

# RUSSIAN PAINTING

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**Overview** Paintings found on the wall of the caves in which stone age people lived and performed religious rituals are the earliest examples of pictorial art in Russia. From the Paleolithic to the present paintings have served as a means of communication. In the prehistoric period rock paintings and drawings found at numerous sites across Russia (e.g. Karelia, the Altai, Transbaikalia, the Urals, Yakutia) recorded the the environment and way of life of the people who made them. With the adoption of Christianity painting, and icon painting in particular, became a vital element in Russian religious life, reminding the faithful of spiritual realities and their link with God. Along with the new religion came growing influence from artistic developments in Europe which would challenge traditional Russian artistic conventions.

## ANCIENT PERIOD

**Cave Paintings:** The Kapova Cave paintings, dated to 12,500 BCE, are the oldest known stone age art in Russia. They depict various Ice Age mammals painted, in addition to abstract signs, pictograph, handprints and hand stencils all painted in red ochre. Near the town of Kislovodsk in the Caucasus red ochre cave painting dating to 3000 BCE have also been found.

**Petroglyphs:** Ancient petroglyphs have been discovered at a number of sites across Russia. Ones dating back 10,000 years in the Paleolithic period that depict bison, horses and other animals are found on the Ukok Plateau in the Altai Mountains. Petroglyphs from the Neolithic period have been found at Besov Nos in Karelia. These petroglyphs contain not only images of animals, but also individuals, activities such as swimming and skiing, battles, religious scenes and geometric shapes.

Petroglyphs from the late 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, in the transition period between the Stone and Bronze Ages, have been found on cliffs at Sagan-Zaba near Lake Baikal. The variety of animals - including deer and swans – depicted has led some scholars to interpret them as tribal totems. In addition, scenes of birth and death, daily life and hunting are also found. Images of a dancing horned man may represent a shaman performing a ritual dance.

Another group of petroglyphs, the Kanozero petroglyphs, dating from the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BCE was discovered on Kamenny Island. In addition to the usual images of birds and animals, the petroglyphs also include images that have been interpreted as religious symbols, depictions of household items and typical activities, along with more enigmatic images such as bird of prey with five talons, a large shaman and a flying crane.

## POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

**Icon Painting:** Although Byzantine religious icons were brought to Russia after Vladimir I's conversion to Christianity, Russian artists did slavishly follow Byzantine styles of icon painting. Instead, Russian icon painters began to create their own original style by modifying Byzantine models and to form distinctive schools of icon painting.

**Kievan School (10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>c):** As a newly imported art form icons produced in the early Kievan period were still very close to the Byzantine tradition in style. However, many Kievan School icons differed from

Byzantine icons in their use of dark, somber colors and in their comparatively large size, a result of being painted on wood that had been hand-cut with an axe.

**Vladimir-Suzdal School (12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>c):** During the second half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Kiev was overshadowed as a center of icon production by Vladimir and Suzdal. Icons painted here were distinctive for their harmonious blend of silvery-blue, grayish-purple and pinkish-green colors and use of motifs derived from folk art, while preserving the spirit of Kievan art.

**Novgorod School (12<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>c):** Novgorod became the center of Russian icon painting following the fall of Kiev. Frescoes produced here displayed a distinctive Russian style while still retaining clear Byzantine influence. A pivotal figure in the development of both the Novgorod and Moscow schools Theophanes the Greek (Feofan Grek) came to Russia from Byzantium in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. Theophanes, after moving to Moscow, began to work with Andrei Rublev of the Moscow School. Their works are characterized energetic drawing, the contrast of large shapes, the use of warm golds and bright yellows, and a simple, economic yet precise style.

**Moscow School (16<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup>c):** Influenced by the evolving political and religious atmosphere of the period of Mongol rule, the style of painting developed by the Moscow school became the foundation for a national art. From this school the works created by four artists are particularly famous. The works of Theophanes the Greek were known for their skillful, rapid execution, use of monochromatic colors in frescoes, and creation of contour and depth through bright highlights. Andrei Rublev's works were characterized by the use of luminous color, delicate lines, reduction of details to create greater impact, and complex, subtle relationships between forms. Dionysius (Dionisy) created a distinctive style of painting that softer and gentler than that of previous artists, one that downplayed sharp outlines and concentrated on the blend of warm colors. The zenith of baroque icon painting is commonly regarded to have been reached in the works of Simon Ushakov who also head of the icon painters in the tsar's employ. He is credited with bringing icon painting into the real world by depicting sacred figures with faces rendered in style more like that current in the West.

**Pskov School (13<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>c):** In contrast to icons from Novgorod, Pskov icons initially displayed greater poetic inspiration, even if less sophisticated in their execution. Over time, Pskov icons adopted some features of the Novgorod style. In particular, Pskov painters adopted the strong outlines of Novgorod painting as well as certain certain topics. Early Pskov icons are characterized by their intense colors, which contrast with the subdued palette of Kievan icons. In addition, what the figures in Pskov icons lack in elegance of proportion is more than compensated for by dynamic nature of their composition. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Pskov school showed clear influence from Western artistic traditions, leading to the charge that Pskov's icon painters were spreading "Latin heresies".

