

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
RUSSIAN ART

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PART I – PAINTING

Introduction

The art of icon painting, widely viewed as a major expression of Russian piety, was introduced into Russia together with Christianity. Initially icons were purely Byzantine in style, but local schools with their own unique characteristics later appeared in Novgorod, Yaroslavl, Pskov, Tver, Vladimir-Suzdal and Moscow.

A distinctive style of Russian icon painting emerged in the 14th century, with Novgorod as its center due to the excellence of the icons produced there. In addition, the names of individual artists from this period are known.

The 14th and 15th centuries are widely regarded as the acme of Russian icon painting, primarily due to the quality of the icons produced by Andrey Rublev, Dionysios, Theophanes the Greek, and Daniil Cherny.

One of the most influential icon painters was previously mentioned Theophanes the Greek, who is sometimes called the Father of the Russian Icon. He is known for his use of color that shows similarities with Byzantine painting. Examples of his work are still found in the Cathedral of the Annunciation in Moscow.

Another important artist was Andrey Rublev, who was one of the artists who contributed to the development of distinctively Russian icon painting towards the end of the 14th century. His most famous work, *The Holy Trinity*, was dedicated to St. Sergius of Radonezh. However, Rublev was not only an icon painter; there are a number of frescos and illuminated manuscripts that are attributed to him. It was Rublev's style above all others that became the model for what would become traditional Russian art.

The works of the painter Dionysios mark both the the end of Russia's golden age of icon painting and the beginning of a new artistic era. Among his best known works are the *Deesis* in Moscow's Cathedral of the Dormition; a large mural in the Ferapontov Monastery's Virgin Nativity Cathedral; and the icons painted for the Joseph Volokolamsky Monastery. His works are generally considered the peak of Russian religious art's classical style.

Both the composition and techniques of Russian icon painting advanced at the start of the 15th century. During the period of Ivan III in the following century Novgorod lost its status as the center of artistic life to Moscow. The painters of Moscow became known for the vivid colors they used, the exquisite proportions of their figures, and the balanced composition in their frescos and icons. Beginning in the first half of the 16th century icon painting displays more freedom, shifting from purely iconographic to illustrative.

Western art began to have a major influence on Russian icon painting from the mid-16th century on. Despite the objections of the church, these influences proved to be unavoidable. This was mostly due to Peter the Great and his program of westernization. Since the main centers of icon painting were in the Kremlin, they were subject to royal influence and Peter could dictate the style artists would employ in their work.

The Stroganovs, a boyar family, established a new artistic school that was named after them in the late 16th-early 17th century. The Stroganov school created a new artistic synthesis that combined the features of secular portraits with long-standing traditions of icon painting in Russia. This new type of painting became known as a *parsuna*; rather than religious figures, they honored secular figures of the time. Two of the best-known artists of this time were Fedor Zubov and Simon Ushakov.

The style of Russian icons, like the Orthodox Church itself, would be divided by a religious dispute in the latter part of the 17th century. In 1666 a group which became known as the Old Believers left the Orthodox Church in opposition to a series of reforms that were ordered by the Patriarch Nikon; among the innovations that the Old Believers opposed was the change in the style of icon painting. Peter the Great persecuted the Old Believers and when they were exiled to the edges of the Russian Empire they took their style of icon painting with them. However, the big cities of the empire, such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, Pskov and Novgorod icons continued to be painted in the westernized style.

In the early 18th century that Russian painting finally broke with the traditions of icon painting, but it was not until the Academy of Arts was formed that painting in the western style became predominant. The Academy was heavily influenced by classicism, and this is reflected in the early works of this period.

Although the 18th century was period in which the genres of Russian painting had expanded, religious painting remained influential due to the church's patronage of the arts. Among the painters who continued to paint religious themes were Alexander Ivanov and Anton Losenko.

