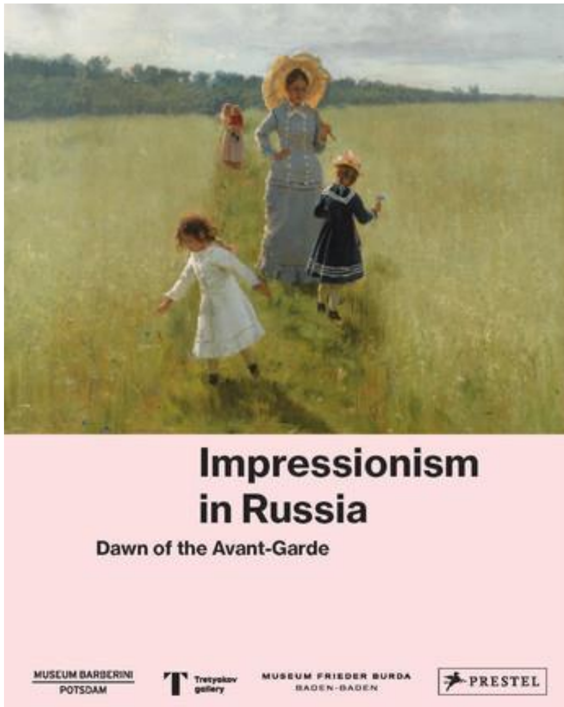

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Dawn of the Avant-Garde

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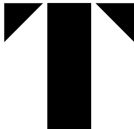

Tretyakov
gallery

Impressionism in Russia

Dawn of the Avant-Garde

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Spelling Style

The Russian transliteration in this book follows the system of the Library of Congress. Apart from the bibliographic sections, diacritical symbols have been omitted, and names ending in -ii or -yi have been simplified to -y. In a few cases an exception was made in favor of a more common spelling. Dates with days and months are cited as listed in each individual source. When double dates are indicated, the first refers to the old date of the Julian Calendar, and the second is the date according to the Gregorian Calendar that was introduced in Russia after 1918.

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Foreword

In memoriam
Frieder Burda

A quick glance at an Impressionist painting was to make art history: when Vasily Kandinsky encountered a work from Claude Monet's series of *Grainstacks* at an exhibition in Moscow in 1896, he saw, to his confusion, a picture composed of bright colors—but was unable to recognize any particular object. This unsettling experience led him to renounce the idea of the motif in his work and inspired his artistic development toward nonrepresentational painting. This anecdote is well-known. It is, however, only a small piece in the mosaic of a complex relationship between French Impressionism and Russian art between 1860 and 1925. The exhibition *Impressionism in Russia: Dawn of the Avant-Garde* is devoted to the reception of French art in Russia, a topic which, up until now, has been little researched. Impressionist impulses not only revolutionized Kandinsky's oeuvre; they were the starting point for numerous avant-garde artists who were to transform Impressionist plein-air painting into Rayonism, Cubo-Futurism, and Suprematism.

From the 1860s onwards, Paris, the leading metropolis of European art, attracted painters from the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. In their confrontation with the Impressionist treatment of modern life, these artists freed themselves from the rules of academic Realism they had been taught in Russia. Their encounter with French art inspired them to create paintings that showed, in addition to impressions of the present moment, a sensual modern world turned toward life. A sketch-like style and painting in the open air allowed a certain *joie de vivre* to enter their work, liberating them from Russian art's more existential themes. The changing sunlight made everything appear airier and more hopeful. In portraits and family pictures, the Russian artists combined immediacy with psychological interpretation to create their own version of Impressionism. Questions about an art that gave expression to the "Russian soul" played just as much of a role as the relationship to the tradition of Realism within painting. Aimed as it was at spontaneous expression and claiming a modernity that transcended national boundaries, Impressionism provided new impulses for this debate. Impressionist-inspired outdoor painting changed Russian art and made the theme of landscape popular. The painters explored the natural environment around Moscow and St. Petersburg and traveled to the far north.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the second generation of Russian artists in Paris became acquainted with Post-Impressionism and Fauvism, styles of painting that

