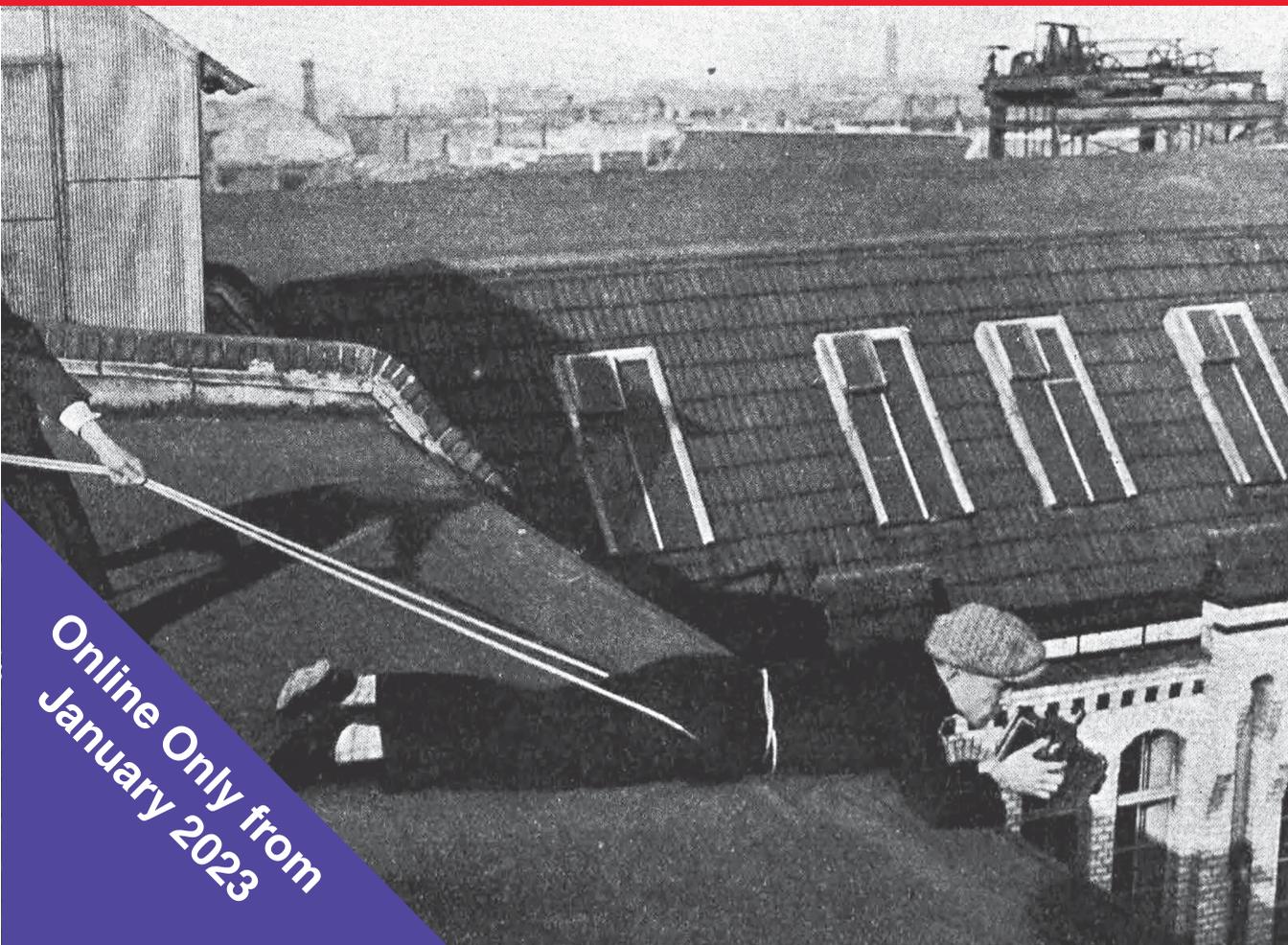


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# THE RUSSIAN REVIEW

AN AMERICAN QUARTERLY DEVOTED TO RUSSIA PAST AND PRESENT



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## ABOUT THE COVER

In the mid-1920s the Soviet state launched a widespread, long-term campaign to develop a new visual culture and, correspondingly, a new visual literacy. Various publications encouraged readers to experiment with their cameras by taking photos from unusual angles, and assuming unorthodox points of view. The anonymous photo reproduced on our cover initially appeared in *Sovetskoe foto*, 1928, no. 1, accompanied by the caption “Foreign photo-reporters at work: To get a higher viewpoint, a photographer calmly works at the very edge of the roof, while being supported with a rope.” For more detail on new ways of seeing, read this issue’s “Too Hard to See? A Forum on Visual Studies and Russia.”

