

# The Growth of British Interest in Russian Painting

*Dr. Alan Bird*

It was not until the late nineteenth century that Russian art historians and critics turned their attention to the painting of their native land and began to examine its historical development. The initiative of Serge Diaghilev in organising the great exhibition of *Three Centuries of Historical Portraits* in 1905 marks the beginning of Russia's own interest in her painting. The establishment of the Russian Museum in Leningrad and the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow as well as other minor museums and the publication of various art journals, among them *The World of Art* (1898-1904), *Treasures of Russian Art* (1901-), *The Old Years* (1907-) and *Apollon* (1909-), were the means by which the Russian public became acquainted with the history of its art. Although there was considerable investigation into the art of the icon and there were several distinguished collectors it was not until after the 1917 revolution that the identification, cleaning and restoration of the icons began in earnest. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in Western Europe little should have been known of Russian painting until fairly recent times.

Peter the Great began the custom of sending young artists abroad to study at such European art centres as Venice, Paris, Amsterdam, Rome and Paris. Later rulers, the Imperial Treasury, and a few cultural agencies continued this work; and many were the complaints by the professors in Paris and elsewhere who, to paraphrase Turgenev, were at first amazed by the industry of their Russian students and then equally amazed by their indolence and complete avoidance of the painting studio. These students made no artistic impact outside their native land. Nor did those European artists who worked in Russia leave much in the way of comment on cultural life although Madame Vigee-Lebrun did record some impressions and exclaimed with wonder, "I see here Russians who are ordered to be sailors, huntsmen, musicians, engineers, painters or actors, and who become all these things according to their master's will. And they are all alert, attentive, obedient, and respectful." The British artists who were invited to the Court do not seem to have found it worth while commenting on their Russian colleagues. This is particularly tantalising since George Dawe (1781-1829), a pupil of Lawrence, who went to record the generals who had served in the Napoleonic Wars, appears not to have kept a diary. It is recorded that during a chance and fleeting encounter

he made a memorable sketch of Pushkin which has now disappeared. He must surely have come into contact with a few Russian artists, for in 1819 he might have met two of the finest portraitists of the late eighteenth century: Dimitri Levitsky (1735-1822) and Vladimir Borovikovsky (1757-1825) whose careers had not fully ended. In fact, Levitsky's superb portrait of the philosopher Diderot was the first Russian painting to enter a Western gallery when it was presented to the city museum at Geneva by his heirs.

It may be that the first Russian artist to stay on British soil for any length of time had already left our shores before George Dawe had set sail. In 1799 Lord Elgin had employed a small group of artists, architects and craftsmen to proceed from Rome to Athens where they were ordered to sketch, record and supervise the removal of classical statuary. Among them was an odd individual Feodor Ivanovich (1763-1832) who is known to history as Lord Elgin's Kalmuk. After activities in Greece had come to an end he was asked to come to England and engrave the drawings he had made of the remains. Probably the Kalmuk had friends here, particularly John George Frye, the illegitimate son of George IV, with whom he had studied in Rome in the nineties; and it is reported that during his stay (1803-1805) he began a historical composition, possibly of a neo-classical nature, for the royal family. He left for Germany without, it seems, receiving satisfactory payment from Lord Elgin who had been detained in France as a prisoner-of-war and with whom he was to renew contact in Paris in an attempt to secure recompense. When in 1815 Colnaghi and Co., of London, published his engraved self-portrait it was surely the first time a Russian artist had been brought to the attention of the British public. The caption (not entirely accurate), read:

The portrait of Fedor, a Kalmuk Slave (Drawn and Engraved by himself) who was given by the present Empress of Russia, to her mother the Margravine of Baden; having shewn a disposition for the Arts the Margravine sent him to Rome, in order to improve himself in Painting and Drawing; he now resides at Carlsruhe, where he enjoys the reputation of a clever Artist.

During the nineteenth century a number of the major Russian artists studied abroad, frequently in Rome or Munich, among them the artist who grandiloquently combined classical and romantic elements, Karl Bryullov (1799-1852). His immense *Last Days of Pompeii* (1828), exhibited in Rome in 1828, swept European romantic sensibility: it is claimed that the dying Sir Walter Scott sat in front of it for an hour and remarked that it was not a painting but an epic. Indirectly it inspired a novel which once enjoyed great popularity but which has now passed from favour—Bulwer Lytton's

*Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Alexander Ivanov (1806-1858), arguably the greatest Russian artist of the nineteenth century, also studied in Rome, and on his way home in 1858 called on Herzen in London. An English critic has left a little-known account of Ivanov standing before his great canvas *Christ Appearing to the People* on which he toiled for over twenty years:

In my mind's eye, I see him now, silent and sad, careworn and broken in health, as he stood beneath the immense canvas which embodied the anxious toil of twenty years. He had borne up against poverty, he had struggled manfully through obscurity, and then as the goal was reached, he died.