experimented with pure, bright colors. In Russia, too, painters began to use expressive color schemes to extract the light from their paint. Similar to the French Post-Impressionists, the Russian painters of this generation strove for international success and did not view their stays in the West as mere opportunities for study. Later, avant-garde artists began to abstract color from the world of objects in landscapes that were inspired by Impressionism. Shortly thereafter, the Post-Impressionist treatment of light was to give rise to Rayonism and its ray-shaped dissolution of the representational. Already in the first decade of the twentieth century the examination of light resulted in new subjects. In such a liberation of color the painters saw an energy they felt stood for the dynamics and renewal. Impressionist observation was transformed into a Cubist and Futurist dissection of surfaces, and in Malevich's series *White on White* it was made absolute as a light-containing void.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the cooperation of the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. We would like to thank General Director Zelfira Tregulova for her trusting and constructive collaboration. Her institution possesses the collection relevant to our theme, and generously supported the project with loans from it. We would like to express our sincere gratitude to guest curator Alla Chilova, who has made a name for herself as an ambassador of modern Russian art in Western Europe with exhibitions on the work of Aleksandr Rodchenko, Natalia Goncharova, and the relationship between the Russian avant-garde and Paul Cézanne. For our project, she worked closely with experts from the staff of the Tretyakov Gallery, who presented their new research at a symposium in Potsdam in November 2019: Irina Vakar, Tatiana Yudenkova, and Olga Atroshchenko. Their contributions can be read in this volume. Rosalind P. Blakesley, Maria Kokkori, Nicola Kozicharow, and Susanne Strätling, experts on Russia from Britain, the United States, and Germany, joined the team of authors. We would like to offer them our warm thanks as well.

The coordination of the project, which also included loans from regional museums as well as private collections, was at the Tretyakov Gallery in the trusted hands of department head Tatiana Gubanova. We would like to thank the director of the State Museum of Fine Arts of the Republic of Tatarstan in Kazan, Rosalia Nurgaleeva, and her deputy Marina Kutnova for their support, as well as the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Rein Wolfs, and the director of the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, Guillermo Solana. Alla Chilova was also able to arrange valuable loans from private collections. We would like to thank Anatoly Bekkerman and his assistant Natalia Ukolova; Iveta and Tamaz Manasherov and the curator of their collection, Olga Muromtseva; Vladimir Tsarenkov and his assistant Katarina Kindem; Roman Polewski; and Elsina Khayrova for their support as well.

Our sincere thanks are also due to the staff of both the Museum Barberini and the Museum Frieder Burda. The friendly ties that we were able to establish with our Russian colleagues have been invaluable. Time and again we were able to rely on the advice of Evgenia Iliukhina from the Tretyakov Gallery.

Following its appearance in Potsdam, the decision to bring the exhibition to Baden-Baden—which thanks to Turgenev's and Dostoevsky's stories and novels has been a popular travel destination and meeting place for Russian artists, musicians, and writers in search of recreation since the time of the Impressionists—has everything to do with Frieder Burda. This exhibition is dedicated to his memory.

Ortrud Westheider
Director
Museum Barberini

Henning Schaper
Director
Museum Frieder Burda

In the Land of Impressionism Russian Artists' Travels to France

Tatiana Yudenkova

In the three decades between 1860 and 1890, Russian artists came into contact with contemporary French painting in different ways. They studied it in Russia at the museum of the Imperial Academy of Arts, the Kushelev Gallery, in St. Petersburg. But they also became familiar with Western art through private collections in Moscow, exhibitions, and illustrated books and engravings.[1] As they were generally not well-to-do and came from the nonaristocratic intellectual milieu or the impoverished nobility, they typically had to apply for scholarships from the Imperial Academy of Arts if they wanted to study in France. These grants were awarded to students who had won the Grand Gold Medal in a competition. For their stay abroad the scholarship holders received instructions on where to live, what to do, and what to look out for, which works of art deserved attentive study, and so on. Wealthy citizens of the Russian Empire were able to travel abroad in the second half of the nineteenth century without any great ado. Thus there were also artists like Aleksei Savrasov or Vasily Vereshchagin who traveled abroad at their own expense or with the support of other means, but they were a minority.

