

FACING EUROPE

IMPRESSIONS, CONTACTS, AND CRITICISMS

Around the 1890s, the number of foreign cultural contacts and art exhibitions in Russia increased significantly. At this time, what the Russian artistic community lacked was not so much information as definite aesthetic criteria. Symbolism, Impressionism, and Post-Impressionism all demanded a new set of values and a different historical perspective. The basic positions of the artistic camps were clearly expressed in the essays in this section by Mark Antokol'skii, Vladimir Stasov, and Igor' Grabar', who tried to present a coherent picture of contemporary art. In discussing the groundbreaking quality of contemporary Western painting in relation to Russian art, Antokol'skii attempted a compromise, while Stasov was hostile and Grabar' quite positive.

At the turn of the century, as Russian art was changing, a debate arose on the national character of that art. To opponents of modernism like Stasov, Western influence robbed artists of their "Russianness" and rendered their work inferior. For the conservative cultural establishment, Western influence was strongly associated with Decadence. The World of Art—a group of young artists from the cosmopolitan cultural elite of St. Petersburg—altered Russian society's attitude toward Western art decisively. World of Art members defined their art policies as international and regarded their group as a mediator. Outside Russia they attempted to ensure that ideas about Russian art were associated with their group; inside, they deliberately defined themselves as new Westernizers. This duality, which was the basis of the group's ideology, culminated in the major projects of Sergei Diaghilev: the Russian exhibition at the 1906 "Salon d'Automne"; and the performances of the Ballets Russes, starting in 1909.

The World of Art's early projects were emphatically international and sought, in particular, to bring together Russian and foreign artists, on the model of the Champ de Mars Salon and the Munich Secession, as in the "Exhibition of Russian and Finnish Artists" (1898) and the "First International Exhibition" (1899); however, the newly ascendant artistic generation faced open resistance from champions of the socially and nationally charged narrative art of the late Wanderers, whose leader, Vladimir Stasov, made the issue of Western influence central to his aggressive reviews.

The struggle for a new paradigm of Russian art paralleled their new discoveries in contemporary European art: from the art of the Scandinavian countries, through disappointment in the "German vogue" of the 1900s, to the recognition of contemporary French painting as a paragon for Russian art. As Muratov's essay makes clear, by the 1900s the modernists had made Russian painting a legitimate part of European art and successfully re-evaluated the Russian nineteenth-century painterly tradition in the Western context.

Mark Antokol'skii**"Notes on Art" (1897)**

Mark Antokol'skii (1843–1902), a sculptor close to the Wanderers, received his training at the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts. He lived in Europe from 1871 until his death. Antokol'skii's article was written in Paris and published in a liberal St. Petersburg journal, *Vestnik Evropy* (Messenger of Europe) 2 (1897).

. . . Say what you will about French art, but not to love it and respect its mighty technique, the elegance and concreteness of its drawing, its colors, the taste that flows so generously throughout, means not to be an artist, not to love the sky and the spring and to reject the truth. In contrast, to be able to say that the sun has no spots, the rose has no thorns, and French art is impeccable one must be a calculating writer, turn one's sails to the wind, and know how to straddle the fence. The French despise such writers, as do decent people around the world. Be that as it may, this gives me an occasion to have my say on French art once and for all—and I write about French art because it is extremely interesting and instructive: something new and unprecedented in the history of art is going on in it now. To speak about French art is to speak about European art in general. . . .

. . . One must always take into account the difference between two characters such as the French and the Russian. I know of nothing more contradictory than these two natures, but at the same time I know of no two extremes so capable of converging. What the one has in abundance the other lacks, and vice versa. I shall begin with the fact that the French are an old people and we are young; they are rich and we are poor; they are calculating and we are carefree; they are polite, while we are good-hearted; they are culturally disciplined—we are careless. . . . With the French you do not know where sincerity ends and civility begins; we are always sincere and are therefore always abusing one another. The French work their entire lives so as to rest in their old age; we are always resting, yet we not only spend all we have but also run up debts. . . . In art, the French are Epicureans and we are Puritans. For them form is predominant, for us content. For them, the main thing is *how* something is done, while for us it is *what* is done. . . .

Artists such as Delacroix and Millet have become universal idols; they have eclipsed everyone, and no one has noticed other artists with other merits. . . . They are without a doubt very important artists; Millet's works, for example, are unusually plastic, and Delacroix has unusual colors and an ardent tone, but these are purely outward merits, especially in Delacroix, like beautiful language, sonorous verse, and so on in literature. But, after all, God gave people beautiful language so that they could express their feelings and intimate thoughts, but the latter is what I have found so very little of, though hardly anyone was demanding it at the time.

