Smithsonian Associates

Russian Art: From Icons to the Avant-Garde
Dr. Aneta Georgievska-Shine
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Kievan Rus and Russia

Kievan Rus refers to the East Slavic state that emerged around the 9th century centered around Kiev (Kyuv), while Russia typically refers to the vast expanse of territories governed by the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, or the modern Russian Federation. Kievan Rus encompassed territories primarily in modern-day Ukraine, Belarus, and parts of Russia. In contrast, Russia has historically expanded to cover a much larger area, including territories in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.

Kievan Rus played a crucial role in shaping the cultural, religious, and political identity of Eastern Slavic peoples. Its adoption of Orthodox Christianity from Byzantium, under Prince Vladimir the Great, significantly influenced the religious landscape of the region. Russia has undergone various cultural and political transformations over the centuries, blending Slavic, Turkic, Nordic, and other influences.

Icons and Russian Art

Russian icons, originating in the Byzantine tradition, are primarily associated with the Orthodox Christian faith. Rather than an accurate representation of the physical world, their painters aim to convey the unchanging aspects of spiritual truths. They serve as aids to prayer and meditation, aiming to facilitate a connection between the viewer and the divine. They are characterized by flat, stylized forms, vibrant colors, and a lack of realistic perspective.

Icons are traditionally painted on wooden panels, often using egg tempera as a medium, and gold leaf for the backgrounds, symbolizing the divine light. Colors, poses, gestures, and even the arrangement of figures all carry theological significance. Famous icons include the Virgin Mary known as the "Theotokos of Vladimir," the "Trinity" by Andrei Rublev and the "Mother of God of Kazan."

The Introduction of Western Art

Peter the Great (1672-1725) and Catherine the Great (1729-1796) were instrumental in introducing Western art to Russia, leading to a cultural transformation known as Westernization. Inspired by European travels, Peter sought to modernize Russia and bridge the cultural gap with the West. He founded the Russian Academy of Arts in 1757, providing a platform for the study and promotion of Western artistic techniques.

Catherine continued and expanded upon Peter's cultural initiatives. A patron of the arts, she amassed a vast collection of European paintings and sculptures, creating the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg to showcase these treasures. Catherine also attracted European artists and architects to Russia, encouraging the creation of Western-style palaces and public buildings.

Russian Art of the Nineteenth Century: Main Currents

The 19th century was a transformative period for Russian art, marked by a shift from traditional styles to a new cultural identity. Among the most significant artists of this era, who adopted Western styles in depicting Russian landscapes, society, and culture, are the following:

Ivan Aivazovsky (1817-1900): Renowned for his marine landscapes, he captured the vastness and drama of the sea, with a tremendous sensitivity to light and atmosphere.

Ilya Repin (1844-1930): A prominent realist painter, Repin depicted scenes of everyday life with emotional depth, often focusing on the plight of the Russian peasantry. His later works also show influences of Impressionism.

Valentin Serov (1865–1911): Serov was a prominent Russian Impressionist painter, known for his portraits and scenes of contemporary life.

Ivan Kramskoi (1837–1887): Kramskoi was a prominent figure in the Russian art scene and a founding member of the Peredvizhniki (Wanderers) group. While not a strict Impressionist, some of his later works show elements of the style.

Writers and Collectors

The writer and philosopher Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) had a profound influence on discussions about the purpose and role of art in society. In his work "What is Art?" he argued that genuine art must convey universal, moral truths and be accessible to the common people. He criticized the elitism and decadence he perceived in contemporary art, advocating for a more democratic and morally grounded approach to artistic creation that could inspire and uplift society.

Sergei Shchukin (1854–1936) and Ivan Morozov (1871–1921) were Russian art patrons and collectors who significantly influenced the development of modern art in the early 20th century. Shchukin, a textile magnate, and Morozov, a wealthy industrialist, independently amassed extensive collections of avant-garde and Impressionist artworks. Shchukin focused on French artists like Picasso and Matisse, while Morozov supported Russian artists. The Bolshevik Revolution nationalized their collections, but their efforts laid the foundation for the appreciation of modern art in the Soviet Union.

The Russian Avant-Garde

At the turn of the 20th century, Russian art underwent a revolutionary transformation, marked by the emergence of avant-garde movements that sought to break away from traditional conventions. Notable figures include:

Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944): a pioneer of abstract art, he co-founded the Blue Rider group and explored the synthesis of color and form to convey emotion and spirituality.

Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935): founder of Suprematism, an art movement emerging around 1915, which aimed to transcend representation and achieve a state of pure feeling and non-objectivity, using a visual language of abstract forms.

Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953): a central figure in Constructivism, Tatlin is best known for his "Monument to the Third International," a dynamic and ambitious design that embodied the movement's emphasis on industrial materials and functionality.

Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956): this influential artist and photographer played a crucial role in Constructivist graphic design and applied arts.

El Lissitzky (1890–1941): A key figure in both Suprematism and Constructivism, Lissitzky contributed significantly to graphic design, architecture, and exhibition design.

Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962): a co-founder of Rayonism, Goncharova explored dynamic compositions and vibrant color schemes, incorporating elements of folk art and futurism.

Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958): A painter and textile designer, Stepanova collaborated closely with Rodchenko, applying Constructivist principles to fabric design.

Stalinist Repression

During the Soviet era – especially under the rule of Josef Stalin (1924-1953) – numerous artists and writers faced censorship, persecution, imprisonment, or execution due to their perceived deviation from the state-sanctioned artistic and political ideologies. Some of the best known of among them include:

Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930): The pioneering poet and playwright was initially a supporter of the Bolshevik government. However, as disillusionment set in, became more critical. In 1930, he committed suicide, reportedly due to personal and political reasons.

Isaak Babel (1894–1940): known for his short stories and plays, Babel fell victim to Stalin's purges and was executed following false accusations of espionage.

Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948): The pioneering film director faced scrutiny for his innovative filmmaking techniques and was subjected to censorship and official disapproval.

Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966): A prominent poet, Akhmatova's work was considered politically suspect, and she experienced official condemnation and censorship during Stalin's regime.

Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935): his abstract art was condemned as formalist and bourgeois, and he was not allowed to exhibit his work.

Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938): An acclaimed poet, he faced persecution for his critical verses about Stalin and the Soviet government. Following several imprisonments, he ultimately died in a labor camp in 1938.

The impact of these repressive measures on the cultural and artistic landscape of the Soviet Union was profound and long-lasting.

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Handout with main points – prepared by Aneta Georgievska-Shine