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Feature

The World of Art

By Christine Lindey

In 1897 Diaghilev, the critic and future impresario, asked why Western Europeans considered Russian art to be "obsolete and asleep on a bed of long-moribund traditions" when its young art was in fact as vibrant, fresh and original as that in Paris, Munich or London. The answer, he said, lay in its disunity and thus of its lack of international profile. To rectify this he founded the World of Art Society (1898–1906)* in collaboration with the art historian / painter Benois, the theoretician Filosofov and the stage designer Bakst. Via a polemical journal and exhibitions they set out to unite and promote the Russian avant-garde at home, Russian art both old and new abroad, and to bring Western avant-garde art to Russia.

No clear aesthetic stance unified the many participating artists: their works varied widely in genre, style and subject matter.

These ranged from Kustodiev's illusionistically rendered scenes of Russian provincial life to Vrubel's impastoed hybrid creatures and demons; from the broken brushwork of Levitan's shimmering birch forests and lakes to the bold, flat outlines of Bilibin and Mitrokhin's fairy tale illustrations.

The journal and the exhibitions also introduced the Western avant-garde to the Russian public, particularly the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists but also Art Nouveau and Symbolism such as Böcklin, Puvis de Chavannes and Beardsley.

Influenced by William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement, which challenged the academic hierarchy of fine art as superior to the applied arts, the society exhibited and discussed jewellery, glass, ceramics, furniture, weavings, embroideries, book illustrations, printmaking and theatre designs, alongside fine art by Russian and Western artists and designers, including Lalique, Tiffany, Gallé, Steinlen, Roerich, and Ostroumova-Lebedeva.

Despite this diversity broad themes and preoccupations do emerge, the first being a preoccupation with Russian identity. Kustodiev's illusionistic, snowbound provincial towns with their onion-domed churches and merry troikas differ in style and meaning from Serebryakova's severe, hardworking peasants painted with plein-airist energy and bold colour, yet both portray essentially Russian subjects.

Nesterov's intense symbolist depictions of pallid nuns and saints having religious visions in the Russian countryside differ in style and ideological outlook from Ostroumova-Lebedeva's boldly simplified

woodcuts representing the urban beauty of St Petersburg, but both depict their native land. Furthermore, many artists, including Serov, Vasnetsov, Nesterov and Lanceray, depicted episodes from Russian history.

Finally, traditional Russian icons and peasant arts featured in the group's journal and exhibitions, and the influence of the latter permeated many of its artists' theatre design, ceramics, furniture, textiles and book illustrations in subject matter as well as style. Drawing upon Russian folk tales, they used motifs such as the bird-women (birds of paradise) which appeared in peasant embroideries and carvings, while many were inspired by peasant art's decorativeness and simplifications of form.



Frontispiece for *Mir Iskusstva*, No 11, 1904, by Ivan Bilibin (SCRSS Library)

A second major theme was a nostalgic fascination with 18th-century French and Russian court life. Somov depicted aristocrats' flirtations with pierrots, harlequins or each other in impossibly fertile pleasure gardens in which rainbows cross sunny skies or fireworks cascade in the moonlight. In subject matter the debt was to Fragonard and Boucher, rather than to Chardin, yet Somov's simplification of form and fresh palette were firmly modernist. A macabre or voyeuristic eroticism sometimes enters these works. For example, in Benois' *The Bath of the Marquise* (1906) a pretty aristocrat is immersed up to her neck in the moonlit pool of a formal garden, her discarded clothes suggestively piled on a

bench while a black courtier's face peeks hungrily from behind the manicured hedges.

The third major tendency was the use of modernist visual languages. The plein-airism of Serov's loosely brushed portraits is as spontaneous as any by Manet. The use of flatness, simplification of form, the love of sinuous line and decorativeness or the symbolist distortion of colour and form as a means of conveying states of mind mark the majority of the society's artists as belonging to 1890s international modernism. Indeed, potted accounts of the World of Art simply characterise it as Russian Art Nouveau or symbolist art.

Yet what most united these diverse artists was their opposition to the Itinerants (*Peredvizhniki*). Founded in 1870 in opposition to the academy's western-looking subservience to the Imperial court, they had exposed social inequalities and injustices in a highly accessible, realist style and taken their works to the provinces in travelling exhibitions to raise social awareness. Repin's *Haulers on the Volga* (1870–3), in which exhausted men in rags tug a river barge, was one of their best known works.

But by the 1890s the *Peredvizhniki*'s realist style had become absorbed into the academic canon of taste, and the Russian modernists saw them as old-fashioned and out of touch with the international avant-garde. They argued that modern innovation lay in challenging formal conventions rather than social outlooks. The 'how' rather than the 'what' of art was what mattered, direct political content prevented aesthetic contemplation.

The group's promotion of art for art's sake, or pure art, led to its being attacked as decadent. Modelling itself on the French avant-garde magazine *La Revue Blanche*, the World of Art journal published Russian modernist poetry alongside art, so further emphasising its links with Symbolism and exacerbating public perception of the group as decadent bohemians divorced from society.

In fact, the group's aims faced in opposite directions throughout its existence. The first

issue of the magazine claimed to be concerned with the 'purely aesthetic' intention of developing a modern Russian art but also to apply this to industry. This contradiction was partly the result of patronage, itself informed by contemporary cultural and political debates in which the peasant question loomed large.

Diaghilev's and Benois' primary commitment was to avant-garde modernism but their major patrons were the railway magnate Mamontov (before his arrest for fraud and his bankruptcy of 1899) and Princess Maria K Tenicheva. Both made their financial support conditional on the World of Art's promotion of the revival of Russian peasant art which they fostered by founding their arts and crafts colonies of Abramtsevo and Talachkino. Their artists, inspired by popular arts, created motifs and designs for objects (*kustari*) to be manufactured by peasant craftsmen.