Portraiture, in imitation of western trends, along with some types of folk art were the major forms of painting in Russia in the 18th century. Among the best-known portrait painters of this period were Andrei Maveyev, Ivan Nikitin, Ivan Vishnyakov, Alexei Antropov, Dmitri Levitsky, Vladimir Borovikovsky, Ivan Argunov and Fyodor Rokotov.

In the wake of Peter the Great's reforms aimed at westernizing his country, Russian art became more and more secular, much as art in Western Europe. Western architects and sculptors were invited to Russia by Peter to help in the construction of St. Petersburg, his new capital. In addition, a large number of Russian artists were sent to Europe to learn the skills and techniques Peter demanded. Peter had intended to establish a separate department of art in his recently founded Academy of Sciences, but died before he could carry out his plan. However, Ivan Shuvalov, the minister of education in the mid-18th century fulfilled Peter's wish by establishing the Imperial Academy of Arts.

The Imperial Academy of Art supported art which reflected the European neoclassical style, rather than art based on Russian traditions. Russian artists learned current European styles and techniques, particularly those of the schools of Paris, Rome and Bologna. Paintings of historical events and individual portraits became particularly popular during the Romantic movement. An artist who became famous for his portraits of celebrities was Vasily Tropinin. Karl Bryulov, a contemporary of Tropinin, was the most famous portrait painter of his era.

Russian artists also rediscovered their own society and surroundings as art moved outside the limits of the court, and the trend towards naturalism was indicative of this development.

It was not until the early 19th century that Russian landscape painting became widely popular. There had been artists before this time who had produced fine landscape paintings, among them Fyodor Alexeyev, Maxim Vorobiev, Fyodor Matveyev, and Silvester Shchedrin, but their

works were products of the Italianesque romantic tradition. True Russian landscape painting only emerged with the works of Nikifor Krylov, Alexei Venetsianov, and Grigory Soroka. Venetsianov's depiction of the Russian landscape and Russian peasants helped start this artistic tradition. Fedotov and other artists took the middle class as the subject of their paintings, works which also contained elements of social criticism. However, artists such as Ivan Aivazovsky and Mikhail Lebedev continued to paint in the Italianesque romantic tradition.

Growing dissatisfaction with the conservative aesthetic and pedagogical principles of the Academy in the 1860s led to a student revolt in 1863. Instead of being required to follow the Academy's recommended themes, they wanted to use theme of their own choosing. The Academy refused to accept this, leading to the resignation from the Academy of one sculptor and thirteen painters. The leading figures of this group were Ivan Kramskoy, Vladimir Stasov, Vasily Stasov, Ilya Repin, Vasily Surikov, and Vasily Perov. At a later date they established *The Society of Wandering Art Exhibitions* which strove to reach people that the Academy and its art did not. Travelling throughout Russia, society members who became known as *Wanderers (Peredvizhniki)* held exhibitions of art that they had produced during their travels and espoused political reform. Cognizant of the fact that Peter the Great's reforms had produced a schism in Russian culture between the upper and lower classes, the Wanderers attempted to bridge this gap through their exhibitions.

Outside the limits of the Academy, the Wanderers embodied a realism in their ideology and shown a national spirit that attempted to re-establish the bonds between their land and their art through depictions of the people, history and landscapes of Russia.

Ilya Repin, one of the most famous members of the Wanderers, became best known for his paintings depicting historical subjects, although he was equally skilled in many other genres. These paintings would become the model for realism in the late 19th century due to their blend of realistic depictions and criticism of society. The blossoming of Russian art in these years was, to a great degree, due to the Repin, Nikolay Gay and Ivan Kramskoy. The works of the latter two artists on religious themes were particularly influential.

Instability and creativity were the distinguishing characteristics of Russian between 1890-1917. Internal disagreements among the artists in *The Society of Wandering Art Exhibitions* would eventually lead to the group disbanding just at the point that it was becoming truly established. The Wanderers also became the target of criticism from both intellectuals and younger artists on two points: they claimed that the Wanderers had failed to pass on their skills to the next generation through teaching and that they had failed to formulate a new artistic system in place of the one they had rejected.