The following text describes Russian artists' approach to the modern themes and stylistic innovations of French painting and examines how these in turn influenced art in Russia.

City of Deprivations

Ever since Paris had become a center of attraction for artists from all over Europe in the early 1860s, Russian painters traveled to France. Vasily Perov, Viacheslav Shvarts, Aleksei Bogoliubov, Ilia Repin, and Vasily Polenov were among the first. At that time, most Russians saw Paris as a city one went to for fun, where it was difficult for Russian painters to study, even harder to work, and impossible to find subjects for large paintings. Russian artists judged contemporary French painting exclusively according to the Salon, the most important and renowned exhibition in Paris. It was considered a place of encounter with not only French, but also European contemporary art. Consequently, French contemporary art was equated with the art of the Paris Salon.

[1] On the relationship between the different views of art cf. Dmitrieva 1978, 18–38, and German 2005; on the creation of anti-academic artists' associations in France and Russia: Kalitina 1972, 56–63; on Russian-French art relations: Nesterova 1987, 22–28, and Pashkova 2014; on Russians collecting French art: Semenova 2010 and Iudenkova 2012.

Many Russian artists were hesitant when it came to the innovations of French painters as they preferred, in accordance with their aesthetic taste and their sense of tradition, to look to the past of Western European art and to orient themselves more toward the demands of Russian art, which at that time lagged behind ten to twenty years. Russian scholarship holders often preferred the artists of the Barbizon School, who by the 1870s had already become classics of French art. They did not immediately take the Impressionists seriously. Repin was alone in the 1870s when he commented on the "Impressionists' unfettered liberty," exemplified in works by Édouard Manet or Claude Monet. And yet, as was the case with many of his contemporaries, he seemed to be more fascinated by the achievements of the Spanish painter Mariano Fortuny y Marsal, noted for his works with exotic themes. Nevertheless, at that point Repin was the only one to recognize the originality of Manet and the Impressionists' artistic language.[2]

The belief that stays abroad in the 1860s did not bring much creative success to Russian artists is widespread. The painters' difficulties of getting settled in Paris and working productively in foreign climes have often been described, although not many memoirs regarding the life of Russian artists in Europe have survived. Letters suggest that, in Paris, they often lived rather withdrawn lives among their fellow countrymen, and that they found their rather precarious states in a foreign country depressing. "Recently I have been constantly ill and full of yearning, I do not even know what for . . . . You cannot imagine what we poor artists, accustomed as we are to the comforts of Russia, must put up with. Here everything everywhere is cold, there is no comfort whatsoever. Working is almost impossible because of the cold. I heat the whole day long and still it only makes it to my waist, while the wind whistles around one's legs. It is impossible to sit in one place for even an hour . . . . The poor Perovs simply weep," Russian artist Aleksandr Rizzoni wrote in 1863.[3]

Most of the works created by Russian painters in Western Europe during this period—since the beginning of the 1860s most scholarship holders went to France—have not gone into the annals of art history, but the artists themselves did indeed develop a new potential that unfolded once they returned home. The scholarship holders of the Imperial Academy of Arts were obliged to give account of their travels in the form of paintings, but their stays abroad encouraged them to study and design rather than to create works on a large scale. In accordance with the Academy's statutes, the traveling scholarships were granted for the purpose of artists perfecting their technique and getting to know the collections of old and new Western European art. Genre painters could look forward to a three-year stay abroad, and a six-year stay was the norm for history painters. As opposed to the decades before and after, many artists felt that a stay abroad was pointless.[4] Grigory Miasoedov approached the Academy twice with requests for an early return to Russia, finding that, "for Russian artists there is no need whatsoever to travel abroad."[5] As far as Ivan Kramskoy was concerned, everything created abroad carried "the stamp of exhaustion and anguish . . . , as there is no real interest in work . . . . All are on the search! But find little—that is the common lot."[6] The unanimous opinion was that real topics could only be found in Russia.

Back from Paris: Artistic Echoes

Even though the artists frequently complained about their travels to France, the influence of the impressions they gathered in Western Europe should not be underestimated. For example, Grigory Miasoedov and Nikolai Ge returned with the idea of a traveling exhibition. A few years later it took shape in the Association of Traveling Art Exhibitions under their aegis and in cooperation with Vasily Perov, Aleksei Savrasov, Ivan Kramskoy, and others.