Russian cultural life was alight with theoretical debates born of the dynamic and contradictory nature of the socio-political situation which led to the 1905 and 1917 revolutions. Industrialisation, and therefore modernity, arrived later and faster in Russia than in Western Europe, so that the speed and modernity of the cities contrasted sharply with a countryside virtually unchanged since medieval times. The urban intelligentsia and industrialists were mostly western-looking liberals keen to haul their country into 20th-century modernity, while the bulk of the nation consisted of landowning aristocrats ruling over illiterate peasants for whom serfdom was still within living memory.

The question of the function of art and of the need to modernise governance were intertwined. Artists may have been sophisticated and westernised, yet like everyone else they were still the Tsar's disenfranchised subjects until the limited democracy established by the 1905 bourgeois revolution. Aesthetic debates revolved around the issue of art for art's sake as opposed to art with a social function. Many intellectuals argued that art should be a catalyst for social and political

change; for them the World of Art's defence of pure art amounted to a betrayal of the Russian artist's role as a progressive social force in an undemocratic country.

The uncomfortable duality of the group's outlook was summed up at the *Section Russe* at the Paris Salon d'Automne in 1906 in which Diaghilev introduced Russian art to Western Europe. Russian art's first comprehensive international exhibition, it occupied 10 halls in the Grand Palais and travelled on to Venice and Berlin. Curated by Benois and designed by Bakst, the exhibition showed ancient Russian icons, 18th-century portraits mostly by Levitsky and Borovikovsky, contemporary peasant manufactures (*kustari*) and the Russian avant-garde, including Bakst, Benois, Bilibin, Kustodiev, Ostroumova-Lebedeva, Roerich and Vrubel.

Linking peasant art with the urban avant-garde and old Russia's icons (then still little appreciated at home and abroad) with westernised post-Petrine court art presented an ideal, inclusive view of Russian society and history far from the truth of the fragmented and antagonistic ethnic groups and classes which had led to the previous year's revolution. It attempted to unify the yawning gap between peasant art and that of the educated intelligentsia and aristocracy which had existed since the 18th century and glossed over the fierce debates between Moscow-led Slavophiles and St Petersburg-led Westernisers which had raged during the 19th century. This aligned it with the cultural policies of the right wing of the liberal Constitutional-Democratic Party, formed in 1905, which argued that a cultural elite should function as a bridge between social differences under the guidance of an autocratic state. Despite its defence of pure art, the World of Art society could not stand outside the dynamic political situation of its time.

* The first journal was dated 1899 but appeared in October 1898. Benois revived the society solely as an exhibiting society from 1910–24.

Christine Lindey's publications include 'Art in the Cold War' (1990) and 'Keywords in Nineteenth Century Art' (2006).

SCRSS News

Annual General Meeting

The Society's AGM took place on 16 May 2009.

The full Council, including newly elected members, is now: *Honorary Officers:* Professor William Bowring (President); Robert Chandler, Professor Robert Davies, Sir Edward Downes, Stanley Forman, Dr Kate Hudson, Dr Rachel O'Higgins, Robert Wareing MP (Vice-Presidents). *Executive Committee:* John Riley (Chair), Ralph Gibson (Vice-Chair and Hon Treasurer), Philip Matthews (Vice-Chair), Jean Turner (Hon Secretary), Victoria Nartova, Charles Stewart. *Council:* Kate Clark, Jill Cunningham, Barbara Ellis, Andrew Jameson, Christine Lindey, Diana Turner.

In his opening remarks the Chair, John Riley, praised the continuing generosity of the Society's members who, through volunteering, donations and bequests, helped keep the Society afloat. He particularly thanked John Cunningham, the Society's only paid member of staff, and the Hon Secretary Jean Turner for the wide range of work which they undertook. He welcomed two potential new cataloguing projects, currently in discussion with Central St Martins University of the Arts and the Russky Mir Fund, both of which would improve access to the SCRSS library and archive.

Philip Matthews, Vice-Chair, highlighted that 2009 was the 85th anniversary of the founding of the Society.

The Hon Secretary, Jean Turner, introduced the Annual Report. In particular, she drew attention to this year's 10th anniversary of the unveiling of the Soviet War Memorial in Southwark, London. The memorial had its origins in a decision taken at an SCRSS AGM in 1997 and was the only one of its kind in the UK. It had become an important centre for the observance of Victory Day (9 May) in London, with this year's ceremony

being particularly well attended (see *Soviet Memorial Trust Fund News* on page 6). Among other successful events over the past year, she also highlighted the 3rd SCRSS Russian Language Seminar and a visit by Russian academics from St Petersburg University, led by Professor Evgeny Yurkov, to promote Russian language and culture in the UK (both in April 2009).

In moving the Annual Accounts, the Hon Treasurer, Ralph Gibson, reiterated that the Society survived on very little income. Events such as the SCRSS Russian Language Seminar were important sources of additional income and needed to be developed further. Bequests were a lifeline to the Society, but needed to be set aside as reserves, rather than used as working capital.

Following refreshments, which included a toast to the Society on its 85th anniversary, Council member Christine Lindey gave a talk on her private exhibition *Inner Worlds / Outer Worlds* on show at the SCRSS. The exhibition evoked her inner life (her childhood in Paris, born of French and Polish parents) and her outer life (her participation in recent anti-war demonstrations). Christine has generously donated half the proceeds of the sale of her paintings to the SCRSS.

3rd SCRSS Russian Language Seminar

The 3rd SCRSS Russian Language Seminar took place at the Society on 15–16 April 2009. Lectures were given by Professor Yuri Kuznetsov and Professor Natalia Rogozhina of the Faculty of Russian Language at St Petersburg State University. Twenty-one participants took part, including teachers, translators, interpreters, graduates and independent students of Russian. The event was covered on St Petersburg's *Ekho* radio station, which interviewed Professor Rogozhina, and on the St Petersburg Government website. The seminar is an SCRSS initiative organised in conjunction with the St Petersburg Committee for

External Affairs, the St Petersburg Association for International Co-operation, St Petersburg State University and the International Association of Teachers of Russian Language and Culture. The response to the seminar has been very positive from both the British and Russian sides, and it is hoped to continue this event in the future.