In this period a number of new artistic societies appeared; one of the most famous was *The World of Art* established by writers and artists based in St. Petersburg in 1899. Nikolai Roerich, Alexander Benois, Lev Bakst, Evgeny Lancere, Konstantin Somov and Sergei Diaghilev were among the founders of this society that was focused on art's aesthetic properties. Their intention was to create an art movement that was Russian, yet also part and parcel of general European culture. Past Western culture was admired by artists in *The World of Art*, but not to the degree that the West was seen as superior to Russia. Perhaps the greatest contributions of *The World of Art* to Russian art was teaching young artists about issues in Russian and European art, and that the most important quality of a nation's art is its uniqueness. In addition, unlike the Wanderers, *The World of Art* placed great importance on the expression of the individual artist.

Sergei Diaghilev can be credited with much of the success of *The World of Art*. The clear goals of the movement and the international recognition given to Russian art in this period was the result of his efforts. One factor that contributed to Diaghilev's success was his deep understanding of European and Russian artistic trends. He used this knowledge to find ways to introduce Russian art into the world of European art. One way he did this was by holding exhibitions that would display his artistic vision to both viewers and other artists. In 1906 he held an exhibition in Paris entitled *The Russian Seasons* which featured talented, traditional Russian artists from St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Between 1890-1917 naturalism was the predominant genre of Russian painting. However, some artists did produce works in other styles; the portraitist and former Wanderer Valentin Serov painted in a semi-Impressionistic style. Likewise, Konstantine Korovin and Mikhail Vrubel produced portraits in the same style. However, the works of Lev Bakst, Zinaida Serebriakova, Konstantin Somov and Alexander Golovin displayed a more classical style.

Igor Grabar, Alexander Kuprin, Boris Kustodiev, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, and Ilya Mashkov were all noted painters of still life, a category which was in harmony with *The World of Art's* artistic philosophy.

In the field of landscape painting, French Impressionism was a major influence on Russian works in this category. The most renowned Russian landscape painters were Vasily Surikov, Valentin Serov and Igor Grabar. Other notable landscape painters in this period were Konstantin Yuon, Vasily Baksheev and Nikolai Krymov.

The years before the revolution of 1917 witnessed a burst of creativity and activity in Russian art. Russian artists had been exposed to and were familiar with the trends in contemporary European art, but they no longer attempted to merely imitate European art. Russian artists now combined European styles with their artistic vision; in the process they created works that would take modern art in new directions.

The second decade of the 20th century was a time when several movements related to abstract and semi-abstract art emerged. Among these were Cubism, Expressionism, Rayonism, Futurism, Constructivism and Suprematism. Notable Russian artists in these movements were Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich. However, due to their sources of inspiration and methods Kandinskiy, Filonov and Marc Chagall stood outside of these movements. Chagall was one of the last representatives of the first generation of European modernism. He moved between St. Petersburg, Berlin and Paris in the period prior to the First World War and created his own distinctive style utilizing themes and elements from the culture and religion of Eastern European Jewry.

Russian expressionist painters primarily worked outside of the country; among the major Russian artists in this movement were Alexei von Jawlensky and Vasily Kandinsky.

Following the example of contemporary French artists, young Russian artists began revolutionary experiments in their own artistic works, among them Goncharova, Larionov and Byurlyuk. Cubism became one of the most influential of the French artistic trends in early 20th century Russian art. Desiring to preserve folk art, Larionov and Goncharova combined Russian folk art with elements of modern French art. Their inspiration came from icons as well as from popular Russian prints known as *lubok*.

A number of Russian avant-garde artists made rejection of dependence on western artistic models a major tenet of their movements. Futurist experimentation soon displaced Larionov

and Goncharova's interest in icons and *lubok*. Vladimir Mayakovsky is known as the initiator of Russian Futurism, and Kasimir Malevich, David Burlyuk and Vladimir Tatlin are among the prominent artists of this movement.

