

# Russian arts on the rise

## Proceeding

The fifth Graduate Workshop of the *Russian Art and Culture Group* (RACG) once again proofed how vivid the art and culture of Russia and its neighbours are discussed among young researchers. Though still little represented in the curricula of German universities the art of Eastern Europe is the topic of many PhD theses. But also in a broader international context-both in the East and the West-Russian art has gained importance in the discipline of art history.

The *Russian Art and Culture Group* that was founded in 2014 by Isabel Wünsche at Jacobs University Bremen provides an international platform for scholars and younger researchers in this field. At least once a year members of the group organize a workshop to bring together recent research-mostly by PhD candidates as well as by already well-established academics.

For the first time the workshop did not take place in Bremen but in Berlin. For two days, from September 21<sup>st</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Kunsthistorisches Institut of the Freie Universität hosted the event that was as well supported by the Kroll Family Trust. Also for the first time the talks were either in English or in German.

In the year of the anniversary of the October Revolution the organizers refreshingly desisted from yet another commemoration of this once-in-a-century-event. Instead they drew the focus to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century's theorization and contextualization of Russian art-a period that ranged from national appreciation to scientific approaches in the cultural discourses.

The first day started with a panel that was devoted to "National Tendencies" in the culture of late Imperial Russia. Maria Nitka from the Polski Instytut Studiów nad Sztuką Świata in Warsaw talked about "The Artistic Identities of Henryk Siemiradzki", a Polish artists with strong connections to Russia's but also to the Western art world. Siemiradzki was a professor at the famous Art Academy in St. Petersburg. In Germany and France, and later in Rome, he came in closer contact with the Western academic tradition as well as with ancient art. Siemiradzki's artistic identity thus was characterized both from a cosmopolitan and a national approach. Nitka further referred to the hot-headed debates in Russia's art scene from the 1860s onwards, when a group of artist that later formed the Peredvizhniki movement broke free from the academic style and paved the way to modernism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this regard the academic Siemiradzki who was influenced by the Peredvishniki and their realism as well as by Russian folklore art also played a role in the process of modernization in Russian art.

Ludmila Piters-Hofmann, one of the organizers of the workshop, devoted her research to Viktor Vasnetsov and his interpretation of fairy tales and folk tales. Vasnetsov is considered to be one of the most prominent representatives of Russia's search for its own national style in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The themes of his paintings, the architecture and the costumes of his protagonists often evoke the image, or rather the imagination of a disappeared fairy tale-like Russia. In her talk "Behind the Green Veil: The Russian Forest in Viktor Vasnetsov's Folk Tale Paintings" Piters-Hofmann further outlined the role of the forest in Vasnetsov paintings as a *topos* of Russia's national identity.

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The second panel "Intergenerational Tensions and Commonalities" focused on the relation between the representatives of the different succeeding art movements at the turn of the century. Using the example of Martiros Saryan, an Armenian artist, Mane Mkrtchyan from the Institute of Arts at the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia shed light on Russia's Symbolism. In her talk "Martiros Saryan and Russian Symbolism" Mkrtchyan argued that Symbolism in Russia had two stages. The first one was led by Mikhail Vrubel and Victor Borisov-Musatov. They were followed by a younger generation that formed the famous group "Blue Rose". Mkrtchyan further pointed out that in Saryan's personal artistic life there were also two stages of Symbolism: The first one ending with the Blue Rose-exhibition in 1907 was followed by a later phase where Saryan was influenced by Vincent van Gogh's artistic language.

Isabel Stockholm from the University of Cambridge challenged in her talk "Enough Blood! Artistic Generations in Late Imperial Russia 1890-1914" the idea of a linearity in Russian art history and the assumption that a younger Avant-Garde always has to overcome the older, established generation. By evaluating documents like letters or memoirs of artists Stockholm could proof that there were many friendly contacts between the younger and the older generation. Thus even a radical renovator like Vladimir Mayakovsky who shocked the art world with the manifesto "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1912) was amicably visiting the Peredvishniki-senior Ilya Repin at his residence "Penaty", as Stockholm pointed out.

The third panel was dedicated to the different "Arstistic Developments in Russia" at the turn of the century. Tanja Malycheva from the Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster and the Moscow State University once again gave interesting and new inside into the work of Valentin Serov. This time she focused on the influence that Italian art but also Italy itself had on Serov's artistic development. In her talk "Italy's Role in the Artistic Development of Valentin Serov and his Russian and Western Contemporaries" she compared his perception of Italy to those of Western artists, but also to the perception by his Russian colleagues like Nikolai Ge or Ilya Repin, who also frequently visited Italy.