Next Events

Friday 10 July 7pm

Illustrated Talk: SCRSS – The Early Years (1924–39)

2009 is the 85th anniversary of the founding of the Society. This talk, given by members of the Society who have helped catalogue the SCRSS Archive, covers the early years through to the outbreak of WWII. It will be illustrated by a selection of recently digitised photographs, documents and other artefacts from the archive.

Obituaries

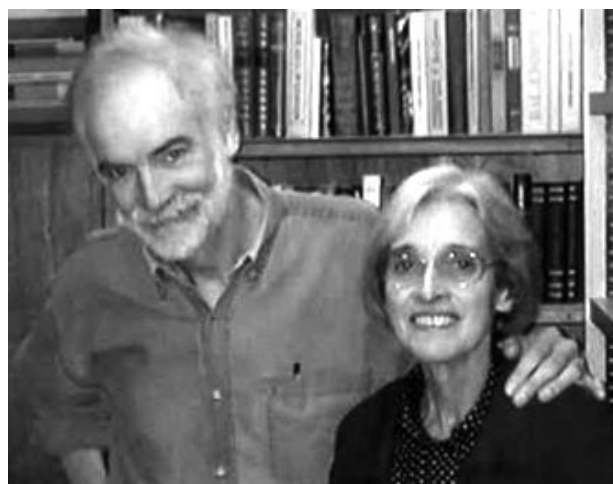
Sheila Clarke (1936–2009)

It is with great sadness that we announce the death on 14 May 2009 of our much-loved member and voluntary librarian Sheila Marion Clarke. The news came as a great shock to the Society as Sheila had only recently attended the SCRSS Russian Language Seminar and paid her weekly visit to the SCRSS to carry out work in the Loan Library.

It will take some time to get over the loss of Sheila and our sympathy goes out to her husband Gerry Clarke. He has lost a life partner who shared all his interests.

Sheila and Gerry, members of the SCRSS since 1987, made a major contribution to our Loan Library when the Society became an educational charity in 2004. They donated some magnificent shelving, skilfully erected by Gerry, which allowed Sheila and other volunteers to re-organise the whole of

the literature section into a welcoming and much admired area.



Sheila and Gerry Clarke in the SCRSS Library

Sheila was a qualified public librarian who, over a period of 10 years, used her knowledge of Russian language and her love of its art and literature to enhance our library. Our duty must be to carry on her good works.

At her funeral on Thursday 27 May friends, neighbours, fellow librarians, university students and the Hon Secretary of the SCRSS all spoke of Sheila's great qualities, her kindness and generosity. A suggestion has been made to erect a memorial plaque to Sheila in the SCRSS Library: we would welcome ideas and offers towards this.

By Jean Turner

Vladimir Molchanov

It is with deep regret that the SCRSS has learned of the death of Vladimir Molchanov on 24 May 2009.

For 15 years Vladimir's work as representative of the Russian State Agency for International Co-operation in Culture and Business (RAMSIR, later Rosintercentre), based at the Russian Embassy in London, was of the highest order. His relationship with our Society and other British organisations linked with Russia was always fruitful, leading to good British-Russian relations.

His lasting tribute will be the Soviet War Memorial in London, which commemorates the 27 million Soviet citizens who died fighting Fascism from 1941–45. This unique UK memorial was the result of British–Russian co-operation in which Vladimir Molchanov, together with our Society, played a key part. Its increasing importance to and support from the Russian-speaking community in London is a fulfilment of his desire that the memorial should reach out to all Russian, former Soviet and British citizens who wish to pay tribute to those who gave their lives to the victory over Fascism.

Vladimir was also closely involved with other memorials to famous Russians who lived in Britain and these are a tribute to his efforts to record our two countries' long-standing diplomatic and cultural relations.

His loss is truly a sad one and we send our deepest sympathy to his devoted wife Galina and to his family and colleagues.

By Jean Turner

Soviet Memorial Trust Fund News

Victory Day – 9 May 2009

"One of the most important events we have in London," declared Simon Hughes MP during the act of remembrance at the Soviet War Memorial on Victory Day. He was addressing an impressive gathering of more than 350 people. This year three World War II veterans from Archangelsk joined their British comrades, the Mayor of Southwark, Minister for Veterans Kevan Jones MP, British-Russian Parliamentary Group Secretary Robert Wareing MP, diplomats from almost all the CIS countries, and representatives from a growing range of British and Russian organisations. The ceremony attracted large numbers of people from ex-Soviet states now living or studying in the UK, bringing young and old together

to remember their very personal losses during the war.

In addition to the sea of wreaths and flowers that covered the Memorial, everyone present will also remember the poignant strains of the famous Soviet song *The Cranes* sung by the young Polina Baranova from the Russian Embassy School.

The formal ceremony was followed by a brief outdoor reception hosted by the Russian Ambassador. Veterans were able to chat and sing with the many Russian students and young people who had come along for the first time.

While the veterans departed to participate in further events on board HMS Belfast, over 100 participants went inside the nearby Imperial War Museum to listen to a fascinating and enlightening account of the war on the Eastern front given by historian and writer Michael Jones. He drew upon his vast amount of research for two books on the subject – *Stalingrad* and the very recent *Leningrad: State of Siege*. His talk was followed by a showing of *Red Star*, one of the episodes in the epic TV series *The World at War*, which dealt with events on the Soviet front in 1941–43.

Once again the SCRSS played an important role in the organisation of these events. As well as significant administrative help in the weeks prior to the event, members of the Society made generous financial contributions and also helped to steward on the day.