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# The Russian Review

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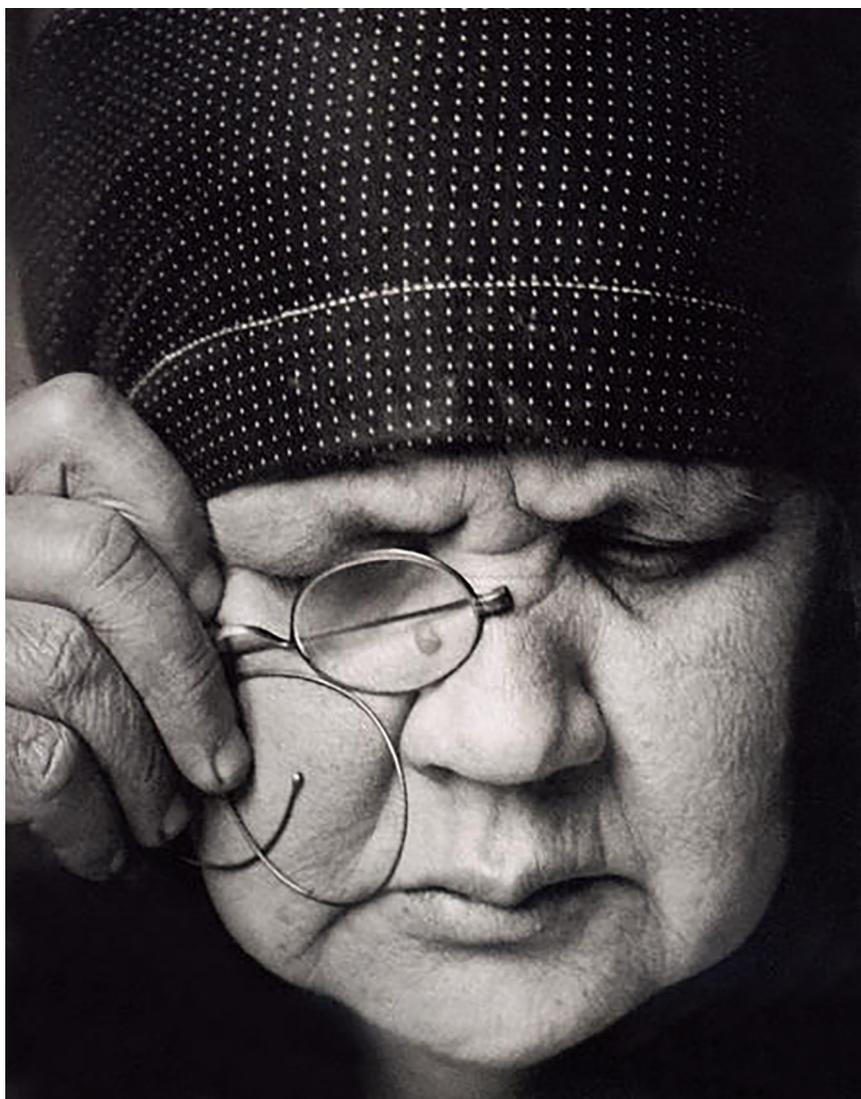
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Too Hard to See?  
A Forum on Visual Studies and Russia



Twenty-Five Scholars Share Their Views on  
What Is To Be Done  
with Visual Studies of Russia

All of which helps to prepare us for the extraordinary photograph below, taken in the countryside during the Tenishev ethnographic expeditions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The photo is of a peasant family: a wife, her husband, and their six children. (fig. 4) They are seated inside their izba eating a meal. We can see aspects of the past quite clearly here: clothes, utensils, furniture, hairstyles. We can also see the decorations on their walls. A number of popular prints are plastered behind the family. On the bottom, just to the right of the father's head, is the lubok "Buying with Cash, Buying with Credit." What does it mean that a peasant family in the provinces of European Russia bought this lubok and used it as decoration?

