

**The Russian - Orthodox Icon Painting and its Repercussions on the
Russian Art of the 20th Century**

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Abstract

The paper aims to introduce an art historical phenomenon, which appears in Russia in the beginning of the 20th century. The early years present plurality of art movements in Russian and in Europe. Efforts have been made to constitute a true art of Russia. To do so, the traditional/religious art and folk art, mainly of the peasants, were reconsidered. The accumulation and study of works of folk art already began by the mid-19th century. By this time, an increasing interest had emerged concerning icons and folkloric elements, found in arts and crafts. Kasimir Malevich, Marc Chagall, Vladimir Tatlin are among the leading figures who vigorously defended a re-investigation of these art forms. They elaborated genuine features of icon painting and adapted to their contemporary art conceptions and compositions. Accordingly these leading figures are to be mentioned in brief. Russian Avant-garde artists, Constructivists, Suprematists with their non-objective art show re-percussions of traditional particularly religious art modelled after the Byzantine tradition.

Key words: icon, lubok(ki), folk art, Russian Avant-garde, Suprematism, Constructivism, Malevich, Chagall

Özet

Bu makalede 20. yüzyılın başında Avrupa'da pek çok sanat hareketinin oluşmaya başladığı bir dönemde Rusya'da özgün ve çağdaş Rus sanatını yaratma isteği ve bu süreçte geleneksel sanat formlarının artan ilgiyle incelenmesi sonucu çağdaş sanat akımlarında gözlenen gelişmeler ele alınmaktadır. Bu bağlamda Rus Avant-Garde, Suprematist ve/veya Constructivist ressamların özellikle geleneksel Rus-Ortodoks dini resminden aldıkları üslupsal ve ikonografik etki dönemin önemli sanatçılarının işleri yardımıyla örneklendirilmeye çalışılmıştır. Kasimir Malevich, Marc Chagall, Vladimir Tatlin gibi sanatçılar geleneksel Rus-Ortodoks ve halk sanatının incelenip yorumlanmasını çağdaş Rus sanatı yaratma sürecinde kaçınılmaz bir unsur olarak görmekteyiz. Rus Avant-Garde sanatçılar, konstruktivist- ve suprematistler "nesnesiz" işlerinde bu görüşlerini ortaya koymuşlardır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ikona, lubok(ki), halk sanatı, Rus Avant-garde sanatçılar, Suprematism, Konstruktivism, Malevich, Chagall

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In this paper it is intended to introduce an eventual impact of Russian-orthodox and folk art especially of icon painting, and coloured-woodcuts (*lubok*) (Figure 1) on the theoretical base of modern art movements that appeared at the beginning of the last century in Russia. These art movements cover Russian Avant-Garde, Suprematism and Russian Constructivism. Study and evaluation of equally important art historical phenomena like Cubism, Symbolism, Futurism etc. and their effects lie out of the scope of this paper, therefore, they will not be dealt with. The unique and main ingredient in the process of achieving a genuine *modern* art of Russia, traditional religious art plays a vital role.

The word icon which stems from the Greek *eikon* meaning image, symbol, semblance etc. could be termed as a simulacrum; in this context it is to be interpreted as the likeness of what is represented.¹

A formal definition of the icon stresses that image and/or the icon reflects the subject's characteristics yet with some differences. It does not reproduce the exact appearance of the archetype; instead, the icon contains within itself elements of both resemblance (likeness) and non-resemblance (dissimilarity). The important principle of non-resemblance signifies a world that is different from the one that surrounds us. Hence it does not provide the real appearance of the world. The aim is to refer to the celestial world where the subjects of icons are supposed to belong. When one venerates an icon,

the archetype is revered through the likeness illustrated on the icon. This feature of painting, within defined limits of resemblance and non-resemblance, prevented icon painting from unlimited stylization.