**Yaroslavl School (13<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>c):** Among the pioneers in incorporating landscapes into their paintings, fresco painters from the Yaroslavl School used scenes of daily Russian life as the setting for traditional biblical stories.

**Stroganov School (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>c):** Named for the boyar family that established it, the Stroganov School was established in the late 16<sup>th</sup> – early 17<sup>th</sup> century and created a new style of painting known as *parsuna*. *Parsuna* depicted contemporary secular figures rather than religious ones in a style that blended traditions of icon painting with features from secular portraiture. Two of the main representative of this school were Fedor Zubov and Simon Ushakov.

The emergence of both new forms of religious piety and new styles in icon painting is the combined result of several factors. Among these are a noticeable shift towards individual rather than communal forms of religious devotion, the rapid erosion of traditional icon painting styles, and the replacement of traditional icons with official religious painting; all of these developments took place in an intellectual milieu where Renaissance and Western ideas had tremendous influence in the Russian court.

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

**Neoclassicism:** 18<sup>th</sup> century neoclassicism incorporates a variety of styles whose ideas are most clearly visible in historical landscape, painting and portraiture. Neoclassicism is characterized by clarity, order, logic and a degree of realism and was, in part, a reaction to the over-refinement of the baroque and rococo styles. In Russia, neoclassicism was associated with the efforts by artists to adopt Enlightenment techniques and styles. Appreciation of Western art was particularly encouraged by four monarchs - Peter the Great, Anne, Elizabeth and Catherine the Great. This appreciation was cultivated by sending students to Europe to study, importing the works European masters, and employing foreign artists in their courts. Initially, some artists produced works that were merely copies of Western models. However, artists such as Dmitry Grigorevich Levitsky, Vladimir Lukich Borovikovsky, Ivan Petrovich Argunov, Aleksei Petrovich Antropov, Fedor Stepanovich Rokotov, Ivan Firsov, Ivan Nikitin, and Andrei Matveev created original works that moved beyond simple mimicry.

**Parsunas (Portraits):** Non-religious portraits painted in the style of icons were known as *parsunas*. Although unintentional, by issuing a ruling in the *Stoglav* on the question of whether portraits of living people were sacrilegious Ivan the Terrible had opened the door for the development of nonreligious art, although it would not be until the reign of Peter the Great that Russia would begin to produce secular art akin to that of the West. In the portraits by Ivan Nikitin, Andrei Matveyev, Ivan Vishnyakov, Alexei Antropov, Dmitri Levitsky and Vladimir Borovikovsky the focus is clearly on the hands and face of the subject with its serious expression. However, it is clear that the artists were attempting to accurately depict the face and clothes (with their all their folds and textures) of a specific individual.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

**Landscapes:** It was not until the early 19<sup>th</sup> 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. However, artists such as Ivan Aivazovsky and Mikhail Lebedev continued to paint in the Italianesque romantic tradition. In the field of landscape painting, French Impressionism was a major influence on Russian works in this category.

**Religious motives:** Works produced by the Wanderers (see below) were noted for an intensity, both psychological and imaginative, that had been lacking in Russian art since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century during the time of Alexander Ivanov.

**Still Life:** Objects from daily life constitute the subject matter of still life painting. Ivan Khrutsky was one of the first major artists in this genre whose paintings, like those of Ilya Repin and Mikhail Vrubel in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, were influenced by the masterpieces of Dutch still life painting.

**Genre Painting:** Genre painting came to occupy a firm place in Russian art, despite having been considered less prestigious than other styles of painting. Peasant culture in all its aspects would be the focus of works by Aleksei Venetsianov, while depictions of the middle class, and even social criticism, would feature in the paintings of Fedotov and other artists.

**Slavic Revival:** This artistic movement rejected Western subject matter and turned its attention to depictions of Russian culture, particularly as seen in peasant life. The works of Viktor Vasnetsov and Mikhail Nesterov depict heroic episodes of Kievan history and scenes related to the Orthodox Church, and, in general, strive to reflect the richness of Medieval Russia's artistic heritage.

**Realism:** In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Realism was the predominant artistic trend. As a reaction to what they regarded as an excessively restrictive artistic tradition, painters such as Ivan Kramskoi insisted on depicting life realistically in their art. Kramskoi and other like-minded artists would come to be known as the Wanderers due to their travelling exhibitions of their art.

**Wanderers (Itinerants-Peredvizhniki):** The Academy of Arts witnessed a student revolt in 1863 in which a group of students did not follow the Academy's recommended themes, but used themes of their own. 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 Kramskoi, Vladimir Stasov, Vasily Stasov, Ilya Repin, Vasily Surikov, and Vasily Perov. Travelling throughout Russia, society members inspired by the *narodniki* (Populists) held exhibitions of the art that they had produced during their travels and espoused political reform. In keeping with their realist tendencies, formal achievements for these artists were less important than the political and social aspects of their work.