2 On the thesis that Russian artists were less inclined to Impressionism than their European colleagues due to their special mentality, cf. German 2005, 16.

3 Letter from Aleksandr Ricconi to Pavel Tret'iakov, December 1863, in Galkina/Grigor'eva 1960, 149. All citations translated from Russian by Brigitte van Kann and then from German by Alexander Booth.

4 Aleksandr Ricconi criticized the stipend. Repin and Polenov returned from Paris early.

5 Letter from Grigorii Miasoedov to Andrei Somov and Vladimir Shemiot, October 24/12, 1863, in Miasoedov 1972, 29.

6 Letter from Ivan Kramskoi to Pavel Tret'iakov, June 6, 1876, in Kramskoi 1953–54, vol. 2, 142–43.

Instead of the scheduled three, Perov only spent two years abroad, in 1863 and 1864. In Paris he got the idea for a sketch for a painting of everyday life, but soon distanced himself from his plan: "As I was neither familiar with the people nor their way of life, their character nor popular types, which is the foundation of genre . . . , I abandoned my plan and concerned myself with sketches, in order to select some of the best and get to know the country."[7] Perov, however, conceded that his walks through the city, his visits to balls, markets, and squares had been of great benefit. He extensively copied the Old Masters and was attracted by the work of his contemporaries, the landscape painters of the Barbizon School such as Camille Corot and Charles-François Daubigny, as well as by French genre painters, "who had carried the genre scenes out into the streets and squares."[8] He was also interested in the work of Ernest Meissonier, whose Paris studio he visited.[9]

Once back in Russia, Perov confessed that he had made progress with regard to the technical side of painting. This is shown by the changes in his work in the second half of the 1860s. The period after his time in Paris became the most productive in his entire career. Even during his time in France, the painter had set his sights on subjects from Russian life, as he found this work more productive than painting people whom he hardly understood and who remained strangers. After his premature return, Perov set to work. He painted several pictures a year, each one innovative in its own way. Themes he had brought back from Paris found a multifaceted transformation and bring to mind the work of Honoré Daumier, Gustave Courbet, and French genre painters. Throughout these years motifs such as feasts, processions, vagabonds, and homeless orphans brought Russian and Western European art closer together.

In Paris, Perov had sketched his *Funeral in a Poor Quarter of Paris* (fig. 1) in pencil. The funeral procession itself remains hidden from the viewer. The painter is interested in the emotional reactions of the viewers, from apathy to empathy. He took this drawing as the starting point for a large-format painting. After his return, Perov executed the composition *Seeing Off the Dead Man* (fig. 2), in which he gave valid expression to human grief. Perov's art was found to be "Russian." For example, the French critic Théophile Thoré, considering the artist's works presented at the 1867 World's Fair in Paris, including *Seeing Off the Dead Man*, remarked that Perov was Russian both in his choice of subjects and in the way he understood and interpreted them.[10] Taking his cue from the Barbizon School, Perov was one of the first artists in Russia to integrate landscape motifs into genre painting. Though it would be premature to speak about the influence of the Barbizon painters here, from this point on the landscape in Perov's paintings contributed to the overall emotional charge—something new for Russian art in the 1860s and 1870s.

The Russian painters who lived abroad in the 1860s continued to move intellectually within an artistic coordinate system determined by the reality of the Russian Empire. They remained oriented toward Russian art. In France they considered subjects for large paintings born out of day-to-day life or the history of their homeland. Vasily Perov produced a sketch of the painting *Art Teacher* (1863, Museum of Art, Ivanovo). Abroad, the image of Russia remained present not only to painters, but to writers as well, who felt just as intimately connected to their homeland. Thus in 1869 Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote from Dresden: "Every day I think about Russia until I'm staggering and long to be back as soon as possible, whatever it costs."[11] And further: "I must be in Russia . . . , not only must I see it (I have seen a lot), I must live there too . . . . That is why it is difficult for me abroad, it is impossible for me not to return."[12]

[7] Cited in Petrov 1997, 70.
[8] Ibid. Perov was referring to the brothers Adolphe and Armand Leleux as well as to Philippe-Auguste Jeanron and Octave Tassaert.
[9] Cf. ibid., 72.
[10] Cited in Kalitina 1972, 62.
[11] Letter from Fedor M. Dostoevskii to Sof'ia A. Ivanova, December 26/14, 1869, in Dostoevskii 1930, 239.
[12] Ibid., 245.

