Back on “the main stage”: Russian art at the Guggenheim Museum—part 1

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Russia! An exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City, and the Guggenheim Heritage Museum, Las Vegas, until January 11, 2006, presenting selections from the State Hermitage Museum, the State Russian Museum and the State Tretyakov Gallery

The first of two parts

The Guggenheim Museum’s *Russia!* is an ambitious exhibition surveying 800 years of Russian art. Aptly likened to an extravaganza [1], it displays 275 works—primarily paintings, but also icons, sculpture, and precious objects—many of which have never been shown outside Russia or the former USSR. Together they offer an invaluable opportunity to discover many less-than-familiar works of art as well as to view widely recognized pieces in the context of their rich and complex cultural heritage.

However, worthwhile as this exposure of Russian art is, it is obvious, and has been remarked upon by various reviewers, that its sponsors had more in mind than simply an art show. That it was “realized under the patronage of Vladimir Putin, president of the Russian Federation” and that its primary sponsor is Vladimir Potanin—Russia’s wealthiest oligarch since oil giant Yukos’ Mikhail Khodorkovsky’s imprisonment—indicates that its organizers intended the show as no less than a cultural emissary of the Russian state.

Bearing the message that Russia is back on the capitalist main stage after its unfortunate detour through revolution and Stalinism, the exhibition promotes the “new” Russia (down to the exclamation point in the show’s title) as a sophisticated state to be reckoned with by the West. Yet it has happened before that the Russian state has found itself bested by its more powerful Western rivals in “great game” politics, and apprehension, more than confidence, seems to underlie this show of Great Russian nationalism.

The Moscow regime faces increasing pressure from the US ruling elite in particular, with the Bush administration supporting (financing) oppositional elements in former Soviet republics or spheres of influence—a tactic which proved successful in fostering Ukraine’s Orange and Georgia’s Rose Revolutions. In this context, the exhibit’s display of Russian cultural clout takes on added meaning.

Likewise as a trustee on the Museum’s board negotiating the recently announced St. Petersburg Guggenheim, Potanin’s service in expanding the international Guggenheim network epitomizes the influential, well-connected role that this sector of the Russian elite hopes to play in these negotiations. [2]

These considerations do not detract much from the exhibition until it reaches the art of the twentieth century, and so this comment will treat the latter separately.

The show begins with a selection of icons, most dating from the classical period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, hung in a darkened gallery to suggest the churches of which they were an essential part. Although presented without their ornate silver and bejeweled cases, the vibrant yet austere icons exemplify the insulated and ritualized culture of medieval Moscow, with its autocratic tsars, orthodox priests and *boyars* (nobles).

Religious cult objects more than “art” as now defined, icons were created according to a ritual not susceptible to variation by individual artists, though the masters Andrei Rublev and Dionysii are known by name and represented in the show by the *Ascension* (1408) and Crucifixion (1500) respectively.

Physically and politically isolated, Russia languished in a medieval state until the beginning of the eighteenth century, far behind Western Europe in scientific, technological, and economic development. Icons likewise were to remain stylistically static, never becoming a vehicle for artistic innovation as did western Christian art beginning in the Renaissance.

However, stagnation was unsustainable, and Peter the Great (1689-1725) built himself a new capital, St. Petersburg, on the Gulf of Finland, thereby “chopping a window to the West,” as poet Alexander Pushkin famously describes it in *The Bronze Horseman*.

Integrating Russia abruptly and forcefully into the tradition of European art was an integral part of Peter’s efforts to supplant the power of the Moscow *boyars* with a state along European lines. He imported European artists to build and decorate St. Petersburg, and established an Academy of Arts (1757) to train Russian artists.

Peter the Great also avidly collected art, as did his successor, Catherine II (who ruled 1762-1796); she was known to have bought up every major European collection to come onto the market during her reign. (3) The Tsar’s collection thus came to include representative masterpieces by all the “leading lights” of Western painting—Rubens, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Titian, Bronzino, Chardin, Watteau and others. It formed the basis of the Hermitage Museum’s collection, from which this show is largely drawn, and a sample of these paintings is given its own gallery in the Guggenheim exhibition.

Without having experienced a Renaissance, as it had had no period of classical antiquity to rediscover, nor a Reformation challenging the feudal power of the Church and allowing for increasingly secular subjects, Russia in the eighteenth century plunged headlong into the Enlightenment. It seems that in art, no less than in history itself, the laws of uneven development apply.

Thus after a chronological gap in the exhibition of some 200 years, icons are succeeded by initially stiff but increasingly charming portraits of the Russian nobility, painted in an approximation of the Western neo-Classical style.

The *Portrait of Tsarina Marfa Matveevna* (early 1680s) represents one such transitional portrait, called a *parsuna*, where the flatness of background, color scheme, and bejeweled headdress recall an icon, while the features strive for a modeled individuality.

Other portraits, particularly those by Vladimir Borovikovsky, show an intimacy and liveliness in their royal subjects, as in his Portrait of the Sisters Princesses Anna and Varvara Gagarina (1802). These already display the naturalism of the Romantic period at which Russian painters

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would excel.

If the eighteenth century saw the imposition of foreign styles and techniques on Russian art that resulted in an accelerated, sometimes erratic artistic flowering, the first half of the nineteenth century represents their mastery. Landscapes and genre scenes of villagers and peasants capture the openness of the Russian land, the weather, the light, as well as offering views of St. Petersburg and Moscow.

