Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art

New Perspectives

EDITED BY LOUISE HARDIMAN AND NICOLA KOZICHAROW

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6. Re-imagining the Old Faith: Goncharova, Larionov, and the Cultural Traditions of Old Believers

Nina Gurianova

The series of programmatic avant-garde declarations published between 1912 and 1915 marked a different period in the evolution of the early Russian avant-garde, which was turning toward abstraction, and to a new conceptual entity that Kandinsky had named a couple of years earlier a “new spirituality” in art.¹ These artists were not interested in the critical ranking and material value of their art, nor in solely formal innovations: on the contrary, by proclaiming the principle of “art for life and life for art”, the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-gardists attempted to expand the role of art beyond the instrumentalist framework accepted in modern society and to erode regulated alienation between professional artist and audience in the consumerist world. They saw no value in ‘art for art’s sake’ either. Art was no longer assigned the “soothing, calming influence” of “a good armchair”, to use Matisse’s popular metaphor, in which “every mental worker [...] the businessman as well as a man of letters” can dream of beauty and relax from mental and physical fatigue; rather, art became action, spiritual as well as social responsibility, a constant resistance to individual and cultural inertia.² As the futurist poet Aleksei Kruchenykh explained in one of these declarations, “our creativity is generated by a *new deepening* of the spirit,

1 See Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, translated with an introduction by M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977). The first version of this text was written in German, and dated 3 August 1909. It was published only in December 1911.

2 Henri Matisse, ‘Notes of a Painter’, in *Matisse on Art*, ed. by Jack Flam (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 30–42 (p. 42). This essay was originally published in December 1908. A Russian translation appeared in the Symbolist magazine *Golden Fleece* [*Zolotoe runo*] in 1909.

and it throws new light on everything. Its genuine novelty does not depend on new themes (objects)".³

Coincidentally or not, the majority of these pronounced artistic and poetic manifestos were published the same year that another cultural event of great importance for Russian culture took place in Moscow. The first Exhibition of Old Russian Art, mostly from Moscow private collections, in honour of the celebration of the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty, opened in February 1913 under the auspices of the Moscow Imperial Archaeological Institute. Since there was practically no concept of secular art in pre-Petrine Russia, the exhibited items possessed not only historical and aesthetic value, but, above all, were objects of great religious and spiritual significance. According to many art historians of the era, who came from very different aesthetic beliefs and artistic circles, such as Pavel Muratov and Nikolai Punin, as well as modern-day scholars, this first public exhibition of the recently cleaned twelfth- to fifteenth-century icons on such a grand scale had a tremendous impact on the future development of Russian culture, and affected the 'first generation' of the avant-garde in particular — Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich, Olga Rozanova, Aleksandr Shevchenko, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Kruchenykh, among others.⁴

There was another crucial point shared by the same critics: the instrumental role of thousands of the so-called Old Believers, who came from all social strata, but were mostly peasants and merchants, in the preservation (often under the threat of execution and exile) and conservation of ancient icons, as well as all many other material objects. These included popular *lubki* (cheap, hand-coloured prints) (fig. 6.1), books, and manuscripts, which belonged to the 'uncomfortable' religious and aesthetic traditions of the Russian past that had been rejected and abused by the state. In the west, Russian Old Belief movements are sometimes compared to early Protestantism, which seems to be a deep misunderstanding: the Old Believers were never reformers, but fiercely independent dissenters who remained at the same time traditionalists.⁵ "Adherents of the traditional view of the world, they preserved traditional icon painting and the

3 Aleksei Kruchenykh, 'New Ways of the Word', in *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, ed. by Anna Lawton, trans. by Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 69–77 (p. 77).

4 See Pavel Muratov, 'Vystavka drevnerusskogo iskusstva v Moskve', *Starye gody* (April 1913); Nikolai Punin, 'Vystavka drevnerusskogo iskusstva', *Apollon*, 5 (1913), and 'Puti sovremennogo iskusstva', *Apollon*, 9 (1913), http://www.v-ivanov.it/issledovaniya_i_materialy/apollon, as well as Chapter 10 of this volume. See also Oleg Tarasov, 'The Russian Icon and the Culture of the Modern: The Renaissance of Popular Icon Painting in the Reign of Nicholas II', *Experiment: A Journal of Russian Culture*, 7 (2001), 73–88; Jane A. Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natal'ia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Irina Shevelenko, 'Otkrytie drevnerusskoi ikonopisi v esteticheskoi refleksii 1910-kh godov', *Studia Russica Helsingiensia et Tartuensia X*, Vol. 2 (2006), 259–81.

5 For more on this subject, see: Robert O. Crummey, *Old Believers in a Changing World* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011); E. M. Iukhimenko, *Staroobriadchestvo: istoriia i kul'tura* (Moscow: Ano Staroobriadcheskii dukhovno-prosvetitel'skii tsentr "Krinitsa", 2016).

traditional attitude toward the icon, resisting the new, ‘foreign’ iconographic style that appeared in Russia in the second half of the seventeenth century under West European influence”, argues Boris Uspensky.⁶ In fact, Church reform had been harshly imposed from above by Patriarch Nikon and the state elite in the mid seventeenth century. As a result of this schism, and after years of executions and massive oppression, the traditional mainstream religion then supported by the overwhelming majority of the population, and later known as Old Belief, became marginalised by the state itself.