Russian-orthodox icon painting left a permanent mark on Russian culture and art for centuries. Icon painting borrowed and adopted its pictorial, stylistical and iconographical elements after the Byzantine i.e. Greek-orthodox model and experienced a particular history and development in Russia. It survived along with the artistic traits such as Cubism, Futurism well into the 18th century and beyond. (Milner, 1993, p. 12; Bering, 1986, pp. 143ff.) The first quarter of the 20th century is an era of remarkable



Figure 1. Anonymous Lubok, Pharmacy, id 19th century, State Museum of History, Moscow

artistic developments. Different artistic movements are to be observed. It is also an era of technological advancements and social political changes particularly in Russia. However, by the early 20th century the imposing artistic tradition of Russia witnesses conflicts with the contemporary testimonies. Russian artists of the period re-discovered, studied and adapted orthodox pictorial patterns, its repertory of images and iconography.

Brief History of Russian Icon Painting

For centuries art and religion were intermingled inextricably and provided a firm backbone for the Russian art. Icon painting workshops provided the historical origin of the Russian art schools. (Milner, 1993; Ward, 1992) In its very beginning icon painting is connected with the Byzantine art. At the end of the 10th century, after accepting Christianity, Byzantine examples were introduced into Russia². These were not just venerated, but also imitated rigorously. (Lazarev, 1997, p. 21f.)

In the 12th century Russian artists were able to produce their own works and liberated themselves from the Byzantine tradition, both iconographically and stylistically. It soon acquired its national characteristics and advanced firmly especially in the northern parts of the country like Pskov, and Novgorod which became important centers with respective painting styles. In these Northern provinces the emancipation had been fully completed in the 13th century by practically giving up all its Byzantine



Figure 2. Virgin Mary of Belozersk. First Quarter of the 13th Century, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



Figure 3. Apostles Peter and Paul. First Quarter of the 13th Century, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

association and the icon painting became sovereign (Figures 2 and 3). It took a slower course in Moscow; however, they also developed their own way of artistic expression in icon painting.³ Major schools of icon painting appeared in the Northern provinces in the principalities of Novgorod, Pskov, and Moscow and so it is relatively easy to speak of a Nordic style of icon painting.

It was also possible to attribute certain stylistic features to other centers in the principalities of Ni_nij Novgorod, Tver, Rostov and Suzdal. There is, however, little information to trace back the initiation of icon painting and related schools in the southern provinces of the country like in _ernigov or in Kiev. In the meantime numerous provincial workshops or ateliers with strong popular, humble characteristics exist. These minor ateliers of provincial nature played a decisive role in shaping up the Russian icon painting.

In brief, the fundamental iconographies and forms were taken from the Byzantine conventional repertory. The alteration appears in their style. Later, however, a respective gradual revision of the iconographical types and forms also took place and provided an utterly Russian character while departing from the Byzantine. For many centuries it was then the Byzantine Empire and its art that provided the model, iconography and means for the Russian art which was essentially a religious art. The close connection between Russia and the Byzantine Empire provided basic elements to the Russian culture. This cultural influence left imprints for centuries and even in the early 20th century it was still a common practice to work in icon painting studios or to start their career as icon painter. Effects of this exclusively religious art continued to be observed until the 17th and the 18th centuries.⁴ With Tsar Peter I (1682-1725) Russian art and architecture underwent a transformation, resulted from the close relations with the West. In 1703, the city of St. Petersburg (Petrograd) was founded which exhibits in its architecture the arrival of Baroque to Russia. In the course of the 18th century many foreign western artists were invited to Russia and vice versa. Queen Catherine II (1762-1796) acquired major works of Western art for the newly founded Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. It was the second half of the 19th century that the Russian art academy was founded in the same city. This intensive encounter with the western art and the artists, the arising interest in contemporary socio-political themes in Russia provided stimulus for studying historical, traditional origins of Russian art. An impressive example is the efforts and achievements of the Tretjakov Brothers who possess a significant icon collection. By exhibiting these icons, a renewed perception and interest is called towards the works of Orthodox Russian art. They were then considered not just as mere objects of veneration, but also referred to artistic values.