The next event at the Soviet War Memorial will be on Remembrance Sunday, 8 November 2009. For further details about this event, and next year's ceremonies, please contact the Hon Secretary, SMTF, c/o 320 Brixton Road, London SW9 6AB. Email: smtf@hotmail.co.uk.

The Soviet War Memorial is located in the Geraldine Mary Harmsworth Park, (adjacent to the Imperial War Museum), Lambeth Road, London SE1 6HZ.

Feature

Intute: Russian Social Science Resources Online

By Angela Joyce

The Internet seems to be indispensable nowadays for students, researchers or keen amateurs and can be a valuable tool for finding resources on Russia. However, it is all too easy to find quantity rather than quality. This feature provides guidance for locating reputable materials and even improving your Internet skills.

Google is usually the search engine of choice for finding information online and while it can be amazingly clever at producing results, it cannot find everything and there are alternatives. Intute is one such service, which is free and easy to use. Funded by a UK government agency, JISC, it is aimed mainly at students in higher education, but its resources are relevant to a wider audience. No registration is needed for the main Intute website and it can be accessed by anyone with an Internet connection in the UK or elsewhere.

Intute: <http://www.intute.ac.uk/>



Intute – home page

Intute aims to find the 'best of the Web' worldwide, both in English and other languages. The core of the service is a catalogue of high quality websites, arranged in subject areas. Intute websites are selected by a team of subject experts in universities across the UK. Staff find websites by scanning email lists, networking with colleagues, reading journals, searching systematically on the Net, reading newsfeeds and quality blogs, or from suggestions from Intute users. The websites are then indexed in our catalogue. Intute follows criteria for this process, drawn up by its senior managers and advisers, i.e. selected websites must be from reputable sources, be stable, accessible and well designed. Websites of a purely commercial nature or that promote illegal activities are not allowed. Each catalogue entry contains the following information: the address (URL) of the website / resource, a short description written by the Intute editor, keywords, a subject classification and any technical requirements. Resources are checked regularly to ensure currency.

Russian resources can be found in the EuroStudies section. This covers every country and region of Europe, including the Russian Federation, plus a section on the European Union. Subject scope covers most of the social sciences, in particular politics, business, law, education, economics and statistics. The Russian section has over 200 resources listed – more than the UK section but fewer than the EU section with over 600 resources.

Intute EuroStudies:

<http://www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/eurostudies/>

Intute Russian Federation:

<http://www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/cgi-bin/browse.pl?id=120952>

The Russian Federation catalogue section can be searched or browsed to find resources. These are usually free websites with no subscription - if it is a subscription service, we state this in the description. We list Russian government pages, free journals, non-profits, academic associations

(including the SCRSS), news websites, reports, research centres or poster collections. We even include video clips and podcasts of lectures in English. With the increasing moves towards democracy and the free market model in much of Eastern Europe, plus growth of Internet access, there has been an explosion in the number of websites about Russia and Eastern Europe in general. For example, there are now many more blogs, news sites, research projects and government websites. Various political views are represented throughout the section and we aim for balance.



Intute – Russian Federation catalogue page

At the top of the page are Editor's Choice websites – ones that we consider to be of key importance for Russian social sciences, such as the President of Russia's site, the Central Bank and Federal State Statistics Service. But we also look for more unusual resources that readers may miss. Scroll down the page and you will see an alphabetical listing of all the resources.

As we have Intute staff with Russian language knowledge, we include some sites in Russian only. However, many websites based in Russia now also have excellent versions in English and so are accessible to our non-Russian speaking users too.

Below we list a selection of Russian websites on Intute that may interest SCRSS members:

EU-Russia Network

<http://www.eu-russia-network.stir.ac.uk/index.htm>

A new collaboration between the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) and the University Association for Contemporary Studies (UACES).

Meeting of Frontiers

<http://frontiers.loc.gov/intldl/mtfhtml/mf splash.html>

Unusual US-Russian bilingual joint project about colonisation and the meeting of the two powers in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest.

Russia After Putin

<http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/LSEPublicLecturesAndEvents/events/2007/20070906t1353z001.htm>

Podcast of lecture at LSE by Sir Roderic Lyne.

Russian Public Opinion Research Centre

<http://wciom.com/>

In Russian or English. Post-Soviet organisation with the status of an academic institution. Interesting surveys on social optimism, crime rates, confidence in political leaders and similar.

Stalinka

<http://images.library.pitt.edu/cgi-bin/i/image/image-idx?c=stalinka>

Hosted by the University of Pittsburgh, this is a fantastic digitised collection of photos, posters, paintings, chinaware and more relating to Stalin.

We constantly strive to improve our Russian coverage and welcome suggestions from SCRSS members. Please email us with suggested new resources via the Intute Suggest a Site page.

Intute Suggest a Site:

<http://www.intute.ac.uk/suggest.html>

For those SCRSS readers who want to improve their Internet skills, we recommend another Intute service, the Virtual Training Suite.

Intute Virtual Training Suite:

<http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/>

These free tutorials teach information skills, especially how to judge the quality of what you find on the Internet. The European Studies and Modern Languages tutorials may be of most interest. They list key websites and explain how to search the Internet more effectively. With the constant growth of online information, Intute considers information skills more important than ever.

Readers may also be interested in the Intute blog, written by our editors. It is a good way of keeping up to date with online resources and events. For the more technically-minded, this is available in newsfeed form too.

Intute Blog:

<http://www.intute.ac.uk/socialsciences/blog/>

The EuroStudies section will merge with Intute's Modern Languages and Area Studies section this summer. The latter covers arts and humanities subjects. This will improve accessibility to all Russian resources on Intute.

We hope you will visit the Intute website and spread the word. Please email us with any comments.

