outside Moscow in 1974 (bulldozed by a group of reactive communist ‘gardeners’, instructed by the KGB), the first public exhibitions of work by artists other than Social Realists were allowed.⁹ Increasingly cognizant of western European debates, the convention of producing art for its own sake, as understood until the October Revolution, began to revive. A wide variety of new styles were explored. Most significant in the present context is the fact that, still vulnerable to charges of anti-Soviet activity, a number of artists - for instance Volodymyr Makarenko, Feodisiy Humeniuk (Plate 4) and Mikhail Chemiakin - were explicitly influenced by icons to develop their own finely crafted luminous fantasy worlds as hermetically sealed alternatives to the official party style. The danger of producing art in such pressurised circumstances was greatly reduced in 1988, when

⁹ Jackson, M. J., *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes*, University of Chicago, 2010, pp. 139-140.

Sotheby's organised the first public auction of contemporary Russian art in the Soviet Union, thereby commercialising it overnight and radically altering the parameters within which it acquired



4. Feodisiy Humeniuk, *In the Desert*, 1981, oil on canvas, 95 x 100 cms., Ukrainian Art Gallery, London.

meaning in the process. With the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russian artists became free to participate in the international art world openly and, while many of them lost their sense of direction (which had been fundamentally associated with political resistance), many continue to do so. The concept of self-expressive art appears to have recovered fully.

But several important questions remain, pertaining to the role of art in contemporary culture, and *The Avant-Garde Icon* raises them. The overwhelming pre-occupation of twentieth-century avant-garde artists with the *rationale* of art - art about itself - had led some to ask whether art (or some part of it) had not really died at the beginning of the twentieth century? If it did, as Malevich and his compatriots claimed, then are we not denying a fundamental truth about our own culture, and trivialising our own condition by reducing the 'death of art' to the level of an impotent irony (rather as the Dadaists' declaration that 'art is dead!' was also reduced to irony in the 1920s)? If we invest art with the capacity to legitimise itself (as 'art for art's sake'), are we not simply placing it on an artificial and arbitrary life-support system, confirming Nietzsche's pronouncement that 'we need art lest we perish of the truth'?

On the other hand, while *The Avant-Garde Icon* questions the role of art after the 'death of art', it also makes a case for art as a transmitter and translator of traditional values into the language of contemporary culture, ever-filtering them and re-expressing them in forms that are consistent with contemporary modes of experience. In this respect, *The Avant-Garde Icon* serves as a study of the way in which the perceived value of traditional cultures - their wisdom and insights - can be honoured in the contemporary world without ossifying and becoming anachronisms. At a time when the distinctive cultural conventions of the world's societies are being exposed to, and influenced by, each other ever more rapidly, challenging traditional values at their core, this issue is especially topical.

The latter question was addressed one hundred years ago by Natalia Goncharova, some of whose 'iconic' images were intended to elicit the passionate and popular essence of icon painting - at the expense of their aesthetic refinement and the hidden structures of power that this refinement subtly required of their viewers. It is a telling coincidence that when the feminist punk collective Pussy Riot performed their 'punk prayer' in front of the iconostasis of the Holy Redeemer Cathedral in

Moscow in February 2012 (Plate 5), they used a similar visual language - simple forms in bright, unmodulated, almost childish colours - to that of Goncharova's *Four Evangelists*, painted almost



5. Pussy Riot demonstration in the Church of the Holy Redeemer, Moscow, 2012.

exactly a century earlier (Plate 6).¹⁰ And just as Goncharova was accused of blasphemy for producing this work and was forced to remove it from its first exhibition, so Pussy Riot were similarly charged, despite the fact that, like Goncharova, they were attacking politics and the politics of the Church rather than the sanctity of the Mother of God (The Virgin Mary), whom they invoked 'prayerfully', if vociferously. Indeed it is no accident that, despite the fact that they seem to have had no artistic awareness or agenda, Pussy Riot used the associations of the Mother of God, and the sanctity of the Church (which they did not damage) to lend purity and innocence, as well as popularity and nationalism, to their actions.



6. Goncharova, *Four Evangelists*, 1911, oil on canvas, 204 x 58 cms. (each panel), Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

While the avant-garde potential of the Mother of God is clearly still being acknowledged and exploited at a political level, interest in the cultural and spiritual potency of icons is also gathering momentum academically. In April 2012, a conference on the impact of Byzantine art and theology on modernism (*Byzantium/Modernism*) was held at Yale University, and in September of the same year, a conference, *On the Spiritual in Russian Art*, was held in Cambridge, UK. Papers from a conference *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, at Columbia University in 2003, were published in 2010.¹¹

Important new research is also being undertaken on the formation of the earliest museum collections of icons, both in Russia and the West, reflecting the new value that icons were increasingly perceived to hold, from the late 1920s onwards, not only among pioneering artists but among the secular public too.¹² It seems therefore that while a revival of interest in icons was instrumental to the consolidation of a modern sense of national identity in Russia from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, interest in that revival clearly also resonates with the cultural needs and capacities of our own time.

¹⁰ *The Four Evangelists*, 1911, oil on canvas, 204 x 58 cms. (each panel), Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

¹¹ Greenfield, D. and Gatrall, J. (eds.), *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010.

¹² Salmond, W., 'Russian Icons and American Money, 1928-1938' in Odom, A., and Salmond, W. (eds.), *Treasures into Tractors: the Selling of Russia's Cultural Heritage, 1918-1938*, University of Washington, 2009, pp. ; and Salmond, W., 'An Imperial Collection: Exploring the Hammers' Icons', in *Rublev to Fabergé: The Journey of Russian Art and Culture to America*, Bob Jones University Museum, 2012.