Confrontation with the Western Art

As stated above, from the 17th century onwards art and artists were faced with the challenging issues of western art and painting. This encounter brought up an art historical debate among the young Russian artists of the period. The proponents of the view claim that in order to have a genuine Russian art one has to explore and study the traditional orthodox art which mainly refers to the icon painting inherited from the Byzantium. The opposite view embraces the West and its art completely.

The reassessment of traditional art works provided in the meantime, deeper insight into exclusive and refined examples and their aesthetic meaning. The members of the Russian contemporary art scene pointed out certain degradation these works underwent and so they studied them painterly, iconographically as well as art historically. Thus, by the beginning of the 20th century two main clashing artistic interests are observed with opposing views. Western and Russian features in conceptualizing art were compared, contrasted and blended. An active representation and participation and/or integration of Russian artists to the wider art scene, including movements as Impressionism, Futurism, Cubism or Fauvism are to a large extent accomplished. Latest trends and art works were



Figure 4. N. Gontcharowa, St. George, Lithography, 1914, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preubischer Kulturbesitz



Figure 5. Poster of the "Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10", Photograph Courtesy Mr. Herman Beminger, Zurich, in Bowlt: 1988.

accessible to them and they responded to them vigorously and enthusiastically. So in this artistic environment Russian artists like M. Larionov (1881-1964), N. Goncharova (1881-1962) (Figure 4), V. Tatlin (1885-1953), K. Malevich (1878-1935) stand as vanguards while seeking the traditional-historical roots of Russian art in order to generate a comprehensive and true art. The genuine Russian art needed to be compatible also in the world' art scene while embracing the contemporary developments like the advances of technology.

Russian Suprematist, Constructivist or Avant-Garde painters, designers as for instance A. Jawlensky (1864-1941), L. Popova (1889-1924), El Lissitzky (1890-1941), W. Meller (1884-1962), I. Puni (1892-1956), A. Rodchenko (1891-1956), M. Chagall (1887-1985) appreciated and benefited from their preoccupation with icons, folk art while searching for their own distinctive artistic languages. For them Russian-Orthodox Painting and icons, folk art were the sole devices for the artistic aims.⁵ They were familiar with the aesthetics, visual properties and principles of icons and made use of those while working on new modes of paintings and transmitting their vision of art.⁶ Some of these properties are, the spatial construction of icon painting, presentation of space, backward perspective, movement, continuity and expansion in painting, luminosity/source of light (no natural lighting of the objects and persons are presented), resemblance vs. non-resemblance, non-real conception of composition, no real colours; the colours are used instead with respect to their corresponding symbolic meanings. In addition, further emphasis is given on the canvas as such, which was considered as a flat-surface as it simply is, so that flatness and its impact became part of central issues. New aesthetic formulation emerged as a result. In this paper two significant figures of this art scene are presented. Kasimir Malevich as he holds a particular importance by launching Suprematism and Marc Chagall, with Jewish origin, however, grown in an overwhelmingly Orthodox setting.

It has been ninety years since Suprematism was first heard of as an art movement in January 1916, and in the art scene of the period in Russia. At that time Russian Futurism was enjoying its height; in December 1915 during the last Futurist exhibition (entitled 0.10) held in St. Petersburg organized by Ivan Puni, Malevich, together with Tatlin's constructed corner-reliefs, displayed his 35 abstract paintings, the so-called Suprematist "non-objective" works (Figure 6). With these a new mode of painting is introduced with no recognizable subject matter or object or a reference point to the physical terrestrial world that surrounds us (a shared aspect with icons). Instead, basic clear-cut, coloured geometric forms like squares, rectangles, circles are given.