City of Fun

At the beginning of the 1870s, the situation began to change. Under the conditions of consolidating a political alliance with France, the Imperial Academy intensified its artistic contacts. In the spring of 1870, new instructions for scholarship holders were published, requiring knowledge of French or German so that they would use all the materials at their disposable for artistic education while also maintaining useful and necessary contacts with foreign colleagues. During these years, the presence of Russian artists in France grew, and a society of Russian painters was established in Paris, led by Aleksei Bogoliubov, who lived mainly in the French capital between 1872 and 1896, and Ivan Turgenev, who also spent most of his time there from 1847 until his death in 1883. The artists maintained contact with each other and with their French colleagues, visiting public and private studios. In the 1870s they made an attempt to establish exhibitions of Russian painters in France. The Association of Traveling Art Exhibitions, the *Peredvizhniki*, or Wanderers, negotiated with Turgenev's support for an exhibition in Paris.

At the end of the 1860s Aleksei Kharlamov, who had an Academy scholarship from 1869 to 1875, settled in the French capital and remained there until his death in 1925. In the first half of the 1870s, Ilia Repin and Vasily Polenov followed. From 1871 to 1884 Nikolai Dmitriev-Orenburgsky lived in Düsseldorf and in Paris; Pavel Kovalevsky was in Paris between 1876 and 1877. As a scholarship recipient from the Ministry of Maritime Affairs, the landscape painter Aleksandr Beggrov collected numerous experiences abroad between 1871 and 1877, before eventually moving to Paris. Yuri Leman and Ivan Pokhitonov spent many years in France at their own expense. Konstantin Savitsky went with a scholarship from Czar Aleksandr II, and Viktor Vasnetsov and Ivan Kramskoy traveled to Paris for a short time on their own account.

The painters plunged headfirst into the artist's life, into the dance of literary *soirées*, celebrations, and dinner parties organized by the Russian colony. The reason for not being able to work no longer lay in the difficulties of everyday life, but in the endless outings and entertainment. "Here I wander through the most diverse societies: first of all, our own Russian art scene . . . , second of all, the musical world of the French at Madame Viardot's. Then there is the similarly French world of scientists and artists . . . , for example, Renan, Gérôme, Bonnat, Carolus-Duran . . . , and, last but not least, on the other side of the Seine, students . . . of every possible type," Polenov wrote.[13]

In the 1870s the Russian artists felt more self-confident, even if melancholy and nostalgic observations echo throughout the letters of Polenov, Repin, and Vasnetsov. In 1876 the latter complained from Paris: "Here I just continue to drift . . . , neither bored nor joyful!—I'm working more, which sometimes helps against the whirlwinds of the most horrible, doubt-filled bouts of sadness and longing! Among strangers sometimes you suddenly feel you are surrounded by empty space, filled with figures but no people, faces but no souls, and with an unpleasant language. There is nothing the heart can cling to: alone, alone, alone!"[14] Even Repin admitted to having suffered in Paris from not having the possibility to hear Musorgsky's music, and while reading Émile Zola he reread Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and eagerly awaited a shipment of Nikolai Gogol's works. Nevertheless, the self-confidence of Russian artists abroad gained new contours in the 1870s.

At that time, Russian artists already saw the significance of a trip abroad differently: the focus was not on finding a monumental Russian subject, but on trying to find and understand their own calling. "I cannot really fathom myself," Polenov wrote his relatives, "for the moment I am still groping about in the twilight."[15] Ilia Repin, who stayed in Paris between 1873 and 1876,

[13] Letter from Vasilii Polenov to Elena Polenova, April 26/14, 1876, Manuscript Department of the State Tretyakov Gallery f. 54, ed. 328, l. 1 ob. This refers to Pauline Viardot-Garcia, Ernest Renan, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Léon Bonnat, and Charles Auguste Émile Durant, known as Carolus-Duran.