6.1 Anonymous, *Monster from Hell with the Souls of Sinners Mounted on its Back*, mid-nineteenth century. Ink, tempera, 50.5 x 58.8 cm. State Historical Museum, Moscow.⁷

The avant-garde’s obsession with the newly discovered magnitude of the spiritual and artistic heritage of medieval Russia, rather than the westernised aesthetics of the centuries that followed, inevitably led them to the reevaluate the cultural phenomena of Old Believers, by definition the only keepers of this ancient tradition through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Wendy Salmond writes: “During the centuries that followed, the traditions of medieval Russia survived largely through the efforts of Old Believer communities. From the far north to the Ural Mountains, Old Believers were fervent collectors of old icons as well as skilled practitioners of traditional painting and iconography” (fig. 6.2).⁸

6 Boris Uspensky, ‘Russian Spirituality and the Veneration of Icons’, in *Holy Russia*, ed. by Evgeniia Petrova and Irina Solov’eva (St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2011), pp. 30–41 (p. 35).

7 Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chudo_yudo.jpg

8 Wendy R. Salmond, *Tradition in Transition: Russian Icons in the Age of the Romanovs* (Washington, DC: Hillwood Museum & Gardens, 2004), p. 15.

6.2 Old Believers' Workshop, Icon of Archangel Michael (c. 1800).
Tempera on wood. 36 x 30 cm. Private Collection.⁹

Being themselves marginalised by society both aesthetically and politically in their search for the roots of national memory and spirituality, the avant-gardists apprehended the cultural discourse of Old Believers — non-conformists, who struggled to preserve their religious, intellectual, and cultural autonomy. The Old Believers had consistently resisted the invented national 'narratives' of the official Church and state since the late seventeenth century, and for that crime were silently ostracised for more than two hundred years from social, political, and public life. Schism was not a question of a simple generational conflict, of shifting tastes between 'archaists' and 'innovators';

⁹ Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Icon_of_Michael_horseman,_Old_Believer_\(c.1800,_priv.coll\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Icon_of_Michael_horseman,_Old_Believer_(c.1800,_priv.coll).jpg)

this was a complex matter related to religious philosophy, and probably most of all a political issue, a massive popular resistance to oppressive church reform, and a drastic shift in state politics imposed on people by the elites. Finally, this resulted in the cardinal re-evaluation of national identity and the establishment of the Russian Empire in 1721. As Robert Crummey, a historian of the Old Belief movement, points out: “they threatened the emperor’s beloved ideals of Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality. [...] Simply by existing, of course, they challenged the monopoly of the official Orthodox Church”.¹⁰

The year 1913 was one of those paradoxical moments in history when the ancient past and the utmost contemporaneity came to an unlikely juncture: it reinvented the national self-identity of Russian art. The avant-garde aspiration towards the Russian past and the restoration of its cultural markers was at the same time a political way to resist the established and over-bureaucratized cultural and social structures of the time, such as the Imperial Academy of Arts, for example. And, of course, this ‘alternative’ national tradition gave them a treasured chance to legitimise their call for artistic independence and creative freedom from the paramount western aesthetic tradition that had dominated the Russian art scene. This was their attempt to build cultural and intellectual autonomy and redefine Russian identity, an interest common to many Russian intellectuals around the turn of the century. Pavel Muratov defined this quest when he questioned the imposed authority of eurocentric values for emerging Russian modernism back in 1907:

Our painting is already part of the general European current. [...] But there one finds cold analysis and the work of an inquisitive, observant mind, whereas here there is delicate lyricism, the confessional song of the soul. [...] It is difficult, almost impossible, for us to compare ourselves with the highly cultivated Denises, Guerins, and Vuillards. And why should we have to?¹¹

Let us not forget that the move to dismiss cultural eurocentrism was common to the general tendencies of western modernism, which sought inspiration in African art (e.g., Picasso) or Polynesian art (e.g., Gauguin), but in Russia it was an especially complex and sensitive issue. For over two centuries, ever since Peter the Great had commissioned European artists *en masse* to work and teach in Russia, and to introduce Russian society to the concept of secular painting, which had not existed there before, professional Russian art had been consciously oriented toward the west. This imposed eurocentrism had become ‘official’ aesthetic dogma, replacing the Greco-Byzantine-inspired Russian iconic canon even in religious art. The philosophical and aesthetic orientation of the early Russian avant-garde was expanding in time, rather than in space, and instead of geographically exploring the ‘found’ traditions of primitive cultures (as was happening with Picasso or Gauguin),

¹⁰ Crummey, *Old Believers*, p. 163.

¹¹ Pavel Muratov, ‘O zhivopisi’, *Pereval*, 5 (1907), 40.

the Russian Neoprimitivists and Futurists were drilling through the layers of time, returning to what was semi-despised by the westernised elite, and the forgotten roots of their own pre-Petrine past.

The years 1905–17, marked by the uniquely productive and intense evolution of Russian modernist and avant-garde movements in art and poetry, were also known in history as a brief ‘golden age’ of Old Believer culture. During this decade, no less important than preserving was their role in restoring and disseminating the idea of the ‘other’ Russia, the possibility of ‘other’ national and cultural discourse, which had nothing to do with official nationalistic propaganda. Surprisingly, even the public paths of Old Believers and the avant-gardists unintentionally crossed on a few occasions at the Polytechnic Museum, the most popular and highly demanded space for lectures, conferences, and public debates in Moscow. In 1912–13, when the famous Futurist debates were held there, the leading Old Belief religious thinkers even organised a national conference and debates with representatives of the official Church at the same place.