Malevich presents the black square on white surface, and in a supplementary Suprematist manifesto to the exhibition, he speaks of a new-Reality (Figure 5), which does not show (resemble) an absolute reality. He calls it *Quadrilateral* and it is known

as *The Black Square*.⁷ Malevich termed his work as presenting a higher Reality, the so-called Supreme Reality (Suprematism). The term is derived from the Latin adjective in its superlative, meaning the last and the highest – *supere* – different from another Latin word *summus* which also means highest. The Square represents for him the null which is an experience of non-objectivity. In his manifesto on “from Cubism to Suprematism” he concedes that the very perception of *supremus* i.e. the highest (reality) and the last at best is achievable only through the embodiment of pure simple geometric forms. Malevich concerns that the disengagement from the real objects as existed in nature leads to an infinite freedom with no conventional constraints. He defined Suprematism as: “it alters the entire architecture of earthly things in the widest sense and links up with the space which holds the moving monolithic masses of the planetary system” (*Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, 1990). According to Suprematists, it is the expression of pure artistic feeling, it deals with the object as such.⁸ At this point it is useful to look at the properties of icon painting that might provide valuable information on order to understand the phenomenon.



Figure 6. Malevich, Black Suprematist Square, 1914-15, Tretjakov Gallery, Moscow.

Among the essential properties of icon painting ranks first the two-dimensionality and the use of flat surfaces (i.e. the impact of certain flatness and frontality), then comes backward/reverse perspective instead of a linear and figuration instead of representation. The icon painting considers the physical world inconceivable and takes reality as incomprehensible, the painting thus does not correspond and/or resemble to its archetype. On the contrary, west European painting emphasizes basically the power of human reason and rationality, as the agency through which, the physical world is conceivable and comprehensible. Icons do not represent a framed section of the real world, rather, it presents and alludes to a higher level of reality. The symbolism of colours, the notion of movement and the exclusion of time i.e. belonging to all times are also features crucial to icons. It epitomizes a timeless, divine truth or reality, but does not represent a story or a specific moment or sequence of moments (Figures 6 and 7). Finally, its geometrical schematism refers to the compositional rigidity of the icons and their consequent reiteration of pre-defined and arranged forms and types that are mainly based on geometrical schemes.



Figure 7. Sts. Paraskeva, George the Theologian, John Chrysostomos, Basil the Great, Pskov school, 15. century, Tretjakov Gallery, Moscow



Figure 8. St. John the Baptist, Apostle Paul, Andrej Rublev and his pupil, Moscow school, 1408, Tretjakov Gallery, Moscow, Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Growing in the suburbs of the town of Vitebsk, (present day Belarus), Chagall was impressed by icon painting as well. Already as a child and adolescent he became familiar with the Orthodox art. His first artistic responses were towards icons.⁹ Many of his works reveal repercussions of Orthodox pictorial patterns,¹⁰ (Figure 9) and his encounter with it contribute to Chagall's individual route as an artist. A significant example is the painting entitled *Motherhood* (Figures 10 and 11).

The inspiration comes mainly from the well known Byzantine iconography of Virgin Mary Blachernitissa or Platytera. It shows Virgin Mary in *Orans* with the pre-existed *logos* referring to Christ in the medaillion situated in her breast. (Figure 12)

From the 13th century onwards until the 17th century and well beyond the Russian Orthodox painting tradition dominated and also provided the main component to the Russian culture. By the early 18th century with Westernization movements secular painting e.g. portrait painting emerged and it is in the 20th century that at last systematic efforts have been made in order to study Russian art. (Ward, 1992, p. 111; Milner, 1993,



Figure 9. Chagall, Golgotha, 1912. Museum of Modern Art, New York



Figure 10. Chagall Maternity, 1912-13 Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



Figure 11. Chagall, Russia or Maternity, 1912-13, Collection of Helen Serger, New York

p. 11) Suprematism and Constructivism relying on an art principle that has no reference point in the physical world alludes to certain aspects of the orthodox icon painting. On their way to a genuine and contemporary art that enables the transformation and construction of a better society, Russian artists of the 20th century explored traditional, religious, and popular art forms systematically. According to this tradition-conscious view, the only way to achieve a comprehensive art reflective of the land it originated, is to reassess, study and promote traditional and folkloric art works.