Angela Joyce
Intute Research Officer
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Reviews

Lingvo-Kulturologiya (Linguistics and Culture) By EI Zinovyeva and EE Yurkov (2006, ISBN: 5-94922- 013-7, Pbk, 259pp, in Russian)

This book, which is immensely readable, expounds and contextualises that branch of linguistics concerned with the way that a language reflects the culture of those who speak it, including the way in which they look at the world and their history and environment.

It is aimed at "those studying for a master's degree in teaching Russian as a foreign language, doctoral students and all those readers who are interested in the inter-relationship between language and culture". It covers the theoretical underpinnings of the subject and offers fascinating concrete examples of usage from Chinese, English, German, Japanese and Korean. Although this choice of comparative languages can be appreciated, given the historical, geographical and practical factors involved, it would have been interesting to see examples from the Semitic group, for example Arabic.

A wide-ranging survey of the similarities and differences between key words and expressions is offered, revealing the underlying cultural facets that influence the different languages, such as those relating to heavenly bodies, animal idioms, laughter and labour. One entertaining example is the Russian *ubit' mukhu* (literally 'to kill a fly') – meaning to be drunk. *Mukha* (fly) came into use at the beginning of the 19th century as a symbol of winning in connection with card games. When you put down a higher value card or trump on top of another card (the *mukha* or current winning card) you 'killed' the latter. Winning was associated with drinking to one's success. The authors then point out that, "a Japanese person hearing the Russian collocation *mukhu ubit'* would suppose that the meaning ... is the same as

in Japanese where (the equivalent of) 'to kill an insect' means 'to be patient, to restrain one's irascibility'".

The scholarship is of a high order with numerous references being cited and the previous literature thoroughly reviewed. For instance, there is an exhaustive discussion on the difference between *mentalitet* and *mentalnost*, looking in detail at usage in practice. Meanwhile the Oxford Russian to English Dictionary (4th edition) contains both words, though it says they both mean 'mentality' (which seems a tad on the simplistic side after reading this book), while Ozhegov (1999) does not mention *mentalnost* at all.

The authors say that the features of a culture are reflected in the mentality or the linguistic consciousness of its representatives and refer to a mass exercise in which participants were asked to rank certain words. The Russians apparently ranked 'human being' first, 'friend' tenth and 'I' thirty-sixth. The English results were somewhat different: 'I' came first, 'human being' second and 'friend' seventy-third. Admittedly, it would be nice to know more about how that experiment was designed and conducted. Again, the different versions of 'politeness' are contrasted. Apparently for the Russian being polite means behaving well, helping a friend or older people, while for the English it means showing respect to all in equal degree.

Particularly useful are the passages on the fundamental principles on which a 'linguo-culturological' dictionary should be compiled and the review of the degrees of usefulness of various dictionaries for teaching Russian as a foreign language.

If I were to be allowed a quibble, it would be to lament the lack of an index and a glossary of abbreviations.

This branch of linguistics transcends merely teaching Russian (or any other language) as a foreign one and is clearly capable of contributing to mutual understanding between peoples.

The authors are professors at St Petersburg University and the work was presented to the SCRSS library by two of their colleagues who taught on the 3rd SCRSS Russian Seminar in April 2009. The book is a valuable asset for the SCRSS library.

By Philip W Michaelson

Rodchenko and Popova: Defining Constructivism Tate Modern (February–May 2009)

"In the land of the Soviets every kitchen maid must be able to rule the state," said Lenin in 1917. In the early 20th century, as Bolshevism liberated women from patriarchy, more Soviet women artists achieved successful careers than their Western sisters. Yet male dominated Western art history has given greater prominence to their male comrades. This Tate Modern exhibition seeks to redress this balance by tracing the parallel development of the Constructivists Popova and Rodchenko from 1917 to c 1925.

As Marxists, the Constructivists challenged the bourgeois concept of the artist as individual genius, traditionally associated with masculinity. They would become self-effacing constructors, collectively building the new classless state alongside other workers – regardless of gender. Among the Constructivists women were as highly respected as their male comrades.

The artist's role was no longer to self-indulgently represent the world according to his or her individual temperament but to enquire into the basics of visual phenomena with the objectivity of a scientist – with a view to applying the discoveries to help build the Soviet *novy byt* (new everyday life). Art into production was the battle cry.

As early as 1917 both Popova and Rodchenko experimented with functional designs. We see his sketch for a Futurist aircraft hangar and her abstract embroidery designs for the Verbovka Artisan Co-

operative which reject traditional pre-revolutionary motifs.

But from 1917–21 they both concentrated on investigating the possibilities inherent in the very essence of their craft, going into uncharted territory to discover the interaction of lines, shapes, surfaces, colours, proportions and spatial organisations that underlie the visual world.

The resulting abstract paintings and 3-dimensional constructions were intentionally un-emotive. Yet the sheer ebullience with which Popova attacked plywood or canvas, the daring with which Rodchenko replaced brush and paint with the engineering draughtsman's compass and ruler echo the energy and conviction of the Bolsheviks during this era of War Communism.

In Popova's *Space-Force Construction* (1921) diagonal lines fast as a speeding train race across semicircles giddy as a flying machine's propeller to create a dynamic spatial organisation. Not all abstract art is empty nonsense.

When the art market was abolished in 1917 the worker state had become a major patron of avant-garde art, including theirs. In 1921 the New Economic Policy's limited re-introduction of markets threatened to return their art to the bourgeois status of exchangeable commodities. Together with three colleagues (Vesnina, Stepanova and Exter), they publicly renounced painting in 5x5, a farewell exhibition. This has been stunningly re-created here.

The second half of the Tate's exhibition is devoted to an extensive display of their production design. We see a plethora of posters, advertisements for state enterprises, packaging, fashion, textile and theatre designs, and film credits for Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* (Cine-Truth), in which their modernist abstraction and photomontages still look fresh today.