It seems that the early Russian avant-garde could not avoid at least some kind of impact from this equally authentic and ostracised visual and literary tradition which, according to Dmitry Likhachev, eventually found its secret niche in certain forms of traditional folk arts and material culture, in the *lubok*, in different peasant crafts, and in wooden and clay toys.¹² From this perspective, many seemingly separate and isolated elements of the avant-garde’s fascination with different aspects of Old Believer culture coalesce into a strong indication of such influence: Kandinsky’s, Larionov’s, and Nikolai Rogovin’s *lubok* collections, Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov’s interest in Old Believers’ religious textual and oral tradition, Goncharova’s study of early icons and frescoes, and Rozanova’s pursuit of small hand-made, hand-written, and hectograph books (techniques common in Old Believer communities at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries), as well as the general pursuit of apocalyptic symbolism and metaphors, crucial in Old Belief, and commonly shared in Russian Futurist and Neoprimitivist textual and visual narratives (fig. 6.3). To sum up, this tradition reframed the aesthetic and ideological discourse of the Russian avant-gardists, in particular the Neoprimitivist group led by Larionov and Goncharova, and brought them to a sharp, pronounced break with the previous dominant aesthetic models (fig. 6.4).

From this perspective it comes as no surprise that Larionov’s family belonged to one of the strongest and most interesting branches of the Old Believer movement, the Pomors, who had a significant community in Moscow at the time. Before he left the country in 1915, Larionov was perhaps Russian art’s most restless, radical

12 Dmitrii Likhachev, ‘*Russkaia kul’tura novogo vremeni i drevnaia rus’*’ in his *Vospominaniia, razdum’ia, raboty raznykh let* (St Petersburg: ARS, 2006), Vol. 2, p. 193.

6.3 Natalia Goncharova, St Michael from *Mystical Images of War*, 1914. Lithograph. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mystical_Images_of_War_-_8.jpg

genius. “We all went through Larionov’s school”, Vladimir Maiakovsky once said.¹³ The roots of any Russian avant-garde artist, including Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, who started his or her career around 1908, go back to Neoprimitivism, of which Larionov was the recognised leader. In February 1913, directly in conjunction with the extensive icon exhibition, Larionov organised the ‘First *Lubok* Exhibition’ at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. It ran for less than a week, but was soon followed by another exhibition of *lubki* and icon patterns, altogether 596 items (including 129 icon patterns and 170 *lubki*, as well as hand-made books, from Larionov’s own collection), which opened on 24 March in the art salon on Bolshaia Dmitrovka in Moscow.¹⁴

The very same qualities: forceful expressiveness, synthetic, rather than mimetic principle, and an innate tendency towards abstraction as opposed to any kind of physicality, which Goncharova appreciated in ancient frescoes and icons, also attracted Larionov to contemporary Old Believer *lubki* (fig. 6.1). He describes them below, particularly characterised by their “bleeding out” manner of hand-colouring, as “great art”:

The *lubok* is manifold — printed from copper plates, from wooden plates, coloured by hand and by stencil, within contours and extending beyond the contours — bleeding out. This last practice is not accidental, but is a fully conscious and established tradition. This is confirmed by contemporary Old Believer *lubki*, which continue to be coloured in this manner even today. In view of the fact that whoever is interested in this has a special taste, it is shared by [...] hundreds of thousands of people.¹⁵

For the Neoprimitivists, the *lubok* became one of the major sources with which to visualise — in the midst of contemporary urban and provincial life — the features of the imagined Russia of old songs and folk-tales, the nostalgic peasant Russia which was no more. They used *lubok* popular culture, taken in the most general sense, as a key reference to defy the pompous official cultural doctrines with great irony, and to reframe the authentic concept of national art, linked to Old Believer movements, “shared by hundreds of thousands of people”. Thus, in 1912 to 1913, Goncharova created a whole series of watercolours and gouaches on evangelical motifs and the lives of saints (such as *Saint Barbara* in the Tretyakov Gallery), directly influenced by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century hand-painted Old Believers’ religious *lubki*.¹⁶ Her ground-breaking sets and costumes for Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera *The Golden Cockerel* (1914),

13 Nikolai Khardzhiev, *Kazimir Malevich, Mikhail Matiushin. K istorii russkogo avangarda* (Stockholm: Hyleia, 1976), p. 81.

14 *Vystavka ikonopisnykh podlinnikov i lubkov organizovannaia M. F. Larionovym* [The exhibition of icon patterns and *lubki*, organised by M. F. Larionov] (exh. cat., Moscow Art Salon, Bol’shaia Dmitrovka, Moscow, 1913).

15 Mikhail Larionov, ‘Predislovie k katalogu vystavki lubka’, in *Pervaia vystavka lubka, organizovannaia N. D. Vinogradovym* (Moscow, 19–24 February 1913) [not paginated].

16 On the Old Believers’ hand-painted *lubki* see: E. I. Itkina, *Russkii risovannyi lubok* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1992).

6.4 Group of artists (M. F. Larionov, S. M. Romanovich, V. A. Obolensky, N. S. Goncharova, M. Fabbri, A. V. Shevchenko) at the 'Donkey's Tail' Exhibition. 1913. Tretyakov Gallery.¹⁷

produced by Diaghilev as a part of the famous *Saisons Russes* in Paris, are very much based on the Old Believer *lubki*'s subjects and colour palette as well.