The futurist movement was characterized by the importance it placed on geometric form, dynamism, mechanical movement and art's temporal aspect.

Other avant-garde artists took issue with the futurist movement's approach to art, particularly futurism's mechanical aspect, and sought to infuse their art with greater spirituality through a number of separate approaches. One was rayonism, espoused by Kirill Zdanevich and Larionov. Their goal was to display the spiritual connections between the elements in the world, in contrast to the fragmented, mechanical approach of cubism. Rayonism was an approach that would not be advocated for long.

Of all the avant-garde movements, suprematism, established by Kazimir Malevich in 1915 was perhaps the most extreme. It advocated the use of limited colors and basic geometric forms such as lines, circles, rectangles and squares to give full expression to the artist's feelings while disregarding the normal appearance of everyday objects. For a suprematist artist both the concepts of the conscious mind and objectivity are to be disregarded.

Constructivism was another avant-garde movement of Russian art in the early years of the 20th century. It was established by Vladimir Tatlin in 1915 and was based on an emphasis of both an object's material properties and the space it occupied. Constructivist artists put their talents to use in the service of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, in particular by applying their artistic theories to the fields of advertising and fashion.

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Questions

Discuss about the development of iconography in Russia. Why did Russians adopt the style of Andrey Rublev as traditional Russian art?

Discuss about Russian major art movements including artists and their works.

Discuss about Constructivism and its main ideas. What distinguishes Constructivism from Futurism?

PART II –RUSSIAN MUSIC

Introduction

When Prince Vladimir converted to Orthodox Christianity in 988 he ruled a land that had not yet become a sovereign state and whose culture was pagan in nature. As a result, the Church moved quickly to become the dominant cultural force in Kievan Rus'. However, Vladimir's decision to convert to Orthodoxy led to Russia's political isolation from its neighbors, and in order to prevent outside religious influences from entering Russia the Russian Church became isolationist. One area of culture in which the Church sought to assert its influence was music, both religious and secular.¹

Like Orthodox Christianity itself, the music of the Russian Orthodox Church was imported in the 10th century from the Byzantine Empire. Initially, musical instruments were not used in the liturgy, as their use was considered sinful by the Orthodox Church, an attitude which would not change until the middle of the 17th century. Another aspect of this hostility towards the use of musical instruments was the church's long, bitter struggle against folk musicians, in particular instrumentalists. This animosity was fueled by the Orthodox Church's rivalry with the Catholic Church, which allowed instrumental music, and by its struggle against Russia's pagan heritage, a heritage which folk instrumentalists were continuing in the church's view.

Liturgical music in the Orthodox Church was sung a capella by all-male choirs who performed a monodic chant in unison. Over time this type of liturgical music began to evolve into new forms that were unlike the Byzantine chants. One of these, developed some time around the 12th century was the *znamenny chant* (*znamenny raspev*). These chants were performed using a system of eight voices.

Before the introduction of Christianity the musical instruments found in Russia were similar to those used throughout medieval Europe. Among these were the *svirel*, an oboe-like instrument; the *gusli*, similar to a zither; the *gudok*, similar to a fiddle; and horns. In addition there were tambourines, assorted noise makers, drums, and small bells, instruments more typically associated with shamanic rituals. These instruments were played during religious and court ceremonies, and for entertainment. They were also associated with the *skomorokhi*, folk musicians in Kievan Rus and Muscovy who often played at weddings.

However, the *skomorokhi* found themselves officially banned during the "Time of Troubles", the period when Muscovite Rus' was being transformed into a secular, centralized state between the 14th – 17th centuries. The reasons for this ban are not entirely clear; they may have been sacrificed to maintain relations between the church and the state, or they may have been regarded as a threat to the state. Whatever the true reason, pressured by the church Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich issued the decree banning the *skomorokhi* in 1648. After having been an integral part of Russian popular culture for over 700 years, the *skomorokhi* found themselves exiled to northern Russia or Siberia, and their instruments destroyed.