Figure 12. Virgin Mary (Blachernitissa) Panagia, ca. 1224.
Tretjakov Gallery, Moscow

Notes

- 1 Chadzidakis and Grabar (1965) 4f.
- 2 Milner: 1993. s. 11-16. Prince Oleg who was the ruler in Kiev in 882-912, made a treaty with Byzantium in 911. Under Vladimir, enthroned in 980, Christianity was adopted as religion and the capital city of the Byzantine Empire was accepted as a model for subsequent church architecture and their decoration which includes icons, mosaic or fresco decoration. The church of Hagia Sophia in Kiev is a good example. The Metropolitan seat was later moved from Kiev to Moscow in 1326. The 14th and 15th centuries witness the rise of Moscow and also present the formation of a distinctively Russian school of painting. The famous Russian artists Andrej Rublev, Theophanes the Greek, belong to this era.
- 3 On the history of development of Russian icon painting please see L. Ouspensky and V. Lossky (1989). *The Meaning of Icon*. New York; S. V. Iamshchikov (1978). *Pskov: Art Treasures and Architectural Monuments, 12th-17th Centuries*. Leningrad; N. P. Kondakov (1927). *The Russian Icon*. Oxford; S. Smirnova (1989). *Moscow Icons: 14th-17th Centuries* Oxford; M. Apotov (1984). *Early Russian Icon Painting*. Moscow; T. T. Rice (1963). *Russian Icons*. London; V. N. Lazarev (1997). *The Russian Icon: From its Origins to the 16th Centur*. Collegeville: Minesota; V. V. Gormin (1984). *Novgorod: Art Treasures and Architectural Monuments, 11th-18th Centuries*. Leningrad.
- 4 It is to note that Russia has literally little or no experience with Renaissance or does not share the classical past of the West, but reflects a superb Byzantine culture.
- 5 It is worth mentioning that Russian author F. Dostojevski, impresario S. Djagilev were defending the view in contrast to M. Gorki's and I. Repin's concerns that fostered the importance of western art also by criticising the traditional art as being uncompetitive and primitive. (Weiss, 1993, p. 19f.).
- 6 Many of them had experiences in icon painting workshops or ateliers in the early years of their artistic life or in their childhood. Surely it was the art of their land and was to immediately observe and to feel.
- 7 For reproductions of his other Suprematist works please see (Petrova, 1990; Weiss, 1993). Icon painting could be concerned as an important organic step which took Malevich' to non-objective painting. The portraits of peasants by Malevich show reminiscences of icon painting and play a crucial role for his later artistic achievements leading to the Suprematist manifest.
- 8 Suprematism refers to art constructed from elementary geometrical shapes, specifically the rectangle, the cross and the triangle. The most perfect or "purest" of these is the square. It builds up or constructs from non-naturalistic geometrical elements and is therefore to be classed with the form of abstraction. Suprematism could not be considered as a logical development only from abstract art forms such as Cubism or Futurism. (Railing, 1990; Bowelt, 1988).
- 9 In an interview on the occasion of an exhibition in the Chicago art institute he personally emphasizes his organic ties and fascination about icons, especially on the plasticity of figures, on their colouring and luminosity. (Liebelt, 2004, p. 86.). While these impressions and memories kept alive throughout his life, Chagall declares that icons were the refined art of Russia and the folk art *lubok*, represented the popular one. However, both forms were indigenous to motherland where he belonged. (Kamensky, 1989, p. 16f.).
- 10 L. Venturi is the first person in 1956 in his work on Chagall, who mentions the inspiration by Russian icons on certain Chagall's paintings.

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