Lubok aesthetics are closely connected to another Old Believer cultural practice, which was revamped in Neoprimitivist and Futurist production: hand-made books. According to Crummey: "since Old Belief is a 'textual community', its leaders valued literacy and saw that boys learned to read [...]. Second, the men and especially the women of the Old Believer communities made innumerable copies of manuscript books of pre-Nikonian texts".¹⁸ In order to maintain their tradition, faith, and authority, the leaders of the Old Believers (especially the division of the so-called 'priestless') had to find new models for their existence outside of the mainstream, one of these being through the dissemination of books, which required high literacy among their communities.¹⁹ Since Old Believers were not allowed by law to print books typographically until

17 Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Donkey's_Tail_exhibition.jpg

18 Crummey, *Old Believers*, p. 49.

19 Priestless (*bespopovtsy*) were a large group among Old Believers (mostly *pomor-y-fedoseevtsy*) who trusted that Nikonian reforms had broken the apostolic succession and, as a consequence, after all the old priests had been executed or died of natural causes there was nobody with the authority to ordain new priests and perform certain sacraments. Therefore, the Old Believers' laity had to learn to read the Bible and other books of worship in order to celebrate a restricted number of sacraments, such as baptism and the Ministry of the Word.

1905, this led to the production of hand-written colourfully illustrated books, or books multiplied through the most primitive copier, the hectograph, up to the mid-twentieth century.²⁰ Practically abandoned nowadays, this technique uses a duplicating machine that operates by transferring ink from the original to a slab of gelatin treated with glycerin, from which prints are made. Usually fewer than one hundred copies can be printed.

After 1906 several Old Believer book printers were established in Moscow, and there were plenty of printed and illuminated hand-made books in circulation, well known to Larionov. Kruchenykh, who along with Goncharova and Larionov initiated the creation of the first Futurist artists' books, was deeply interested in the Old Believer movement as well. Even though Futurist books differed from religious manuscripts in concept and goal, as well as target audience, there were certain parallels in the artistic techniques used and in general aesthetic quality. The 'contemporary' twentieth-century Old Believer books were less expensive, and much more manageable (especially considering their usually small size) and more accessible than the original medieval Russian and Byzantine books, being more intimate and 'user-friendly' for the contemporary reader, including children. They did not carry with them the highly revered 'masterpiece' quality of the valuable *incunabula*, but instead were simple, joyfully naïve in their design, and democratically affordable for anybody. The Futurists were looking to achieve exactly the same qualities in the production of their books. Following Larionov's initial example in *Pomada* (1913), Rozanova and Kruchenykh started to paint some of the copies by hand in watercolour and gouache over lithographs as well. In their Futurist books the rich visual texture mirrors various poetic devices — deformations, shifts, plays on the non-coincidence of a unit of meaning and a word — paralleling deliberate colouration in painting ('bleeding out' in Larionov's words, as seen in Old Believer *lubki* or manuscript books) that ignores and goes beyond the outline of the depicted object. The synthesis of colour and sound, the painterly and the poetic, became complete in Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's *Te li le* (1914), designed by Rozanova, and created using a unique seven-tone hectographic printing technique. In Rozanova's and Kruchenykh's visual poetry, the 'hieroglyphic' quality of the word-image is intensified, and its ornamental nature eclipses the meaning contained in it. The poetic word is transformed into image and is perceived visually as an inimitable, enigmatic picture. The word is viewed rather than read, and its semantic meaning gives way to its graphic, visual sense, which is apprehended momentarily (as though its meaning is unintelligible or unknown). Some of the 'transrational' sound-letters evoke the medieval Russian musical notation,

20 On Old Believers' hand-made religious books, see: *Litseye apokalipsisy russkogo Severa: Rukopisi XVII-XIX vv. iz fondov Drevlekhranilishcha Pushkinskogo doma*, ed. by Gleb Markelov and Arina Bil'diug (St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Pushkinskogo doma, 2008). There is a separate catalogue of the hectograph books as well: N. Iu. Bubnov, *Starobriadcheskie gektoografirovannye izdaniia Biblioteki Rossiiskoi akademii nauk* (St Petersburg: BAN, 2012).

which consists of signs reminiscent of small hooks, or marks — so-called *kriuk* (hook) notation, widely used by Old Believers.

“Old Believers, who cherished the faith of their fathers, collected old icons either as revered religious relics, or as a rarity and treasure”, writes Viktor Lazarev in his essay on the discovery and subsequent historiography of old Russian icons.²¹ Lazarev continues:

The famous collections of [Andrei] Postnikov, [Illarion] Prianishnikov, [Aleksandr] Egorov, [Ivan and Georgii] Rakhmanovs have been assembled this way. It is worth mentioning that in comparison with such long-standing and painstaking commitment on the part of some Old Believer private collectors, the state and church institutions showed complete indifference towards Russian antiquity.²²

Even after the 1905 Decree on Religious Tolerance, issued on 17 April by Tsar Nicholas II, Old Believers were still treated cautiously as religious outsiders by the Holy Synod. The October Manifesto of 1905 pronounced freedom of consciousness; these regulations, which directly affected Old Believer communities throughout the country, were finally confirmed on 17 October 1906 by the long-awaited new law concerning Old Believers' social status. For the first time, they were allowed to build their churches and prayer houses, disseminate their religious ideas, and print books. It was not until 1904 to 1905 that the 'public' revival and the first exhibitions of medieval Russian icons began, and in 1909 Ilia Ostroukhov, an artist and well-known Moscow collector, opened his private Museum of Icon Painting to visitors.