Students of Russian painting will know that Ivanov's goal had not been reached with his *Appearance of Christ* which was coldly received in Russia where, quite rightly, his sunlit sketches of Italian life, beautiful and glimmering impressionist landscapes, and mystical illustrations to his projected study of the progress of mankind are far more appreciated. It was this same critic, J. Beavington Atkinson, who in 1873 (and in earlier articles) gave the British public the first account of Russian painting, incomplete and unscholarly, but with some insight unusual for its period—as, for instance, when he described one of Levitsky's Smolny Institute portraits, exhibited at the 1862 International Exhibition, as “one of the very best products of the Russian School . . . only inferior to Reynolds in colour and felicity of touch”. He was remarkably prompt in saluting the new group of painters which were “tending to naturalism and realism . . .”: this group which we know as the *peredvizhniki* had only come into being after 1863. Atkinson recognised the talents of Vereshtchagin, Gay, Makovsky and Perov and wrote sympathetically of the latter's *The Village Burial* as “a touching incident, mourners bearing in a sledge a coffin through the snow’.

It was not, however, until 1896 that there appeared the first brief history of Russian painting. Alexander Benois (1870-1960) who while still a young man had attained an European reputation as an art-historian and critic of his country's art was approached to supply a section for Muther's *A History of Modern Painting* (1896). Benois's attitude is somewhat rhapsodical and rather too full of comparisons: in his attempt to establish the quality of the artists he admires (or detests—because Benois was never an impartial historian) they are likened to Dutch, Italian and French masters, often in a far-fetched manner. His preferences were for the eighteenth century and he was wilfully prejudiced against the neo-classical artists and those nineteenth century painters whose origins were not Italian. Twenty years later Benois published another brief account of Russian painting in which his detestations and admirations are hardly modified.

In the same year there appeared an extraordinary work which unlike other compilations of its kind contained serious and original criticism and which had escaped critical notice until I drew attention to it in a review I wrote for the *Burlington Magazine* some years ago. *The Soul of Russia* was an anthology edited in 1916 by Winifred Stephens on behalf of Russians who had lost their homes and belongings in flight from the battlefield. Not only did it contain a fragment of music by Stravinsky and poems by Briusov and Balmont but also articles on icons, music and ballet. Nicholas Roerich contributed a brief article on Russian art and AMARI (Tsetlin, Berlin, 1882-1945) wrote an appreciation of the work of Natalia Goncharova (1881-1926). There were also colour reproductions of costume design by Goncharova and Larionov who at this time were still in the artistic *avant-garde* and whose artistic achievement was hardly known in Russia let alone in the West.

From the revolution of 1917 to the outbreak of war in 1939 comparatively little was written or published on Russian painting, although there was an interesting exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in the spring of 1917. In 1935, however, there was a splendid exhibition of all aspects of pre-revolutionary Russian Art held at Belgrave Square, London, with a lengthy catalogue compiled by Mary Chamot who has since published critical articles as well as books on Russian Painting and Natalia Goncharova. Under the editorship of the late David Talbot Rice there was issued a little work called *Russian Art* which contained informative notices relating to aspects of the exhibition. Mrs. Talbot Rice was herself to write two accounts of Russian Art (in 1949 and 1963) which contain much useful comment of a general nature. Roughly speaking, these books did not contain detailed reference to painting of the Soviet period which was precisely what many art-lovers wished to know about. There had, however, been a useful compilation in 1935 when G. Holme edited *Art in the USSR*, a series of essays by authoritative Russian critics, and many valuable illustrations. In 1944, Jack Chen who had apparently studied art in Leningrad, possibly with Filonov, published *Soviet Art and Artists*, an interesting but misleading account with very little factual background. Two years later C. Bunt published his useful *Russian Art from Scythians to Soviets*. Meanwhile there had appeared a *History of Modern Russian Painting, 1840-1940* (1945) by the veteran critic G. Lukomsky, an extraordinary book which seems to have been composed from articles and bibliographical dictionaries stuck together without regard to logic, historical order, or common sense; and yet which contained, for its time, much information on Soviet painters which could not be found elsewhere. In 1948 Jack Chen reappeared in print, this time supplying the commentary and catalogue to an

exhibition of Russian Painting of the 18th and 19th centuries held under the auspices of the Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR in London in 1948.

Since that date the whole field of Russian painting has been widely covered both in specialist and general publications of varying merits. Richard Hare's *The Art and Artists of Russia* (1965) has been one of the most disappointing, especially since he possessed the taste, interest and scholarship to write an authoritative history, while G. H. Hamilton's *The Art and Architecture of Russia* (1954), although out-dated and sadly vitiated in critical tone by the fact that the author had seen few of the works of art about which he wrote, is still the most useful general account. It could be claimed that an informed social history of Russian painting from earliest times down to our day is still lacking.