**The World of Art (*Mir Iskusstva*):** The artistic movement World of Art was established by the avant-garde writers and artists based in St. Petersburg in 1899. It was also the name of their art magazine. Nikolai Roerich, Alexander Benois, Lev Bakst, Evgeny Lancere, Konstantin Somov and Sergei Diaghilev were among the founders of this society that was focused on popularization of Russian history and folk art. Despite the diverse characters of the artists in this movement, they were united by three important principles – their emphasis on individual experience, the concept of “total art work” (*gesamtkunstwerk*), and the aesthetic that art was self-justified.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Symbolism:** Across Europe and Russia in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Symbolism had spread as both an artistic and an intellectual movement. In Russia Symbolism dominated the artistic scene for approximately two decades and two generations of artists. The first generation was active between 1890 to 1900, and the second, known as the Blue Rose Movement, from 1900 to 1910. Symbolist artists such as Alexandre Benois, Konstantin Somov, Mikhail Vrubel and Mikhail Nesterov attempted evoke emotion or create a mood by using traditional elements of Symbolism or through their use of color. For these painters their art was an esthetic experience.

**Avant-garde:** Avant-garde is an umbrella term for a number of distinct, but closely related artistic movements that were current in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, among them Constructivism, Cubism, Cubo-Futurism, Rayonism, Neo-primitivism, Suprematism. Russian avant-garde artists did not simply mimic European artistic styles, they introduced their own innovations into them and in the process created new interpretations of these styles. Modern art of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century would be profoundly influenced by a number of artistic movements pioneered by Russian artists.

**Constructivism:** Constructivism 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. Tatlin used paper, wood, metal or glass to create distinctive three-dimensional works that expressed his artistic vision. For him, the form of his works was dictated by the *faktura* (texture) of the material being used to create them.

**Cubism:** Cubism sought to depict forms through the use of basic geometric shapes – cubes cylinders, spheres and cones – and used color freely, without being restricted to depicting forms naturalistically. Although the subject of cubist paintings is still visible, it has been reduced to simpler forms, generally lacks depth and borders on being abstract. Cubism remained popular only up to the 1920s, but its influence on avant-garde art was deep. Wealthy collectors such as Shchukin and Morozov were responsible for introducing Russia to Cubism by purchasing Cubist works and then publicly displaying them in Russia. Among the most famous Russian Cubist painters were of Malevich, Popova, and Udal'tsova.

**Cubo-futurism:** Cubo-futurism differs from Cubism in having more dynamic compositions that incorporate words or letters into them. Originally a French artistic movement, Cubo-futurism developed around 1910 in Russia and soon became one of the most influential movements in Russian art of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Inspired by *lubok* (Russian prints of popular stories with simple pictures) and traditional icons, two of the first Cubo-futurist artists, Larinov and Goncharova, merged elements of Russian folk art and modern French art in their effort to preserve Russian folk art.

**Neo-primitivism:** Founded by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, Neo-primitivism was a short-lived movement active from 1907 to 1912. While Neo-primitivism took inspiration from a number of diverse sources, such as the *lubok* and peasant crafts, but icon painting served as the main source. Neo-primitive painters such as Tatlin, Kandinsky, Malevich, Goncharova, Chagall and Larionov incorporated a number of typical characteristics of icons – one-dimensionality, bold colors, lack of perspective, etc. – into their own works. Line and color were used to create harmony in compositions whose figures were often rendered in either an almost childish fashion, or distorted like figures in a dream.

**Rayonism (Luchism):** Another short-lived Russian artistic movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Rayonism which combined Cubism's fragmented forms with Futurism's sense of movement and Orphism's use of color. Created by Mikhail Larionov, Rayonist works were produced primarily by Larionov and his companion Natalia Goncharova, and the movement came to an end when they emigrated from Russia. Paintings in the Rayonist style are characterized by a mass of slanting lines, generally painted in pure blues, reds and yellows, that represent beams of light that transit and converge across the plane of the canvas.

**Suprematism:** In 1915 Kazimir Malevich established the Suprematist movement. Malevich sought a means to express an artist's feelings without being limited to realistically depicting everyday objects' normal appearance. Since both objectivity and the concepts of the conscious mind were considered to be insignificant, Suprematist art utilized basic geometric forms such as rectangles, lines, squares and circles and a limited number of colors.

### Discussion/Questions

1. Icons had long served in Orthodox practice as devotional aids that portrayed sacred figures, and whose familiar images were associated with the concept of "legitimacy". Can the political posters that

appeared during the Bolshevik revolution be regarded as using themes and elements inspired by Russian Orthodox iconography, such as lighting etc., to legitimize both the revolution and its leaders, despite the new state's avowed atheism?

2. What was the aim of the World of Art Movement (*Mir Iskusstva*) in Russia? What were their key achievements?

3. What is the origin of the Wanderers (*Peredvizhniki* -Itinerants)? How was a relatively minor incident at the Imperial Academy of Arts transformed into an artistic movement that would have a profound impact on Russian society and culture?

### Reading

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