Indeed, to understand the scale of the impact that the rediscovery of ancient Russian art had, one should realise how much the mass perception of the icon in the nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries differed from today. Nowadays, when we speak of Old Russian art, the first name that comes to mind is that of Andrei Rublev. However, at that time his name was practically unknown, until the restorative works on the famous Trinity icon (*Troitsa*, 1425–27, Tretyakov Gallery, fig. 1.7) started in 1903–04, and continued through the 1920s. Since the late seventeenth century, many Greek and Old Russian icons had been irretrievably destroyed by force or neglect. Many others were endlessly over-painted under the influence of secular and religious European art, with their mimetic and illusionistic qualities, which were cherished by the reformed Church and state authority as the only canon accepted in society. Nikolai Leskov's story, *The Sealed Angel* (1872), widely read at the time, describes the common situation that whatever ancient objects were saved, these were not displayed in public, but were thrown out of reformed churches and hidden instead in Old Believer private collections and chapels (fig. 6.5), praying houses, and religious communities, mostly

21 Viktor Lazarev, 'Otkrytie russkoi ikony i ee izuchenie' in V. N. Lazarev, *Russkaia ikonopis' ot istokov do nachala XVI veka* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 2000), p. 12.

22 *Ibid.*

in the Russian north.²³ No old icons had been systematically studied or appreciated throughout most of the nineteenth century, and the acknowledged entity of so-called 'old icons' included mostly seventeenth-century works. Dmitry Rovinsky, Fedor Buslaev, and Nikodim Kondakov, the first scholars who entertained iconographic studies and conducted the initial investigations of the subject, were still very much working from purely archeological and ethnographic perspectives, and based their research almost exclusively on Old Believer archives and collections.

6.5 Old Believers' Country Church, Blagoveshchensk. As published in Henry Lansdell, *Through Siberia* (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1883), p. 527.²⁴

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- 23 Nikolai Leskov, *The Sealed Angel and Other Stories*, trans. by K. A. Lantz (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984). Leskov knew Old Believers' communities well and greatly appreciated pre-Petrine icons. He was the first Russian writer to publish several polemical newspaper essays in defence of old Russian icon painting in 1873.
- 24 Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Page_527_of_Through_Siberia_\(1883\).A_starovers_or_old_believers_country_church._Blagoveschensk.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Page_527_of_Through_Siberia_(1883).A_starovers_or_old_believers_country_church._Blagoveschensk.jpg)

The Exhibition of Old Russian Art in 1913 was directly preceded by a smaller but valuable show of newly cleaned icons, mostly from the collection of Nikolai Likhachev, which was organised by the Second Congress of Russian Artists in St Petersburg (27 December 1911–5 January 1912).²⁵ The Second Congress played a particular role in the re-evaluation and preservation of Russian medieval art and architecture, since its programme was largely dedicated to the issues associated with the conservation of Russian national artistic heritage.²⁶ Interestingly enough, the Russian version of Kandinsky's essay, *On the Spiritual in Art* (fig. 1.1), which had just been published in German in December 1911 (dated 1912), was commissioned as one of the major papers for the same Congress. In the absence of Kandinsky it was read aloud by his friend, the futurist theoretician, medical psychologist, and artist, Nikolai Kulbin, and followed by the comments of the critic, Sergei Volkonsky, and the well-known Byzantinist and art historian, Dmitry Ainalov. This turned into a much bigger and long-lasting discussion on the tradition and future of Russian art.

Along similar lines, and in anticipation of the Second All-Russian Congress of Artists which opened on 27 December 1911, Natalia Goncharova made the following press statement on Christmas Eve:²⁷

The older frescoes are being destroyed in the most barbaric manner. Painted walls are opened up to make air-vents and pegs are nailed in them for coat-racks as if paintings were not even present there. [...]

As concerns the preservation of ancient art (icons, broadsheets) and artistic industry [*khudozhestvennaia industriia*], it is essential that some measures be taken. These things are too valuable [...].

Besides, these works are of infinitely great significance for the future of Russian art.²⁸

Nonetheless, it was not only upon Russian artists that Old Russian art had such an astonishing effect. Matisse, who visited Moscow in the autumn of that same year, asked his Russian patrons if he could see Russian icons (fig. 6.6).²⁹ According to Ostroukhov, who showed Matisse his collection, he “delighted” at the icons:

25 See V. Georgievskii, ‘Obzor vystavki drevnerusskoi ikonopisi i khudozhestvennoi stariny’, *Trudy Vserossiiskogo s’ezda khudozhnikov v Petrograde*, Vol. 3 (Petrograd, 1914), 163–74.

26 See Vladimir Zverev, *Ot ponovleniia k nauchnoi restavratsii* (Moscow: Gos. nauchno-issl. in-t restavratsii, 1, 1999).