Anna Brinkmann presented another form of influence on the artistic developments in Russia: The Cosmism with it's believe to overcome death. The founder of this conviction was the philosopher Nikolai Fedorov, whose writings became popular from 1906 onwards. In her talk "Vom Himmelreich zum Kosmos: Vorzeichen der Avantgarde in den Schriften N. F. Fedorovs" (From Heaven to Cosmos: First signs of the Avant-Garde in the writings of N. F. Fedorov) Brinkmann

highlighted how cosmism influenced the artistic and theoretical Avant-Garde. His-utopian-concepts like colonizing the space but also his more concrete ideas about the role of the museum in a changing society were reflected in the art and writings of the Avant-Garde in Russia, as Brinkmann concluded.

The first day of the workshop ended with the guest lecture “Ad Reinhardts Antwort auf Malewitschs Schwarzes Quadrat” (Ad Reinhardt’s answer to Malevich’s *Black Square*) by Werner Busch. He convincingly drew a connection line from Kasimir Malevich’s famous “Black Square” to Ed Reinhardt’s black “Last Paintings” series, which he painted from 1954 until his death in 1967. Like Malevich Reinhardt searched for an ending point in painting and, as Busch argued, fulfilled this mission. Vice versa Busch came to a deeper understanding of Malevich’s painting as a space of imagination through a closer examination of Reinhardt’s “Last Paintings”. Not an art historian but an architect opened the next day’s first panel dedicated to “Constructions by the Russian Avant-Garde”. Andrea Contursi from Cologne talked about “The influence of El Lissitzky’s *Projects for the Affirmation of the New* on the Architectural Culture of the 1920s in Central Europe: The Case of Mies van der Rohe”. Contursi transformed Lissitzky’s two-dimensional Proun compositions into three-dimensional axonometric projections and compared them to actual buildings by Mies van der Rohe—with a striking result. Especially van der Rohe’s Monument to the November Revolution (1926) in Berlin with its denial of a defined viewing-point paid, according to Contursi, tribute to Lissitzky’s Proun compositions. With Christiane Post from the Bergische Universität Wuppertal the organizers could win an established expert in the field of Russia’s art and culture. Post gave a vivid lecture on her research topic: the founding and organization of the Museums of Modern Art in early Soviet Russia. “Die Museen für Moderne Kunst van den Kunsthochschulen der frühen 1920er Jahre” (The Museums for Modern Art at the Art Academies in the early 1920s) focused on the different concepts for a re-definition of this institution among Avant-Gardists like Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky and Alexander Rodchenko. In Vitebsk, where Marc Chagall had initiated a progressive art school, the Museum for Art should have served as a teaching tool for the students.

The last Panel was dedicated to the “Theoretical Approaches of the Russian Avant-Garde”. Maria Taroutina from the Singapore’s Yale-NUS College shed new light on two main figures of the theoretical discourses of the Avant-Garde: Nikolai Punin and Nikolai Tarabukin. While mostly known for their writings on non-objective, Constructivist and Productivist art, they started their careers as medievalists. Taroutina pointed out their often-overlooked engagement for Russian Icon painting as well as Russia’s 19<sup>th</sup> century art throughout the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s. Thus Taroutina argued that Punin’s and Tarabukin’s art historical narratives were rather circular than linear and the often-claimed dichotomies between the old, established art and the Avant-Garde artists has to be reconsidered.

The other organizer of the workshop, Viktoria Schindler from the FU Berlin, gave the final talk. With “Wassily Kandinskys kunsttheoretische Schriften und ihre Rezeption in den Kreisen der russischen Avantgarde” (Wassily Kandinsky’s art theoretical writings and their perception among the Avant-Gardists) Schindler presented new research on Kandinsky’s perception among the Avant-Gardists after the Russian Revolution. She clearly argued that Kandinsky’s theoretical writings on art changed from 1919 onwards: Instead of the rather metaphysical, associative and symbolic understanding of colours and shapes, he turned to a far more objective, matter-of-fact analysis of painterly means that influenced even Constructivists like Lubov Popova.

All talks were followed by vivid yet cooperative discussions in the plenum. The workshop not only offered latest research but also provided a networking-platform for all participants. Many contacts have been established and will hopefully lead to fruitful cooperation in the future.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.