

**SILVER AGE: RUSSIAN ART IN VIENNA AROUND 1900:
AN EXHIBITION OF RUSSIAN MODERNISM AT THE BELVEDERE IN VIENNA**

Clemena Antonova

Senior Research Fellow
Institute for the Human Sciences
Vienna, Austria

In recent years, some of the most significant art exhibitions in Vienna have been taking place at the Belvedere, the magnificent Baroque palace of Prince Eugene of Savoy. The present exhibition, *Silver Age: Russian Art in Vienna around 1900*, running from 26 June to 28 September 2014, is no exception. The show is conceived as a look back, an exhibition about earlier exhibitions of Russian art that took place in Vienna at the beginning of the 20th century. The main emphasis falls on two shows, both organized by the Viennese Secession—the first in 1901, when Russian art was shown as a section within the show of Nordic art and the second in 1908, which showed solely Russian works. Further, there is a display of early Soviet posters, referring to an exhibition organized by the Committee for the Help of Russia of the Austrian Communist Party in 1922, which falls both chronologically and stylistically outside the period that the Belvedere show purports to cover. There is also the very interesting presentation of stage and costume designs created by Russian artists for the famous *Ballets Russes*.

If for no other reason, the attention of the well-informed visitor would be captured by the fact that the Belvedere show addresses the almost completely understudied topic of the presentation and reception of Russian modernist art in Vienna the last years of the Habsburg Empire. However, the present exhibition is much more than that. It is nothing less than a sweeping panorama of practically all the major artistic and stylistic trends within Russian modernism in the first decade of the 20th century. At the same time, this overview is placed within the framework of the development of European, especially Austrian, *fin-de-siècle* art and culture. As Agnes Husslein-Arco, the Director of the Belvedere mentions, the exhibition brings forth the notion of the period as a “moment of exchange” (p.9 in exhibition catalog)¹. In other words, while the show can be, of course, viewed as presenting a stage of the evolution of Russian art, it is also, and perhaps more importantly, seen as showcasing Russian art as an aspect of European modernism in the 1900s. The Belvedere exhibition seems to openly favor, and invite, the latter approach. In fact, one of the intriguing questions that may remain with the perceptive viewer is: what is specifically Russian about Russian modernism at the time? Is there a *Russian* contribution to modernism at the very beginning of the 20th century, which goes beyond individual artists and cuts across the whole movement? After all, as Natalia Murray points out, an artist such as Mikhail Vrubel, the star of the 1901 exhibition, was a Symbolist working in “the international style common in Paris, Vienna, and Munich” (p.13 in exhib. cat.). In the same vein, an art critic had expressed the impression of many visitors to the 1908 show when he wrote in the same year: “The foreign influences are obvious: the Munich (Dachauer, Scholle, artists of ‘youth’), then Parisian (Besnard, the

1 Husslein-Arco, A. and Weidinger, A., (eds.), *Silver Age: Russian Art in Vienna around 1900*, exhib. Cat. (2014). Henceforth, “exhib. cat.”.

neo-impressionists), ultimately also Beardsley, in short, everything possible haunts here” (p.136 in exhib. cat.).

The problem with the Russianness of Russian modernism is, perhaps, easier to answer with the avant-garde proper—Kandinsky, Malevich, Goncharova, Larionov, etc., who start with a clear affiliation to such Western movements as Futurism, Cubism, etc. and eventually come with their own brand of Rayonnism, Constructivism, Abstract art, etc. It is worthwhile considering seriously the view of Andrew Spira in his *The Avant-garde Icon* (2008) that the distinctiveness of the Russians as part of the European avant-garde movement can be largely attributed to their deep engagement with the art of the medieval icon.² It is one of the merits of the Belvedere exhibition that it can be seen as posing this question in relation to an artistic movement that, while less known, provided the background and many of the original impulses to some of the towering figures of the avant-garde. It could be useful to reflect, for example, on the fact that Vrubel initially considered naming the painting that made his reputation, known as *Demon Downcast* (1901), simply “Icon”. The title would have made explicit the connection of an obviously Symbolist work to the age-old Orthodox and Russian icon tradition. Interestingly, this connection was made by art critics at the time and it was discussed as a well-known theme. In her insightful review of 12 November 1908 of the exhibition that same year, Berta Zuckerkandl observes that “already at the Paris World Fair in 1900 it became evident that Russian art now orients towards the Byzantine Empire, and even further back to archaic, primitive forms [...] Malyutin and Bilibin take up a reanimation of Byzantine techniques” (p.139 in exhib. cat.).

The present exhibition is remarkable for presenting the multi-layered richness of various overlapping, sometimes contradictory, trends within Russian modernism in the 1900s. The period largely frames the flowering of Russian Symbolism and indeed a number of the major figures are represented – Vrubel, Nicholas Roerich, Valentin Serov, Léon Bakst. One can see why it made sense at the time, as well as now, to exhibit Symbolist works in Vienna. The ornamental and patterned structuring of many of the Russian works, the romantic subjects, the intentional simplifications of the compositions and the color schemes are all qualities that the Russians shared with the Viennese Secession and would have been easily appreciated. At the same time, some of the paintings can be described as Realist, others as Neo-Impressionist--there are a dozen Neo-Classical renderings of the idealized world of Louis XIV. The visitor, used to stylistic labeling such as ‘Impressionist’, might well find himself/herself quite confused. However, I believe that this is one of the main advantages of the Belvedere show—it gives a visual sense of the period as one of experiment pulling in almost countless directions, some of which proved promising for the future, some less so.

The various stylistic trends go along with a great variety of artistic media that the Russians were working in—there are paintings, but also ceramic works (including Vrubel’s piece that Klimt famously bought), Soviet posters (including one of a Red Army soldier with the features of Trotsky, a familiar figure among the émigrés in Vienna before the First World War), stage designs and costumes for Sergei Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*, the hugely successful productions that the Russian impresario put on in Paris, Vienna, etc. Admittedly, the exhibition of posters falls, strictly speaking, outside the chronological period covered by the exhibition and may make one wonder if it belongs to this show

2 Spira, A., *The Avant-garde Icon: the Russian Avant-garde and the Icon Painting Tradition*, (Aldershot, 2008). See my review in *Slavonica*, vol.17, number 2, November 2011, pp.174-175.

at all. One can understand the temptation of including it though in the context of the reception of Russian art in Austria.

No exhibition on the art of the period would be representative without a section of the stage designs for the *Ballets Russes* and these are, in many ways, the main attraction at the Belvedere. The designs press on the question at the beginning of this review regarding the Russian character of these works. The international visual idiom of many of the pieces in the earlier rooms is largely left in the background, as what comes to the fore is the sense that at the time “Europe had [never] seen anything like the designs” (p.170 in exhib. cat.).

It might very well be that any really exciting exhibition should open the possibility for different, though complementary, viewing experiences. The *Silver Age* is definitely an exhibition that can be viewed in several different ways. I have been suggesting that one of the possible viewing experiences is at the crossroads of two ideas—Russian art as an aspect of European modernism in the 1900s and, simultaneously, as a brand of modernism which is made specific by its unique appropriation of the art of the icon. The engagement with the icon which is clear in the works of Vrubel, Roerich, Bilibin and others may very well be the unique contribution that the Russians had to make at the “moment of exchange”.

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MUSEUM OF RUSSIAN ICONS