27 As Russia still used the Julian calendar before 1917, Christmas Eve was on 24 December.

28 Reprinted in English translation in Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, p. 271.

29 Matisse had had a previous chance to familiarise himself with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century icons when some examples were brought to Paris by Sergei Diaghilev for the 1906 Salon exhibition. According to Shevelenko, Diaghilev and Aleksandr Benois included thirty-six icons of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, which belonged to the Novgorod, Moscow, and Stroganov schools, in the retrospective exhibition of Russian art, *Salon d’automne. Exposition de l’art russe* (Irina Shevelenko, ‘Suzdal’skie “bogomazy”, “novgorodskoe kvatrochento” i russkii avangard’, *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 124 (June 2013), 148–79, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2013/124/13sch.html>). For more on copper icons such as figure 6.6, see *Russian Copper Icons and Crosses from the Kunz Collection: Castings of Faith*, ed. by Richard Eighme Ahlborn and Vera Beaver-Bricken Espinola (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

Literally the whole evening he wouldn't leave them alone, relishing and delighting in each one. And with what finesse! [...] At length he declared that for the icons alone it would have been worth his while coming from a city even further away than Paris, that the icons were now nobler for him than Fra Beato [...]. Today Shchukin phoned me to say that Matisse literally could not sleep the whole night because of the acuity of his impression.³⁰

Matisse shared his perspective in a newspaper interview given to *Russia's Morning* (*Utro Rossii*) (27 October 1911): "This is primitive art. This is authentic popular art. Here is the primary source of all artistic endeavour. The modern artist should derive his inspiration from these primitives."³¹

While it became a cliché in contemporary criticism to characterise the famous pioneering collectors of western modernist art, such as Ivan Morozov, Sergei Shchukin, and the Riabushinsky family as 'new bourgeois' newcomers from the emerging entrepreneurial merchant class in Russia, liberal in their politics and taste, their Old Believer origins are rarely mentioned. Nonetheless, these origins seem to be crucial in their self-identity: all of them were descendants of well-known Moscow Old Believer families, who kept close ties with Old Believer religious communities in Moscow, were knowledgeable about ancient icons, and were brought up in a cultural tradition that *a priori* understood the beauty of this world as an abstracted, spiritual quality, rather than a sensual one.³² It seems very likely that it was precisely such an upbringing that made them more prepared and receptive than most of their contemporaries to any manifestation of abstraction in contemporary art, which defies any mimetic value and any realistic and physical likeness of the world depicted.

Arguably, Matisse's fascination with Old Russian icons on the one hand, and Shchukin's and Morozov's interest in Matisse and Picasso — the most radical of artists at the turn of the century — on the other, belong to the same phenomenon — a quest for new spirituality in contemporary art. But if, for Matisse, the impact of old Russian icons meant formal discoveries first of all, and the suggestion of different ways of artistic expression via abstract categories, for Goncharova, Larionov, and their fellow artists, icons brought forth the promise of a new expression of national, aesthetic, and individual self-identity. In the words of Goncharova:

Great and serious art cannot help but be national [*natsional'nyi*]. By depriving ourselves of the achievements of the past, Russian art is cutting itself off at the roots. [...]

It seems to me that we are living through the most critical [*otvetstvennyi*] moment in the life of Russian art. The factors that have caused this are: the strong impact of French art of the last decades and the strong rise in interest in ancient Russian painting.³³

30 Iu. A. Rusakov, 'Matiss v Rossii oseniu 1911 goda', *Trudy gosudarstvennogo ermitaza*, 14 (1973), 167–84. Quoted in Pierre Schneider, *Henri Matisse* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), p. 303.

31 Quoted in *Ibid.*

32 See E. M. Iukhimenko, *Pomorskoe staroverie v Moskve i khram v Tokmakovom pereulke* (Moscow: Moskovskaia Pomorskaia staroobriadcheskaia obshchina, 2008).

33 Cited in Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West*, p. 271.

6.6 Theotokos of Tikhvin Icon (late 19th century, Moscow). Cast copper. 9.5 x 11 cm.
Private collection. Photograph © Nina Gurianova, CC BY 4.0.

This search for new identity is visualised in one of Goncharova's still lifes, *Fruits and Engraving* (1912, Tula Regional Art Museum), obviously set in the artist's studio, and also known as *Nature Morte (An Icon, Armchair, and Photograph)*.³⁴ Goncharova's composition reads as a kind of visual manifesto that slightly preceded the avant-garde's published declarations. In pursuit of a new creativity and artistic self-identity, she joins together a few distinct sources, hand-picked reference points that chart her inspiration: the simple, so-called 'peasant' Old-Believers' Russian icon (without the costly *oklad*, the metal casing enclosing icons that was a rarely found among the Old Believers) and the very contemporary photograph (or print) of a Neoprimitivist sketch by Larionov that was close to her heart — the *Provincial Coquette*. This was a

³⁴ Under such a title, but dated much earlier (1907), this painting was listed by Ilia Zdanevich in his book: Eli Eganburi [Ilia Zdanevich] *Natal'ia Goncharova. Mikhail Larionov* (Moscow: Ts. Miunster, 1913), p. VI.

self-statement, in a sense, with ironic reference to Matisse's metaphor of art as an 'easy chair', with Cézanne's 'revered' lemons spread all over it.³⁵ This 'visualised' metaphor, a huge plush chair in bright fauve green, is the centrepiece of her composition; however, it only serves as a pedestal — no more, no less — for the old icon. In fact, Goncharova enters into a kind of witty and gracious debate with her famous French contemporaries here, who had come to epitomise the roots of European modernist innovations of the twentieth century.