[14] Letter from Viktor Vasnetsov to Vasilii Maksimov, August 20, 1876, in Vasnetsov 1987, 47.

[15] Letter from Vasilii Polenov to Fedor Chizhov, March 26/14, 1875, cited in Sakharova 1964, 165.

painted his picture *Sadko* (fig. 3) there. He explained the idea behind the fantastical, fairy-tale-like subject in a letter: "Sadko, the rich guest, on the seabed; the ruler of the waves presenting brides to him . . . , beautiful women of all nations and epochs passing by . . . . Sadko, the naive young man, is beside himself with enthusiasm, but strictly adheres to a saint's instructions to choose the maiden Chernavushka, who is Russian."[16] On the one hand, Repin himself seems to be the "naive young man" who is enthusiastic about European art but nonetheless will follow the call of his artistic conscience; on the other, he was quite critical of his plan: "The idea, as you can see, is not all that special, but it expresses my current situation, and perhaps, at the moment, even the situation of all Russian art."[17] In other words: in Paris many artists began to reassess their role and position in art, which would ultimately prove important for their work.

The Search for Lightness

In the mid-1870s, the Academy stipendiaries Repin, Polenov, Savitsky, Beggrov, and Kharlamov headed off with Bogoliubov to complete some studies in the small village of Veules-les-Roses in Normandy. These works, executed *en plein air*, bear witness to the influence of French painting, which can be seen in their search for light, transparent qualities. An example of their struggle to represent the environment's light and air, the barely perceptible movements of nature, can be seen in Polenov's *White Horse: Normandy* (fig. 4). While working on this study, Polenov realized that his talent tended more toward landscapes and the genre of the everyday. In Veules-les-Roses he found his artistic calling. In a pictorial execution freed from its shackles, the quest for the imperfect showed itself in a number of Polenov's other paintings and oil sketches from France (fig. 5).

Their plein-air studies inspired Russian painters to tackle formal tasks—with a sidelong glance at contemporary trends in Western art. That the Russians examined the technical procedures of their European colleagues in detail can be seen from the letters Repin, Polenov, Kramskoy, and Vasnetsov sent home: "The general technical level of this whole mass of paintings is better than ours, that is, the drawings and the technique in general are more sophisticated," Vasnetsov commented in May 1876. While acknowledging the obvious, he also formulated the special nature of the Russian artist: "Here every reasonably decent artist has a lot of imitators . . . . Whereas, back at home, each one of us tries with all our might not to resemble another."[18] Subsequently, the works created in France served as a basis and preparatory material for further work on pictures with a distinct dramaturgy.

In France, many Russian painters worked on perfecting their technique, with the understanding that their experimentation with a freer way of painting was a new stage in the development of Russian art. Distinctive examples are Konstantin Savitsky's sketch *Resting at Work* (fig. 6), from his stay in Paris—one year before his trip Savitsky had completed the painting *Repair Work on the Railway* in the Realist tradition of the *Peredvizhniki* (fig. 7)—and Repin's small but freely painted, mosaic-like, and, as far as its colors are concerned, liberated sketch for the painting *Religious Procession in an Oak Forest: Appearance of the Icon* (fig. 8), which he created shortly after his return. A few years later, Repin exhibited his monumental composition *Religious Procession in the Kursk Governorate* (fig. p. 34), a work that connects historical painting to the plein-air approach.

In the 1870s Russian painters brought artistic methods like the depiction of sunlight or color shading back from France, and in so doing broke through stereotypes while at the same time helping Russian art to evolve from airless academicism to outdoor painting and the Impressionist movements of the following decades.

[16] Letter from Il'ia Repin to Vladimir Stasov, December 23, 1873, in Repin 1948–50, vol. 1, 81–82.
[17] Ibid., 82.
[18] Letter from Viktor Vasnetsov to Mikhail Gorshkov and Vasilii Maksimov, May 9, 1876, in Vasnetsov 1987, 45.