Along with this one-sidedness, however, I also found another more serious and important trend—something resembling a new age in art—although again in the realm

of pure virtuosity. I have in mind the Impressionist *plein air* movement headed by Manet. . . . As an artist Manet has been of little use to art. All that remains of his works is a historical reminiscence. As a prophet and innovator, however, he has undoubtedly been enormously significant. . . . His immediate followers understood him least of all. Among them were many talented artists, but unfortunately they became too enamored of novelty and were unable to distinguish the good from the bad in their teacher. What they thought good was impossible, what seemed beautiful was ugly, and they began painting faces with violet hair, assuring us that in a certain light things are like that in reality. . . .

Working at the same time as Manet, but in the opposite direction, was another artist. I am speaking of Puvis de Chavannes, an interior decorator and muralist. . . . I became acquainted with his works in a strange way. I was walking around an exhibition and as usual I was looking at everything with intense attention. After an hour my attention was beginning to wane, my feet were getting tired, and the rows of pictures with all possible subjects and colors were starting to make me dizzy. . . . Suddenly I found myself in a large corner room, and spread out before me across the entire wall was a picture that had nothing in common with what had gone before. It was a kind of elegy; I forget the title, but what I saw I shall never forget. . . . Puvis de Chavannes, however, has two substantial shortcomings that render his works short-lived. First, in his pursuit of simplicity he draws his figures all too simply, adhering to primitive art; he effects naiveté, like a child, and of course what we find charming in a child is abnormal in an adult, and vice versa. Second, he effects naiveté even when he is depicting contemporary people in contemporary dress, and this is a complete anachronism. . . .

It would, however, be quite erroneous to think that French art is presently in decline. But in our century it has always led the way, changing directions many times, and everyone has followed it. Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, and so on—it was in France that all of this was created. True, these rapid transitions from one movement to another demonstrate that art has yet to find its foundations, its true ideal; however, this is the fault not of art but of the force of circumstances; it makes no sense to blame French art. On the contrary, at a time when art in other countries was divorcing itself from reality, the French were drawing closer and closer to it; at a time when artists all over the world were falling asleep over their illusionary ideals, French artists were awake, searching for what was genuine. . . . Whether they will find it is another question. . . . I don't think they will, not until this ideal is created for society itself. . . .

Yet, living here in Paris for so many years, amid the colossal activity of French art and industry, which have given their country so much fame and fortune, at times I think about our reality as well, and about our art and industry. . . . And I am pained and irritated. Why do we have such poverty? Why is everything there wrong and different from everywhere else? . . . Lately one can even sense a certain duality: on the one hand, we yield the palm like an obedient vassal to foreign forces and regard

everything foreign with respect and without the least envy or trace of shame for ourselves and our people; on the other hand, we have a kind of childish ardor that makes us ready to clamber to the top of the bell tower and “spit down on everyone.” . . . In fact, we know that art and poetry are the purest language of the soul and the best interpreter of human suffering, that there is no place in it for the “evil of the day,” for envy, quarrels, and discord. . . . On the contrary, art ennobles and elevates our spirit, makes our hearts beat stronger, and makes us rejoice and care not about ourselves alone . . . and, like the sky, it shines and warms everyone equally. But we must not forget that we, like all Europe, are going through the *fin de siècle*, an age of decadence, religion without faith, egotism elevated to a dogma, and a struggle for survival. . . . What remains for art to do in such an age of rupture between emotion and intellect, between moral duty and self-preservation? Science, steam, and electricity aspire to embrace the globe and unite humanity into a single family, while we are prepared to surround ourselves with a Chinese wall. In such an age everyone squints, looking at the truth as though it were the sun and ready to tell each other precisely what they themselves want to hear. In such an age, perhaps all that remains for art as well is to lie, amuse, or come to a standstill. . . .

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Igor' Grabar'

“Decline or Renaissance? A Survey of Contemporary Trends in Art” (1897)

Painter and critic Igor' Grabar' (1871–1960) was born in Budapest and studied law and painting in St. Petersburg. Between 1896 and 1901 he lived in Munich. In 1913 he became a trustee of the Tretyakov Gallery. After the Revolution, Grabar' worked mostly on medieval Russian art.

This essay, written in Munich, presented the evolution of contemporary painting, beginning with Delacroix, for the first time in the Russian press. It was published in the *Monthly Literary Supplements to Niva* (Field) (January–February 1897).

. . . Yes, this is a renaissance, not a decline. We are living through a renaissance in painting precisely akin to what Europe once did in all spheres of the human spirit's expression. That was when painting was born, only to reach the apogee of its development in the mid-seventeenth century and come to a standstill. Two centuries passed before it again showed signs of its former life, and we are the witnesses to its rebirth. Yet with scarcely a thought or care we toss everything strong or weak in the art of our time into one pile, dub it decadence, and laugh and ridicule it. . . . The great masters' art was an independent art that had no auxiliary role thrust upon it. It did not preach, fulminate against vices, or tell edifying stories; it was concerned only with itself and its artistic problems. . . . Yes, art is pleasure and joy for the artist, and although this may offend the vanity of its high priests, the philanthropic principle of “utility” will never kill its egoistic manifestations. . . .

The artist-champion always sacrifices the purely artistic aspect of his work to the