Keeping in mind this fascination with the Old Believers and their aesthetics, it is very important to remember, nonetheless, that the ethnic and primitivist sensibility of the early avant-garde in general, and, in particular, the pluralist aesthetics of Goncharova and Larionov's Neoprimitivism, was by no means a sectarian bond to a single culture, be it popular national tradition or medieval Russian religious art. Like their European counterparts, the Russian avant-gardists were interested in popular and traditional art of various historical periods and cultures. They were known for studying and meticulously sketching objects in the ethnographic museums of Moscow and St Petersburg, including statuettes of Tungusian shamans, wooden Enisei, and North American idols, as well as Scythian stone sculptures called 'stone women' (*kamennye baby*), which often feature in other Goncharova still-life compositions. Along with the frequently repeated image of the Old Russian icon, these stone women became one of Goncharova's favourite subjects and a source of inspiration not unlike that of the African mask for Picasso.

This interest in archaic and traditional cultures, in which artistic activity is in various ways connected with the life of the entire community, such as that of the Old Believers, was inspired by the avant-garde's determination to find more in art than commercial or utilitarian value. On the other hand, western modernist influences were still present, and remained among the distinguishing features of Russian avant-garde aesthetics, but the creative interpretation of these influences rarely spilled over into direct stylisation or the external imitation of form. This pluralist expansiveness reflects the invented word *vsechestvo* ('everythingness') that exemplified the free choice of traditions proclaimed by Larionov: "We acknowledge all styles as suitable for the expression of our art, styles existing both yesterday and today".³⁶ The notion of "world backwards" (*Mirskontsa*), invented in the Futurist book of that title by Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov in 1912, reflected the new interpretation of temporality, which accorded a heightened relevance to cultural memory. *Vsechestvo* is usually treated as an avant-garde aesthetic exploration and utilisation of the newly found and rediscovered traditions, from children's drawings and Neolithic graffiti to Scythian and Byzantine art. For Russian avant-gardists — Futurists in particular — it justified their paradoxical jump four centuries 'backwards' in time, and their exploration of the pre-Petrine past, epitomised in Old Believer culture, which went hand in hand with their visions of contemporaneity.

³⁵ The practice of covering an icon with an *oklad* became very popular after Peter the Great.

³⁶ Mikhail Larionov, 'Predislovie k katalogu vystavki lubka', in *Pervaia vystavka lubka, organizovannia N. D. Vinogradovym* (exh. cat., Moscow, 19–24 February 1913).

6.7 Old Believer's Chapel, Museum of the Russian Icon, Moscow.
Photograph © Nina Gurianova, CC BY 4.0.

While searching for their own answer to the questions 'What makes art national?' and 'What does it mean to be a Russian artist?' the Neoprimitivists and Futurists wanted to start history anew, to create a new spirituality and 'authenticity' in art, which could be shared by the majority of people. Paradoxically, in Russian modernity, artistic innovations, usually categorised by critics as a step forward, expressed a philosophical 'return' toward the cautious revision of the beginnings of Russian religious and intellectual thought as well. Such ideas were shaped by Byzantine and Eastern philosophies, embedded in pre-Petrine culture, and expressed first and foremost in icon painting. This line of 'achronic' consciousness led to innovation along with archaization — retrospectivism in the broadest sense.

When Marinetti accused the Russians of a lack of Futuristic aspirations and a devotion to the restoration of tradition instead, he had a point: if Italians were eager to "destroy museums" to be liberated from their own grand classical past, and redefine national identity through new aesthetic ideals, Russians, on the other hand, had to excavate their own history, in order to get rid of the most recent aesthetic dogma and the westernised self-identity that had been imposed on them. While Italians chose to be utopians in their purely futuristic ambitions, Russians never rejected the past, and indeed internalised and deconstructed it, making a clear argument in their poetics for primitivism and tradition against all the attractions of civilised modernity. The typical subjects of Larionov, Goncharova, Malevich, and even Kandinsky are, first

of all, 'traditional' subjects, focused on the ritualised work and days of the Russian provinces, and peasant life, something else which brings them close to the peasant aspects of Old Believer culture (fig. 6.7).

Marinetti called the Russian avant-garde *passéists* (those who look into the past) for a reason: reinvention and revision of historical memory was their aesthetic and ideological priority. This direction was to a great extent determined by Larionov and Goncharova's turn to Old Russian art and their predilection for eastern tradition as a counterweight to the eurocentric orientation of Russian culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Young artists, mostly of humble origin, from small towns, who shared Larionov and Goncharova's Neoprimitivist aspirations — Aleksei Morgunov, Malevich, Le Dantu, Rogovin, and others — were deeply connected to the Russian provinces, and kept alive the memory of primitive and folk art aesthetics with its archaic elements, as well as the pre-schism Eastern Orthodox iconography and symbolism preserved in the Old Believers' *lubki* and hand-written books. These traditions were neglected from the eighteenth century onward as 'heretical', and considered 'barbaric' and 'low' by the cultural and theological dogma of both the post-Petrine westernised elite and the institutionalised Holy Synod. "One of Peter's decrees revealed a very modern consciousness of the impression that Russian culture and religion made on foreigners," aptly observes Salmond. She writes: "It forbade painters to produce icons that were incompetently painted or that could be perceived as 'ugly' by foreigners and thereby incur their mockery or contempt."³⁷