The Russian tsars saw their position as rulers as having not only a secular aspect, but a spiritual one as well, an attitude that would not change until the late 17th century when Peter I became tsar. The tsars believed that they were the spiritual leaders of an Orthodox state and servants of God as well. For example, Tsar Ivan IV composed a number of church chants and was said to be a talented church musician. As a result of this view of their religious role,

¹ Ritzarev, M., Russian Music before Glinka, A Look from the Beginning of the Third Millennium, <http://www.biu.ac.il/hu/mu/min-ad02/ritzarev.html>

the tsars were against secular music, both foreign and domestic. Anyone giving public performances of secular music, like the *skomorokhi*, were treated as criminals.

The hostile attitude towards secular music changed dramatically when Peter the Great ascended the throne. He set in motion a number of reforms to transform Russia from what he saw as a backward society into a modern, Western-style country. In his new capital, St. Petersburg, he held court balls in the manner of Western Europe where his aristocrats attempted to perform unfamiliar European dances. Copying the Germans, he formed "staff orchestras" that played at court ceremonies, and even travelled with his army in the field. Hoping to marry Peter's daughter, the Duke of Schleswig-Holstein, Carl Friedrich brought a German chamber orchestra with him to St. Petersburg in 1721. The orchestra played works by a number of contemporary composers, and chamber orchestras soon became a requisite element of aristocratic society. In the years after Peter the Great's reign musicians and composers continued to be brought from Europe and paid well for their talents. Private orchestras and choirs, as well as opera and ballet theaters had become feature of the estates of a number of Russian aristocrats by the end of the 18th century. This trend provided a new opportunity for some former serfs; trained by teachers from Europe they went on to become some of the most famous performers of the day.

In the early 18th century most of the developments in Russian music took place in St. Petersburg, as this was both the location of the tsar and his court, but also the center for the secular culture that was developing. For example, St Petersburg was the site of the premiers of two operas by the "Father of Russian Music", Mikhail Glinka, *A Life for the Tsar* and *Ruslan and Ludmila*. The latter, which was first performed in 1842 would be the first in a long line of operas based on Russian fairy tales. Glinka's compositions mark a turning point in Russian music, the point at which Russian music truly becomes a part of European music, while still retaining its folk music traditions.

Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna and the composer Anton Rubinstein established the *Russian Musical Society* in 1859. Its primary aim was to encourage and expand the musical study and performance in the country. Regarded as Russia's first school of music, the Society provided instruction to anyone who wished to study music.

As Russia had no conservatories prior to the 1860's, Russia's first composer, Mikhail Glinka, had to travel abroad to obtain the majority of his musical training. This allowed him to study the folk music of many different countries and to make the acquaintance of many well-known European composers. After his return to Russia Glinka would greatly influence Russian music's development in general, and opera in particular.

A number of composers after Glinka followed his lead and composed music based on Russian fairy tales; among them were Rimsky-Korsakov, *The Golden Cockerel*; Stravinsky, *The Nightingale*; and Prokofiev, in *Love for Three Oranges*. In the compositions for ballet, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky and Prokofiev would also be influenced by Glinka's use of fairy-tales.

One of the most important events in the growth of Russian music occurred with the opening in St. Petersburg of Russia's first conservatory in 1862.

The following year, Mily Balakirev established the Balakirev Circle, a musical group, in St. Petersburg. The Circle studied a wide spectrum of musical traditions to employ in their own compositions: Russian folksongs, classical composers and music from Spain, Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Exoticism was becoming as important a part of Russian music as it was

in European music. This can be seen in the Middle Eastern influences in *Scheherazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov, and the Central Asian elements in Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*.

In 1866 Russia's second conservatory was established in Moscow by Anton Rubinstein from St. Petersburg and Nikolai Rubinstein from Moscow. Both brothers would play important roles in making Russian music more professional. Famous graduates of Russia's first two conservatories include Tchaikovsky (St. Petersburg) and Rachmaninoff (Moscow).

