Skythian baba: A painting counter-revolution


Natalia Goncharova, one of the famous originators of Russian avant-garde, is now the subject of a large, academically developed personal exhibition. Despite the fact that Goncharova is an important pioneering figure in the history of Russian avant-garde as described by Camilla Grey in her book The Great Experiment in Russian Art, the interest in her creativity has faded away.

The expurgatory path of western researchers was warmed by early avant-garde idea of the denaturalisation of art and the ‘death’ of painting, which became quite red in the 1970s. Among other highlighted features there was Malevich and constructionism – ‘post-black square art’ – Goncharova, with her brutal painting, was not included in ‘The Great Utopia’ show (1992–93). The increased interest of this period began with an exhibition called ‘Goncharova and Larionov’ in the Pompidou Centre in 1995. Last year’s exhibition, ‘The Annunciation of Russian Avant-garde’, where Goncharova’s paintings were an important feature – marked the final triumph of pictorial revisionism and the return of total visibility.

At the same time, despite Goncharova’s refugee status, her heritage was carefully studied in Russia by scholars, most of which never accepted the ideas of high modernism. Maybe that is the reason why Goncharova and Larionov’s exhibitions were transferred in 1996 to the Tretyakov gallery by their Parisian friends. Because that, due to the long term lack of interest in Goncharova’s work on the part of foreign museums and collectors, her name was almost never involved in the scramble over fake copies that are quite common in the world of Russian avant-garde. In addition, unlike her male companions in art, who were rather light-headed, Goncharova cared much about the result of her work.

Goncharova’s exhibition in the Russian Museum was expected to take place in 1998, as a commemoration of Goncharova’s centenary. Numerous items indicated in the catalogue were prepared by Eugenia Korotova, a great connoisseur and researcher of Russian avant-garde, who died in 1993. Moreover, Goncharova’s exhibition is the first one to be prepared and organised by only Russian scholars. The other good news is that foreign museums and collectors are no longer scared of Russia’s unsettled state.

As a result, the exhibition turned out to be really enormous – more than 250 items were presented.

The most important and interesting problems for a researcher is that it is often almost impossible to tell Goncharova’s technique from that of Larionov’s. They worked and lived together for decades, and used the same brushes and palettes. This romantic story began in the Moscow College for Painting, Sculpture and Architecture where they studied together. At first, Goncharova became a follower of the young and active obid Mikhail Larionov. As years passed, they came together and separated again and again – both as artists and as a married couple. From time to time one of them was ahead, providing ideas for the one who remained behind.

The future era of ‘storm and charge’ marked the irreversible running forward, and even the indomitable Modighi occasionally found himself among Goncharova’s followers. Larijov, the son of a military medical attendant from provincial Trievsk, was descended from inferior classes along with many other Russian avant-garde artists. The plebeian path led to high modernism, and Goncharova, who had never accepted ‘the great denial of art’, was determined woman. ‘First: the manliness – of a Mother Superior – a young Mother Superior’.

Intensive socialisation and anti-Soviet rhetoric in combination with different mass media manipulations led to a paradoxical result – the avant-garde artist had suddenly become a heroine of yellow media, which discussed her case like ‘Stupid bourgeoisie’ or ‘a herd of sheep’. Since then the manipulation of public opinion has become an important technology of modernisation. Although, the actions of Dadaists and surrealists seemed more envoy-minded than the ready public appearances of Russian Futurists. Even Tonnega Marilleti, who visited Russia in 1914 to promote machine art, was horrified by them. The ritual cutting out to which the leader of Italian futurism was subjected was based on a new anti-western programme formulated by Russian avant-garde artists, who by that time had already animated every existing style and trend such as cubism, futurism and so on.

In 1911 Goncharova said, ‘I have tried everything the West could give. Now I shake the dust off my shoes and move away from the West. I make my way towards the East, the source of all arts’. But these anti-ennamored and anti-western words said by a European intellectual scarcely refer to the critique of European culture practiced by Gandhi, Picasso and German expressionists.

If one tries to interpret existentialism in the manner of Edward Said, as a specific form of colonialism, it seems obvious that German and French artists had to carry out their prophetic expeditions to exotic lands (such as Africa and Tahiti). Russians, according to local imperial traditions, developed domestic artistic space. As an alternative to the ruling West, Goncharova drove her caroms from Skythian steppes to yesterday’s ‘black square’ (which are portraits of mythological amazons of the southern Russian steppes). Although, these skills painted by Goncharova have, instead of an expression of melancholic eternity on their faces – which is more proper for them – a kind of weird, bully grin.

The stormy decade of colonisation of time and space ended with a strange picture ‘The Cock’ decorated by Goncharova became the classic masterpiece of scenography. But the successful export of exotic and fantastic art to the West turned out to be destructive for the artist. In a short time some non-artistic cliches in Russia succeeded in shaking the western bourgeois, so nifty that the letter had forever lost and wish to travel to the East forever. So, in the long run everything ended quite grievously – the Russian Europeans and the creators of the future, Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov, died in absolute poverty and obscurity in the very Paris they had once tried to subvert.

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