Their attempts to get such revolutionary designs mass produced were resisted by factory committees suspicious of modernism. However, film, theatre and

exhibition design provided both of them with opportunities, their graphic designs were produced and Popova managed to get some of her textiles manufactured, leading her to say: "No artistic success has given me such satisfaction as the sight of a peasant or a worker buying a length of material designed by me ..." The exhibition ends spectacularly with a life size reconstruction of Rodchenko's iconic *Worker's Club* for the Soviet pavilion at the 1925 Paris exhibition.

The focus on two artists is misleading as a means of 'defining Constructivism', as the exhibition's title claims. To exclude Tatlin, Lissitzky, Stepanova et al is to distort history. The non-specialist may get the impression that the movement was formed by these two artists. More worryingly, the focus on two individuals fundamentally contradicts the Constructivists' Marxist commitment to collectivism.

The scant information on the wider social and historical context de-politicises Constructivism. By ending in 1925 the exhibition avoids the thorny issues of accessibility and perceived elitism raised by the Socialist state's patronage of experimental art. Popova's dynamic pre-1917 paintings are excluded, as are Rodchenko's continuation of modified constructivist photography and graphic design in the 1930s and 1940s.

Yet this is a marvellous opportunity to enjoy a large body of Socialist art and design, much of it rarely seen in the West.

By Christine Lindey

This review first appeared in the *Morning Star*.

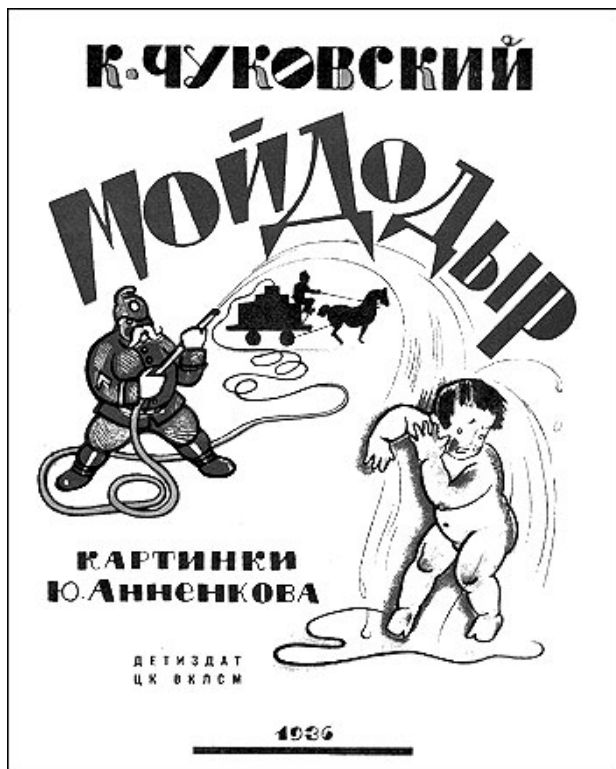
Note: The exhibition closed on 17 May 2009.

Feature

Reflections on Russian Children's Poetry of the Early Soviet Era

By Jill Cunningham

Poetry has always enjoyed a special place in the hearts and minds of the Russian people; indeed its importance to their literary tradition cannot be overstated. Traditionally, poems written specifically for Russian children have often been what are called *веселые* or 'happy' poems with positive and humorous themes and appealing particularly to the younger age range i.e. pre-school and early school years. Such poetry flourished during the 1920s and early 1930s at a time when new foundations were being laid for children's literature and artistic creativity was flourishing. Talented writers joined forces with the best illustrators of the day to produce high quality works, many of which have stood the test of time and are still being read by children today with the same enthusiasm.



Chukovsky's *Wash 'Em Clean*, 1936, illustrated by Yuri Annenkov (SCRSS Library)

In its most basic form poetry is first encountered by children at their parents' knee as rhymes, lullabies and little songs drawn from the oral tradition. These have always been particularly popular because of their immediacy and accessibility; they reflect in various ways a child's everyday interests and experience. What young boy or girl does not love to hear about the adventures of their favourite animals, for example? These often relatively short works are told in a direct, colloquial language that is attractive on the ear and easy for a child to absorb – the sound texture of the rhymes and rhythms in nursery rhymes comes to mind here. In the best of early 20th-century Russian and Soviet children's literature traditional linguistic devices were combined with humour and interesting content to create new and modern poetic works.

Kornei Ivanovich Chukovsky (1882–1969) wrote mini adventures in which characters appear and re-appear. A favourite theme is the eternal struggle between good and evil – in *Тараканище* (The Cockroach) and *Муха-Цокотуха* (The Fly's Wedding) animals are terrorised by a cockroach and a spider. All the larger animals are terrified and go into hiding until a small sparrow and a mosquito, respectively, save the day and the natural order is restored.

Chukovsky also often draws a child's attention to the perils of 'bad behaviour', but always with a 'happy ending'. A particularly successful example of the latter is *Мойдодыр* (Wash 'Em Clean) in which a young boy is taught the importance of cleanliness by a washstand that comes to life – the infamous Великий Умывальник who is chief of the washstands and commander of sponges. There is a particularly humorous episode in which the boy is chased through the streets of Petrograd by a sponge and a bar of soap, saved only by the appearance of a crocodile which swallows the offending items! Although he believed in entertaining children, Chukovsky was at the same time committed to educating them, believing that humour was the perfect way of drawing their attention to a lesson without their really noticing this.