At approximately the same time, five composers from St. Petersburg formed a group which became known as *moguchaya kuchka*, "The Mighty Handful" (or "The Mighty Five"). They shared common political and aesthetic opinions and held that music made by Russians should accurately reflect the people of Russia, and not what was taught by Germans in the conservatory. The group's leader was Balakirev, with Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin and César Cui making up the rest of the group.

They advocated the use of Russian elements such as folk music and folk lore in compositions, and were disturbed by the predominant position of European music and European musicians. Because of their ability to convey a narrative message they preferred song, symphonic poems and opera over other genres. Despite the group's early solidarity, by the mid-1870s Balakirev and the other members were no longer on good terms and the group was, for all practical purposes, dissolved.

A number of well-known works would be composed by members of the Mighty Handful, among them the operas *Sadko* and *The Snow Maiden*, and the symphonic poem *Scheherazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov; *Khovanshchina* and *Boris Godunov* by Mussorgsky; *Tamara* by Balakirev; and *Prince Igor* by Borodin. All are regarded as masterpieces of romantic nationalism and are inspired, as many of the Mighty Handful's works were, by Russian literature, history and folk stories.

One of the first graduates of the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Pyotr Tchaikovsky disagreed with the Mighty Handful over the composition of classical music, in particular which tradition, Western or Russian, should determine how it was composed. Although Tchaikovsky's interest in nationalistic music grew in the late 19th century, he remained opposed to the Mighty Handful's nationalistic bent. Despite his disagreements with the Mighty Handful, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* shows the influence of Balakirev.

After 1917 musicians were subject to extreme pressure from the state to follow aesthetic standards determined by the government. State control over musicians was extended by Stalin in 1932 with the formation of the Union of Soviet Composers. This was a regulatory body whose mandate was to direct all musical activity for the government's own political purposes. One result was that all Soviet composers were compelled to follow very specific regulations concerning the types of music they produced.

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Questions

Discuss the early developments in Russian music. Why would the Skomorokhi be treated as criminals?

Discuss Westernization and its effects on Russian music.

Discuss the Mighty Handful and their political views.

Discuss how 19th century Russian composers were influenced by Western composers and how they influenced the popular culture of the West.

Part III – **THEATRE**

Introduction

Pagan ceremonies in which tales, proverbs and fables were recited, together with the songs and dances of itinerant jesters, known as *Skomorokhi*, laid the foundation for the development of Russian theater. The *Skomorokhi*, based on Byzantine models, appeared around the middle of the 11th century in Kievan Rus and were performers who played musical instruments, sang, danced and even composed the scores for their performances.

The *Skomorokhi* were not universally popular in Kievan Rus; they are described in pejorative terms in the *Primary Chronicle*. Both the ruling authorities and the Orthodox Church viewed the *Skomorokhi* as being in league with the devil, and persecuted them for maintaining what they saw regarded as pagan traditions. A major reason for the *Skomorokhi*'s unpopularity with both the secular and religious leaders was the nature of their art. The *Skomorokhi*'s performances were aimed at ordinary people, and often were in opposition to those in power. As a result the clergy and feudal rulers viewed the *Skomorokhi* as useless to society at the very least, and politically and religiously dangerous at the very worst.

Both civil and religious leaders subjected the *Skomorokhi* to particularly intense persecution during the period of Mongol rule, a period which also coincided with the Orthodox Church's strong advocacy of asceticism.

The *Skomorokhi*'s performances continued to be viewed with suspicion during the time of Ivan IV; it was believed that they undermined the authority and interest of the civil and religious leaders. There were even claims that their practices were somehow a form of devilry from the Greeks.