By the early 1800s, the Russian nobility conceived of itself as European of Russian birth, and the paintings reflect this growing confidence. Artists Karl Bruillov and Orest Kiprensky both spent periods working abroad and achieved fame for their outstanding portraits. In addition to the nobility, sitters included military men, writers, and merchants—members of a growing middle and civil servant class—whose expressions of thoughtful absorption are a hallmark of the Romantic style.

However, Napoleon's invasion in 1812 shattered the illusion that Russia's allegiance to Europe entitled it to protection. In its aftermath, ambivalence and even hostility to Western cultural models begin to develop under the veneer of continuity. It is curious that heroic paintings of the Battle of Borodino or the burning of Moscow, should they exist, are absent from the exhibition.

Alexei Venetsianov (active 1820s) founded an art school for commoners and serfs, many of whom he liberated. Turning away from the Academy's prototypes toward native Russian subjects, his paintings of peasant life (On the Harvest: Summer) introduce some of the features—and religiosity—of icons into a secular context. Although his idealized figures have a symbolic, even sentimental quality, his work is intriguing for its use of shapes like the peasant's scythe, its tawny golden hues and flattened composition.

The strikingly large canvas, The Ninth Wave (1850), with its eerie light and iridescent green wave looming over the tiny, doomed shipwrecked figures clinging to a mast, captures some of the tension developing within traditional styles. By Ivan Aivazovsky, an artist from an impoverished Armenian merchant family who rose high in the ranks of the Academy of Arts, it is at once a polished product of academic training while bearing the less orthodox influences of Theodore Gericault's seminal Romantic work, *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819) and the lighting of J. M. W. Turner's similarly tumultuous seascapes. [4]

Reflecting the delightful diversity that had developed by mid-century, the satirical narrative scenes of Pavel Fedotov are of quite a different mood from Aivazovsky and Venetsianov. *The Newly Decorated Civil Servant* (1846) is like a story by Nikolai Gogol, who was Fedotov's contemporary, rendered in paint. Here, the new official, in his dirty dressing gown, hair curlers and bare feet, strikes a self-important pose in front of his housekeeper, after a night of carousing which has left the room a shambles! It is hard to think of any other European painting quite like it.

Following defeat in the Crimean war, tsarism, 'from above,' carried out the semi-liberation of Russia's 23 million serfs in 1861, clearing the way for rapid capitalist development in the last decades of the nineteenth century. These years were "characterized," as Trotsky explained in his *1905*, "by the rapid formation of a pool of 'free' labor, a feverish development of the railway network, the creation of seaports, the incessant inflow of European capital, the Europeanization of industrial techniques, cheaper and more easily available credit, an increase in the number of limited stock companies, the introduction of gold currency, ferocious protectionism and an avalanche-like growth of the national debt. ... By setting up major industries and by proletarianizing the muzhik, European capital was automatically undermining the deepest foundations of Asian-Muscovite 'uniqueness.'"

The intellectual climate of the end of the nineteenth century similarly expressed crosscurrents of rapid change. The Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg lost influence as artists rejected its set subject matter and techniques. In 1874, artists who had been dismissed from the Academy founded the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions, or the Wanderers, as they came to be known. Leaving the artistic centers of St. Petersburg and Moscow, they staged shows in the provinces, bringing westernized art for the first time to places that still knew only folk prints and icons.

Depicting the commonplace in society in the manner known as Naturalism, painters Ivan Kramskoy and the other Wanderers focused on distinctively Russian characteristics of their subjects, but in an individualized and not idealized way. Like their European counterparts such as Gustave Courbet or Eduard Manet, many of these artists conceived their primary obligation to be the unembellished depiction of social reality.

While some of their landscapes capture the bright light and color of *plein air* painting, a style to be further developed by the Impressionists, their genre scenes often depict the miserable and despairing life of city streets and taverns.

Ilya Repin looms particularly large both for the monumental size of his canvases and his bold and extremely realistic handling of historical scenes. Though tending to heroic idealism, many of his images stand as social indictments as well. Barge Haulers on the Volga (1870-73), drawn from the artist's detailed studies from life, shows men being worked as oxen.

The oppositional stance of these artists toward class society, the depiction of its injustices, as well as the forces transforming it, was of a piece with the Russian intelligentsia of the time, which included writers such as Chernyshevsky, Belinsky, and Herzen, who politically advanced a socialist perspective.

Working at the same time, novelists Tolstoy and Dostoevsky gave unparalleled artistic expression to the social conditions of late nineteenth century Russia, even if their philosophical interpretations were more limited. Portraits of these two authors by Nikolai Ge and Vasily Perov respectively communicate something of the intensity of these writers.

The remarkable ferment of the late nineteenth century was to culminate in tremendous upheavals in both Russia and Western Europe. The irrepressible conflicts of capitalist development plunged the so-called civilized nations into the barbarity of the First World War, out of which emerged the Russian Revolution of 1917.

From this point in the Guggenheim exhibition, the curators' agenda of promoting the bona fides of a restored capitalist Russia moves from the background of the show to the forefront, overwhelming and ultimately falsifying the artwork being presented. One almost wishes that the show had limited itself to being 700 years of Russian art, and ended in 1900.

To be continued

Catalogue to the exhibit: *Russia! (*c) 2005, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York
ISBN 0-89207-329-2. There is also a supplemental catalogue to the exhibition which includes reproductions of all the artwork.

Notes:

1. Roberta Smith, *New York Times*, 9/16/2005
2. Jamey Gambrell, *New York Review of Books*, 1/12/06, p. 48
3. Ibid., p. 49
4. Supplemental catalogue to the exhibition, p. 20

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