Marshak's *The Circus*, 1924, illustrated by V Lebedev (SCRSS Library)

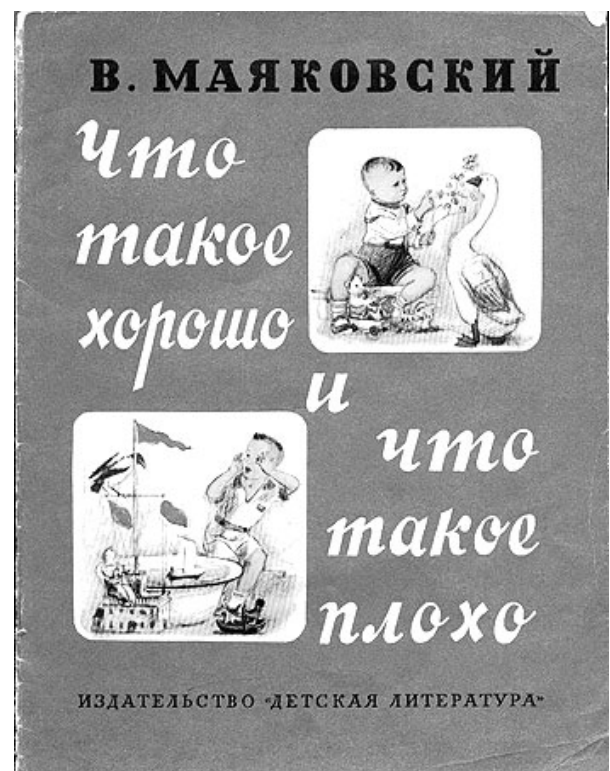
The work of Samuil Yakovlevich Marshak (1887–1964) is more wide ranging – from riddles through translations of nursery rhymes and his own humorous anecdotal works to longer more epic poems reflecting the new Soviet reality. His early work is particularly memorable with his anecdotes such as *Вот какой рассеянный* (That's How Absent Minded), *Мороженое* (Ice Cream), *Цирк* (The Circus) and *Багаж* (Baggage) enchanting generations of Soviet children. *Вот какой рассеянный* describes the adventures of a rather absent-minded man who puts his clothes on back to front, tries to buy kvass at the railway ticket office and tickets in the buffet, and ends up spending two days sitting in a train in the sidings at Leningrad station thinking that he has been travelling backwards and forwards along the suburban railway.

The harmonisation of content and structure in poetry – the musicality of words and sounds together with humour – helps young children to absorb both language and ideas. While we have focused our attention thus far on aesthetic forms, any study of Soviet children's literature cannot ignore the

imperative of the times to produce works that would educate and inform children about the new society and its ideology. As Maxim Gorky famously stated: “воспитывать значить революционировать” (to educate means to revolutionise).

Soviet children's poetry was able to draw on the talents of Vladimir Mayakovsky (1892–1930): between 1923 and 1928 he created 13 works on topics as diverse as the job of a lighthouse keeper, the production of a wooden hobby horse and pioneer activity. All these have a very clear ideological message: children have a part to play in the future and must do their utmost to prepare themselves for this. His message was always a very direct one and in the poem *Что такое хорошо и что такое плохо* (What is Good and What is Bad), for example, nothing is left to chance as he sets good models of behaviour against bad ones.

A vital ingredient to successful children's poetry rests with the ability of the poet to reflect a child's own experience of the world, to see the world through their eyes. The best of Soviet-Russian poetry for children achieves this aim.



Mayakovsky's *What is Good and What is Bad*, 1969 edition illustrated by A Pakhomov (SCRSS Library)

From the Russian Press

Russian Health Service

Argumenty i Fakty Online ran an interview with Leonid Roshal' on the state of the Russian health service ('My by stali luchshimi', No 19, 6.5.09, www.aif.ru). An internationally famous paediatric surgeon, he is chair of the Commission on Healthcare in the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation and has been called Russia's best doctor. He was named European of the Year in 2005.

Asked whether the Russian health service had been affected by the global financial crisis, Roshal' replied that the government was telling doctors not to worry about funding of public services, while in their workplaces they were being warned that cuts had to be made.

Before the crisis began the government had confirmed the need to increase health service funding to 6% of GDP. Russia lagged behind other countries, yet there was a clear link between health funding as a percentage of GDP and mortality and sickness rates. In Russia child mortality was falling but it was still three times higher than Europe. The Russian health service was poorly funded, but investment would bring improvements as the underlying Soviet system was still intact – the health service had survived because of this system and the commitment of doctors who continued to work despite miserly salaries.

He disagreed with criticism of Russian polyclinics and their staff. He believed that the majority were good doctors, but in districts where the patient register was twice the average size and staff were overwhelmed with paperwork, how could they find time to continue their professional development? Roshal' had spoken to both Putin and Medvedev on this subject and they tended to his view that it was essential to introduce a system of *raspredeleniye* for medical graduates (mandatory allocation of posts), if their study had been state funded.

The Russian Minister for Education was opposed to the idea, but the situation was extreme and without such a decision it would be impossible to resolve the staffing crisis in the health service over the coming years. Roshal' had no qualms about *raspredeleniye* – he had gone through the system himself and worked in a polyclinic.

On the subject of children's health, Roshal' commented that the health service was only recovering slowly from the 1990s when it had been thrown to the vagaries of fate. However, immunisation was now back to acceptable levels and this had decreased significantly the number of cases of infectious diseases, such as whooping-cough, diphtheria, measles and polio. Children's general health depended on good nutrition at kindergarten, school and home, as well as physical education. Parents should spend more time doing exercise with their children – most activities were free yet the effects were instant. However, it was up to the government to encourage a healthy lifestyle and give parents clear guidelines and support.

As chair of the Public Chamber's Commission on Healthcare, he and his colleagues had managed to draw the nation's attention to the unsatisfactory state of its health service. They had raised uncomfortable questions with the government and initiated a debate around the health service. Government institutions had not been pleased by the attention, but that was the commission's role.

Oleg Yankovsky, Actor (1944–2009)

The great Russian stage and film actor Oleg Yankovsky died on 20 May 2009, aged 65 years. *Izvestiya* was one of many newspapers to run an extensive obituary ('Nostal'giya po Yankovskomy', 20.5.09, www.izvestiya.ru).