Camilla Gray pioneered the way for an understanding of painting in the early years of our century. Generally speaking, she failed to understand the complexity and devious nature of the *peredvizhniki*, overestimated the achievement, great though it was, of Larionov and Goncharova, and presented the Malevich-Tatlin axis as entirely representative of the Russian *avant-garde*. But her book was wonderfully illustrated and of the greatest importance when it appeared in 1962. By sympathy Camilla Gray was drawn to the futurist-constructivist elements in Russian art, sometimes more to the sculptural and architectural elements than to painting; and in this she was, of course, in line with the thinking of a number of young Soviet art-historians. She did not deal with the tangled interests and changes of direction which lead to the promulgation of the doctrine of social realism in the early nineteen-thirties nor did she concern herself with such interesting individual artists as Chekrygin whose work is now being rediscovered following the important exhibition arranged by E. Levitin, the young authority on Rembrandt, at the Pushkin Museum in 1969. Inevitably, perhaps, there has been a regrettable tendency to assume that apart from the work of Tatlin and Malevich (and I make so bold as to say that some of the more realistic aspects of their painting have been almost deliberately slurred over), there has been little painting of value in the USSR since about 1921. This is absolutely incorrect; and the time may already be at hand for a reassessment both of those artists who agreed to work within the ethos of social realism and those who went their own ways without, however, disregarding their artistic responsibilities to their fellow citizens.

It may be appropriate to mention here a well-illustrated book which although Czech in source has given British readers the best pictorial survey of pre-twentieth century painting: *Russian Painting of the 18th and 19th centuries* (1953) by V. Fiala. The coloured

reproductions are by no means impeccably correlated with the originals and some painters, Bruni and Bryullov among them, do not receive justice but, taken as a whole, this is the only volume which gives the best overall view of Russian painting of those centuries. Catalogues of the Russian Museum and the Tretyakov Gallery are promised in the fairly near future and should prove invaluable to art scholars, especially since authoritative works on Levitsky, Kiprensky, Borovikovsky and Bryullov—and other important artists—are not easily available here.

The field of Russian painting which has been opened up dramatically is that of early mural and icon-painting. There have been numerous works on these subjects by V. Lazarev and M. V. Alpatov, frequently translated into English and published by Russian publishing houses for sale abroad in the English-speaking countries. The glorious works of Rublev, Theophanes and Dionysius and the styles of the regional schools and cities have been a revelation to artists and art-critics, none of which was known to anyone in the West (and few in Russia itself) before the revolution. In no other area have successive Soviet governments shown more clearly their concern with the country's cultural heritage than in the preservation and restoration of these early masterpieces and their publication in albums and scholarly editions.

Certainly much remains to be studied in the history of Russian painting and British students do not find it very easy to find the texts and illustrations they need for a full acquaintance. But, as this brief summary may have shown, there has been an enormous increase in the number of books and critical articles on Russian painting. It is safe to prophesy that there will be more works, preferably of a specialised kind—and here Larissa Salmina-Haskell's detailed catalogues of the drawings in the Ashmolean and Victoria and Albert Museum collections come to mind—which provide more of the details and facts which art-scholars require for a balanced assessment of the achievements of Russian painting. What cannot be doubted is that as art historians and others begin to realise the need for a total assessment of twentieth-century painting they will turn more and more to Russian achievements, experiments and, even, failures. It is to be hoped, nevertheless, that this will not be at the expense of a wider interest in the total history of Russian painting which is probably more difficult to appreciate because it is so far removed from our own times and because of the economic, social and political complexities which have to be taken into serious account and which too many art historians and critics disregard to the disadvantage of their studies.

# Stage Direction

## Donald Bisset

(A review article based on Georgi Tovstonogov, *The Profession of the Stage Director*, translated by Bryan Bean. *Progress*, 1972.)

“One must love art, and not oneself in art.” Stanislavsky.

Tovstonogov is a devoted Communist, a social realist, a disciple of Stanislavsky, and a tolerant man. I shall touch on some of Tovstonogov’s directional precepts later. They are interesting and valuable. But the greatest value of his book consists in his clear appreciation of an artist’s civic responsibilities and the correct mental processes through which art work is achieved. We have in the West a pejorative concept of socialist realism due, in part, to the appearance in English of story writing that is sociological rather than artistic in its approach and, in part, to the fact that some Soviet Academicians have expounded the theory in rather a philistine manner.

Before discussing Tovstonogov’s book, I would like to quote two definitions of the theory of art that are, to my mind, valid. The first is from the late Professor Bernal’s *Science in History*: “The artist observes in order to transform, through his own experience and feeling, what he sees into some new evocative creation.”

The second from Stanislavsky in *My Life in Art*: “True art fades whenever it approaches tendential, utilitarian, unartistic paths. In art tendency must change into its own ideas, pass into emotion, become a sincere effort and the second nature of the actor. Only then can it enter into the life of the human spirit in the actor, the role, the play. But then it is no longer a tendency, it is a personal credo. The spectator can make his own conclusions, and create his own tendency from what he receives in the theatre. The natural conclusion is reached of itself in the soul and mind of the spectator from what he sees in the actor’s creative efforts. This is a necessary condition and it is only when such a condition is present that one can think in the theatre of producing plays of a social and political character . . . .”

A Soviet artist then should have noble ideals, a love of his country, and its struggle, through Communism, to produce a better type of man. If he looks at this from the outside and endeavours to produce what is demanded of him, he will fail. His work will be, at best, sociological and, at worst, philistine. He has himself to be a social realist and feel these ideals, and transform them through his art, otherwise he will merely reflect, not advance these ideals, and, in doing so, will do more harm than good because his own lack of