Thus, it feels only logical that when Goncharova attempted to reinvent the new canon of monumental art in her religious compositions, such as her famous tetrptych *Evangelists* (1911, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg), she chose to be inspired by the ancient frescoes of Novgorod, and the expressive minimalistic style characteristic of Old Believer iconography of the Russian north. Even though Goncharova never considered herself an icon painter, as a religious person she desired to revitalise the long-neglected, alternative national tradition of religious art, which she perceived as very different from the imperial patterns implanted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the daringly unconventional *Madonna with Child* (1911, Tretyakov Gallery) her work is much closer to the expressive linear stylistics of Old Believers' metal icons than to the modernist but still mimetic Christian imagery of Mikhail Vrubel and Mikhail Nesterov, or the semi-naturalistic prettiness of religious painting from Viktor Vasnetsov's studio, which targeted both middle-class and elite buyers. Even the unusual colours she chose for her *Madonna*, golden yellow and sienna, with ornaments in blue and green framing the image on both sides, correspond to the aesthetics and style of small, intimate copper icons and triptychs that were for personal use, often adorned with white, blue, and yellow enamel, which originated in Vyg monastery in the seventeenth century (and are still produced in Old Believers' workshops in Moscow). It is no surprise then that all the accusations of 'blasphemy' by contemporaries of Goncharova in the press repeated

37 Salmond, *Tradition in Transition*, pp. 16–17.

almost literally Peter the Great's objections to old icons. "The sacred face of the Virgin is so repulsively distorted in all the images that sometimes it is difficult to distinguish her features", ran a newspaper review of Goncharova's exhibition, tellingly dubbed "Futurism and Sacrilege": "The eyes and nose of the Child are twisted to the side [...] the premeditated deformation of holy persons must not be allowed [...]. But the four narrow canvases depicting some kind of monsters labelled in the catalogue as The Evangelists are the height of outrage."³⁸

Meanwhile, the sense of an aesthetic and spiritual crisis of mainstream and mass-produced religious art at the beginning of the twentieth century seems to have had an overwhelming impact in the artistic milieu. Even Vasnetsov, an artist who was by no means close to avant-garde circles, yet found religious art under European influence in "total decline", describing it as a "formal, lifeless sort of art, academically naturalistic, with the saints giving way to models who posed for the artist". He wrote: "From the eighteenth century our secular art [...] springs up under pressure from the European Enlightenment. The influence of European art is also reflected in our icon painting, and not, alas, to its benefit [...]".³⁹ Curiously enough, Vasnetsov uses an argument very similar to the one that had been used by Archpriest Avvakum two and a half centuries earlier, based on the understanding of the impossibility of bringing spirituality and religious expression into any image which overwhelmingly strives to be a mimetic, physical, illusionary 'likeness' of the world depicted, to make it look 'as if alive'.⁴⁰ Avvakum puts to shame those who:

paint the image of the Saviour, Emmanuel, with a puffy face, red lips, curly hair, fat arms and muscles, bloated fingers, just like the legs' fat thighs, and it is all done like a big-bellied and fat German [...]. And all this is painted in a carnal way, because the heretics are enamored of carnal grossness and have cast the heavens down to the depths [...]. All this that dog Nikon, the enemy, designed — *paint as though they are alive* — and arranges everything in the foreign manner [...].⁴¹

In the case of Russian avant-garde theory and artistic practice, the anarchic refutation of the conventional demands of modern styles, tastes, and 'professionalism' may appear to be an aesthetic provocation, but it conceals something much more significant: a new cognitive experience, a new epistemology, the conscious annihilation of aesthetic clichés of the 'ideal' and 'beauty' established by centuries of European art history since the Renaissance. In all of these 'marginal events' of art, the category of aesthetic value accepted as a norm in a particular epoch is displaced, and art acquires a new significance outside of its current aesthetic definition.

38 Dubl'-Ve, 'Futurizm i koshunstvo', *Peterburgskii listok* (March 1914).

39 V. M. Vasnetsov, 'O russkoi ikonopisi', in *Deianiia sviashchennogo sobora Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi 1917–18 gg.*, 5 (Moscow: 1996), pp. 46–47.

40 Avvakum (Petrov) (1620–82) was a Russian priest, theologian, and writer, a Martyr Saint of Old Believers, who led the opposition to Patriarch Nikon and was exiled for many years. He was later burned at the stake.

41 Cited in Uspensky, 'Russian Spirituality and the Veneration of Icons', in *Holy Russia*, p. 35.

“Art is not an entertainment and not a temple right in the middle of the marketplace, but a new understanding of world phenomena (*novyi smysl mirovykh iavlenii*)”, Mikhail Matiushin wrote.⁴² As the process of artistic creation was placed on the same footing as the creative *presencing-in-the-world*, spiritual action (*odukhotvorennoe delanie*) became a goal of their art. This was perceived as something much more profound than the way it was commonly understood to be understood in the everyday life of contemporary society. Avant-gardists aspired to bring a new knowledge, a spiritual transformation to the world: the ‘found’ Old Believer tradition offered a clean break with the established norm, and a promising possibility of the new model of art, which perfectly coincided with their own search for abstraction and inner spirit in their work. At the same time, the rebellious nature of the Old Believers’ struggle against official hierarchy and indoctrination must have been appealing to avant-gardists, who in their turn challenged the Academy and other established social models of the art world. In this respect, the Russian avant-garde introduced a paradigm shift, a complete switch of reference points, which can be likened to a contemporary schism, but in the aesthetic sphere rather than the religious or theological one.

42 [Mikhail Matiushin?], review of *Sadok sudei* 2 (St Petersburg: Nash vek, 1913), *Soiuz molodezhi* (St Petersburg), 3 (1913), 83.