Yankovsky was a much loved lead actor at the Lencom Theatre in Moscow and star of many famous Soviet and Russian films, including *Kreytserova sonata* (The Kreutzer

Sonata), *Myungauzen* (Münchhausen), *Obyknovennoye chudo* (An Ordinary Miracle), *Shchit i mech* (The Shield and the Sword), *Doctor Zhivago*, *Nostalgia* and *Zerkalo* (Mirror). He was also a People's Artist of the USSR, receiving his title in the last days before the collapse of the Soviet Union.

He had been diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer in the autumn, but had accepted the blow with true courage, either refusing to talk about his illness or joking about it. Instead he had preferred to carry on living as an actor, rather than a patient, appearing at the Lencom Theatre as often as his strength allowed. He believed in the healing power of the theatre and was transformed on stage, even in the last days of his illness. On the eve of his last birthday he had appeared in Gogol's *The Marriage*, still the same Yankovsky, despite his uncharacteristic leanness.

Strangely, Yankovsky's choice of an acting career had been almost accidental. He had turned up at the theatre institute due to a misunderstanding, but found his name listed on the register for the acting faculty: his brother had successfully passed the entrance examination without telling anyone. Yankovsky took his brother's place instead.

His last film *Tsar*, directed by Pavel Lungin and starring Yankovsky as Metropolitan Philip, had recently premiered at Cannes and was due to open the Moscow Film Festival on 19 June. Yankovsky had not been well enough to go to Cannes. On hearing the news of his death, Lungin told *Izvestiya* that "he was a great actor of international stature... He gave absolutely everything, despite the harsh schedule... He was in excellent form and none of us could have suspected that he was already ill."

The role he played most successfully and frequently was that of a decent man, suffering from that decency. These roles ranged from officers to suffering intellectuals, from Baron Münchhausen to Vladimir Lenin – in Yankovsky's performance the latter became the embodiment of decency and responsibility.

He had a unique ability to maintain an aloof and concentrated silence on stage and particularly on screen. Other actors were often remembered for their dynamism, but Yankovsky was an actor one remembered in stasis – still and engrossed in thought. His silence always seemed a moment of truth rather than a pause. The film director Andrei Tarkovsky had recognised this unique quality in Yankovsky and used it in two films – *Mirror* and *Nostalgia*. The candle scene in *Nostalgia* was an example of his ability to express the concentration of inner life.

Yankovsky was also president of the Kinotavr Film Festival. Film director Valery Todorovsky recalled how he always acted the role of president perfectly – aloof in a white suit and sporting a pipe. In fact, he had a wonderful sense of humour, even a tendency to act the hooligan. He was full of life and never the stiff classical actor.

Oleg Yankovsky was buried at the Novodevich'ye Monastery on 22 May.

Islam in Russia

Alexei Malashenko of the Moscow Carnegie Centre gave an overview of current trends in Islam in Russia in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* ('Islamskiye tezisy: Rossiyskiye-musul'mane segodnya – mezhdu obosobleniyem i konvergentsiyey', 15.5.09, www.ng.ru).

The founding of the independent All-Union Islamic Renaissance Party in 1990 marked the rebirth of Islam in Russia after decades of decline. Ten years later Islam had been recognised as an official religion in Russia and its place in Russian history and tradition acknowledged, some 100 years after a similar 'legalisation' by the Russian Empire.

There was no single tradition of Islam in Russia – the history and cultures of Tatars, Bashkirs and the peoples of the Caucasus differed widely. However, Islamic identity was strong in Russia – Muslims were in a minority and adherence to their religion was a natural form of self-defence.

Russian Muslims could not avoid being influenced by the 'globalisation' of Islam with its search for a unified ideology and system of values, and religious solidarity against the West. However, this conflicted with local ethno-cultural traditions since Islam in Russia was geographically isolated, while in the Soviet era it had been almost totally cut off from the rest of the world. Russian Muslims had come into contact for the first time with external branches of Islam after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Initial mutual hostility had given way at the beginning of the current decade to dialogue between traditional and radical (new) Islam. Traditional Islam in Russia had become politicised, in particular in the Caucasus (Dagestan and Chechnya). In the North Caucasus, society was becoming Islamised with local traditions taking precedence over federal legislation. There was evidence in these areas of an embryonic Islamic banking system, de facto legalisation of polygamy and the popularisation of Islamic dress for women.

However, there were also many Muslims who attended mosque only on religious holidays (like their Russian Orthodox compatriots) and for whom their faith was influenced more by political events in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Chechnya than ideological debates between traditional and radical Islamists.

The Russian government maintained good political relations with Islamic church leaders and had recognised the multi-centre nature of Islam in Russia. In turn, tension between the various centres of Islam had reduced with positive results for the Russian Muslim community as a whole.

On the international front, largely unofficial contacts by Russian Muslims with Muslim politicians abroad had helped build mutual understanding between Moscow and the Islamic states. In 2005 at the 32nd session of the Islamic Conference Sergei Lavrov had noted the role of the Tatars and Muslim clergy in helping normalise Russia's relations with that organisation.

Summarised and translated by Diana Turner

Listings

Russian Language

Lancaster Languages Summer School 2009

The University of Lancaster, www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/conted. Contact: Andrew Jameson (tutor), Email: a.jameson2@dsl.pipex.com, Tel: 01684 572466.

Monday 6 – Friday 10 July 2009, 10am–4.30pm on the Lancaster Campus: *Immerse Yourself in Russian Stage 4/5* (GCSE to A-Level). The course is suitable for teachers upgrading their fluency and knowledge, students taking A-Level or entering university, adult learners for personal, professional or family reasons. The course is now in its 5th year and has had excellent feedback, but due to university re-organisation this may be the last time this unique course will be run. Fee: £128.00 or £52.00. The university has excellent transport connections to all parts of Britain – why not combine the course with a stay in the Lakes or Dales?

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