The high point of the *Skomorokhi* was the period of the 15th – 17th century. Performances were given in city squares or in the streets; spectators were encouraged to take part in them. Occasionally, in the 16th – 17th centuries, groups of *Skomorokhi* would join together to form a *vataga* (large group) and put on a performance.

The *Skomorokhi*'s performances were banned by Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich in the mid-17th century for being blasphemous; nonetheless, popular celebrations remained a venue for occasional performances. A number of dramatic performances were given in the royal court in 1640 and 1650. An English merchant, John Hebdon, was ordered to hire German puppeteers in large numbers to perform in Russia in 1660. Significant changes in both Russian theater and Russian society would result from the introduction of Western theater during the reign of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich.

The 18th century witnessed the end of the *Skomorokhi*'s performances, but some aspects of their art survived in the *rayok* (humorous talk shows) and *balagan* (puppet theater). The puppet shows had a long existence, and put on shows in city and market squares as well as at fairs. Performances were aimed at the lowest classes, with jokes and plot lines being rather bawdy.

It was not until the 17th century, with the introduction of literary culture, that the concept of a dramatic repertoire became known in Russia.

In the 17th century the large number of works translated from western languages and the founding of Russia's first theater were clear indications of Western influence. The degree of this influence grew dramatically with the reforms of Peter I. One result of this increased

contact with Western Europe was the attempt to adapt the literary models of Western Europe to Russian writing. An early example of this process can be seen in the plays of A.P. Sumarokov. Considered the founder of Russian drama, Sumarokov blended Russian themes with European dramatic forms in his works.

A public theater was built on Red Square in 1702 by order of Peter the Great. When completed a German theater troupe came to put on performances. Initially the performances were in German, but by 1705 plays were being translated into Russian and performed. Most of these plays were translations of German and Dutch comedies, or poor adaptations of plays such as Molière's *Le Médecin malgré lui*. Later, both the Moscow Academy and the Moscow Medical School would stage dramas. More surprising, perhaps, was the establishment of a theater in Rostov by its bishop, Dmitrii, which he then used for performances of plays he wrote.

It was not until the latter half of the 18th century that the theater truly became an institution in Russia. The establishment of St. Petersburg's Alexandrinskiy Theater on August 30, 1756 is often taken as the starting point of Russian professional theater. A major innovation was the merging of two theatrical groups – aristocratic students from the Cadet School and a troupe of professional actors from the theater founded by Fedor Volkov – and then giving performances for the public at large. At the same time uniquely Russian drama was emerging in the works of the playwright A. Sumarokov. His tragedy, *Khorev*, is regarded as the first Russian drama and was even performed for the Empress Elizabeth. Sumarokov would direct Russia's first professional public theater between 1756 – 1761, and his works would also become the basis of the theater's repertoire. His later works included comedies such as *The Troublesome Girl*, *The Imaginary Cuckold*, and *The Mother as Rival of Her Daughter*, and such tragedies as *Mstislav* and *The False Demetrius*. This last work is ostensibly a tale about a despotic ruler, and has often been interpreted as a criticism of papal power. However, its real significance is as an indirect criticism of Catherine the Great's arbitrary use of power, while at the same time defending legitimate monarchy. *The False Demetrius* is thus the beginning of a long tradition of theater as political criticism. In addition, Sumarokov's plays *The Guardian* and *Khorev* are regarded as the first political comedy and tragedy in Russia.

Based on the quality of his satirical comedies, Fonvizin is generally regarded as the pre-eminent playwright in 18th century Russia. Two of his most famous plays were the neo-classical *The Minor* and *The Brigadier*. Both were satires of the values of the age and attempted to encourage more moral conduct; however *The Brigadier* takes particular aim at the ignorance and moral laxity of the upper classes. Despite the fact that the monarchy often took issue with Fonvizin's works, Catherine the Great was an admirer of them.

The theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow were later combined to form a state bureaucracy, as a means to control forms of expression that Catherine the Great regarded as dangerous. By 1827 this bureaucracy had become a monopoly which registered actors as civil servants, and which placed as much importance on protocol as it did on art. Earlier, in 1819, the Ministry of the Interior had taken control over theatrical censorship; the severity of its censorship would only increase over time and expand outside of the theaters. In some cases periodicals which made negative comments about actors found themselves the target of the Ministry's displeasure – since actors were civil servants, criticizing them was tantamount to criticizing their employer, the state. However, the effect of official censorship was felt most keenly in the theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow, whose creativity was stifled by government guidelines. Beyond St. Petersburg and Moscow, the situation was slightly better, as independent theaters could put on performances, but still under the watchful eye of the police.

The roles of St. Petersburg and Moscow as the Russia's theatrical centers grew in the 19th century as new theaters were founded. In Moscow in 1824 the Maly (Small) Theater was

established, followed in 1825 by the Bolshoi (Big), which was a replacement for the Peter's Theater which had burned down. In 1832 the Alexandrinsky Drama Theater opened in St. Petersburg.

The first half of the 19th century also witnessed the appearance of the Russian drama's first masterpieces. Among these works were *Inspector* by Gogol, and Griboyedov's *Woe from Wit*. The plays by Ostrovsky which appeared around the middle of the century would inspire a new generation of performers.

In the early 20th century there was a blossoming of theatrical performances as official control of the arts relaxed. A number of private theaters, among them the Moscow Art Theater, the Korsh Theater, and Alexander Tairov's Chamber Theater opened their doors after the end of the government's theater monopoly in 1882.

Of these newly established theaters, the Moscow Art Theater, established by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and Konstantin Stanislavsky in 1898, proved to be the most influential. Their productions of the last four plays written by Chekhov brought them great fame and the theater would go on to profoundly influence theater in Russia. Combining their talents, playwright Nemirovich-Danchenko and actor-director Stanislavsky adopted Wagner's approach to play production as high art.

Directors would now determine how a drama would be staged, as well as their atmosphere and style – an innovation in Russian theater. The Moscow Art Theater was saved from financial ruin in its initial season by its sixth production, *The Seagull* by Chekhov which opened on December 17, 1898. Its first performance two years earlier in St. Petersburg had been a disaster, and Chekhov was understandably hesitant to give his permission for a second production of his play. However, Nemirovich-Danchenko's persistent pleading paid off and Chekhov was more than rewarded by the reception his play received from its second production. The following year in 1899 the Moscow Art Theater staged *Uncle Vanya*, and Chekhov wrote his two last plays, *The Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard* with the Moscow Art Theater in mind. In 1902 the theater put on the play *Lower Depths* by Maksim Gorky.

Reading Assignments:

Malnick, B., The Origin and Early History of the Theatre in Russia, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 19, No. 53/54, The Slavonic Year-Book (1939 - 1940), pp. 203-227

The Cambridge Companion to Modern Russian Culture, Edited by Nicholas Rzhevsky, Cambridge University Press, 1998, Ch. 11.

Senelick, L., Historical Dictionary of Russian Theater, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007.

Figes, O., *Natasha's Dance*, A Cultural History of Russia, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2004.

Varneke, B.V., *History of the Russian Theatre*, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1951.

A History of Russian Theatre, Edited by Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, Cambridge University Press, 1999, Ch.1.

Russian internet sources: Sumarokov, <http://az.lib.ru/cgi-bin/seek>

Questions

Discuss about the Skomorokhi and their importance in the history of Russian theatre.

Read Sumarokov's *The False Demetrius (Dimitrii Samozvanets)* and discuss why the play is considered the beginning of the tradition of political criticism in Russian literature.

Compare Sumarokov's and Fonvizin's conception of the virtuous ruler and their treatment of this subject in *The False Demetrius (Dimitrii Samozvanets)* and *The Minor (Nedorosl)* respectively.

Read Chekhov's *The Seagull (Chayka)*. What does the seagull symbolize in his play? Why did he name his play *The Seagull*? Can we consider the play a comedy?