

Exhibition review

FROM RUSSIA

French and Russian Master Paintings 1870–1925 from Moscow and St Petersburg
Royal Academy Main Galleries,
26 January to 18 April 2008

That the first edition of *War and Peace* (1863–1869) begins with swathes of French, which Tolstoy translated into Russian for the 1873 edition, reminds us that French was the language of the pre-revolutionary Russian aristocracy. It is fitting, therefore, that the first painting we see in this French–Russian exhibition is Ilya Repin's portrait of a besmoked Tolstoy, barefoot, pretending unconvincingly to be a Russian peasant. The exhibition shows us the extent to which French painters influenced their Russian counterparts during a period, turbulent for both countries, that began with the Franco–Prussian war, included the Russo–Japanese war, the minor Russian revolution and Potemkin mutiny of 1905, the first World War, and the Russian Revolution proper, and ended with the signing of the Locarno Treaty.

The exhibition starts deceptively quietly, with a small room of paintings by the French Barbizon landscapists, Corot, Daubigny, and Theodore Rousseau, and salon painters, such as Besnard, alongside those of Russian contemporaries, such as Valentin Serov, Isaac Levitan, and Mikhail Nesterov, some of whom studied in Paris.

After a photographic introduction to the great Russian collectors Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov, we see in the next small room some of the numerous French paintings that they acquired — Cézanne, Monet, Renoir. Impressive, to be sure, but it does not prepare us for the explosion of the next room, a magnificent hall with its galaxy of Gauguins, pot-pourri of Picassos, and feast of French artists, including Le Douanier Rousseau, Derain, Marquet, and the Nabis, Bonnard, Denis, and Vallotton. A single piece by van Gogh, his *Portrait of Dr Félix Rey*, who attended him in Arles after he had cut off his ear, a

picture that Shchukin purchased from the Drouet Gallery in 1908, sits slightly incongruously in this company. But the painting that dominates the room is Matisse's exuberant execution in deeply saturated blue, green, and terracotta, *Dance II*, an enormous work (260 x 391 cm) that has justly been chosen as the symbol for the whole exhibition. Along with a companion piece, *Music*, it was commissioned by Shchukin in 1909 for the grand staircase of his Moscow mansion. On the wall opposite, Bonnard's exquisite *Summer Dance* is beaten into submission and deserves to be displayed elsewhere.

If that were all, we would be satisfied, but the remaining rooms demonstrate the huge influence that Morozov's and Shchukin's collections had on Russian artists of the time. A whole room contains paintings connected with Sergei Diaghilev and his *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art), many of which are familiar from reproductions on the sleeves of books and discs. Here is the white-forelocked Diaghilev himself, rendered by Léon Bakst, Serov's spine-tingling nude portrait of the dancer Ida Rubinstein, Alexander Golovin's full-length portrait of Fyodor Chaliapin dressed in the golden robes of Boris Godunov, and Boris Grigoriev's outrageous double portrait of the innovative theatre impresario Vsevolod Meyerhold.

In a later room Russian neo-primitivism is represented by, among others, Chagall's bizarre *Jew in Red*, Ilya Mashkov's grossly amusing *Self-Portrait with Pyotr Konchalovsky* (a parody of Cézanne's *Overture Tannhäuser*, seen in the second room), and works by Natalie Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. The room entitled 'Cubofuturism' yields paintings by Liubov Popova and Pavel Filonov and includes Nathan Altman's semi-cubist portrait of the poet Anna Akhmatova, anorexically reminiscent of Virginia Woolf. 'Towards

Abstraction' gives us the extraordinary *Bathing the Red Horse* by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, and true avant-garde originality in Russian art emerging in works by Kandinsky and Malevich.

Finally, in the circular space that nestles among the rooms we are treated to two works by the constructivist, Vladimir Tatlin — a literally off-the-wall sculpture, *Corner Counter-Relief*, and a model of his *Monument to the 3rd International*, a never-realised enormous tower that would have housed the headquarters of the Comintern.

The works for this exhibition have been loaned by four major Russian galleries — the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Art and the State Tretyakov Gallery (both in Moscow) and the State Hermitage Museum and State Russian Museum (both in St Petersburg). Their stormy passage to London had to be enabled by parliamentary legislation. Don't miss it.

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Vincent Van Gogh: Portrait of Dr Félix Rey, 1889.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 53 cm, The State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.



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