FIG. 4 Peasant izba interior, photo archive of the Russian Ethnographic Museum, St. Petersburg.



When I worked at the archives of the Russian Ethnographic Museum, which contains the records of the Tenishev expedition, I came across numerous responses from ethnographers such as this one from Viatka province: "the peasants love to decorate the walls with pictures." Others wrote of seeing lubki as decorations and commented that Russian peasants knew about the exploits of military heroes such as Suvorov and Kutuzov because they had bought popular prints from peddlers. Wassily Kandinsky, a trained ethnographer, participated in earlier expeditions and also found images on the walls of peasants houses, calling his experience of seeing the colorful images decorating izba interiors a "miracle." These are all tantalizing textual accounts, Kandinsky's most of all. But here, in this photograph, you *see* this world before you. Why not start investigations into the past with images such as this one, where we use it first to reconstruct a world that is lost to us today? The tantalizing nature of this image also appeals: we can never truly know everything about it or know everything about the past that it conjures up for us. But we can get closer to that past, come face-to-face with it, by seeing it better and by viewing the reverberations it contains.

## Studying Russian Art: Originality as a Form of Bravery

SILVIA BURINI, *Ca' Foscari University*

The limited tradition of studying Russian visual culture or art history outside of Russia can be addressed from a disciplinary and biographical point of view or from a cultural (and practical) one. Although I usually do not like autobiographical accounts, in this case I must start from my personal experience. I am currently the only professor of Russian art in Italian academia. It was Nicoletta Misler, who, for the very first time in Italy, boldly undertook to teach this topic at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" from 1978 to 2008. She remained a unique case until my arrival at Ca' Foscari University in 1999. During the years in which we worked on the same front, Nicoletta and I have tried to offer our students

a new, interdisciplinary professional profile, characterized by a two-fold competence (which was therefore frowned upon on either side): the capacity to write about the semiotics of art and to organize exhibitions with an in-depth knowledge of the country's language, culture and context.

Back in the 1970s, as Professor Misler often told me, studying Russian art was an eccentric endeavor. Upon hearing that Nicoletta was planning to do her research on Russian art, the director of her department in Milan, an authority on Leonardo da Vinci, objected that Russian art did not exist, considering all that remained to be studied in Italian art! She was met with the same condescension at the Department of Slavistics where she went on to teach. The "specialist in Russian art" was "too specialized" for art history and a mere "marginal decoration" for Slavistics. When an important philologist from Princeton came to Naples, he commented on Nicoletta's unprecedented endeavor to create consistent iconographic sequences by good-naturedly observing, "Are you still playing around with your picture cards?" He was obviously unaware of the great scholarly tradition initiated by Aby Warburg. Conversely, art historians were persuaded of the absolute preeminence of the visual dimension and paid no heed to Yuri Lotman's extended notion of "text" and to the need to know and be able to "translate" the language of Russian culture and context. As a result, the first exhibitions of Russian art in Italy were entrusted to people who did not speak Russian, could not read the original sources, and did not believe in the importance of knowing the context.

My career started several years later but presents many similarities, although it followed, in a way, the opposite trajectory: Nicoletta started off as an art historian and later specialized in Russian art, while I went from Russian studies to art history. I graduated with a "peculiar" thesis on the painter and poet Elena Guro, thanks to my extraordinary mentor, Nina Kaučisvili, who did not believe in disciplinary compartmentalization. This led me to travel to Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Tartu at a very young age and with a healthy dose of recklessness. I discovered the significance of visual culture in Russia thanks to Lotman, D. Sarabianov, and S. Daniel, to mention only the best-known figures, while young scholars who later became good friends introduced me to archives, libraries and, most importantly, to the homes of artists. That world soon became my own.

I continued to explore the relationship between art and literature, persuaded that in Russia the experience of the visible was far from secondary. This, however, took me out of the comfort zone of what was recognized and approved by the so-called scholarly community. In my doctoral thesis, "Georgij Jakulov and Russian Imaginists: Hypothesis for an Intersystemic Relationship," I was looking for ways to apply Lotman's semiotics, which I was discovering, and was convinced that the path of writers such as Sergei Esenin and Anatolii Mariengof could only be understood through their connection with visual arts. Once again, I could not find anyone in Italy to supervise my research. I still remember the words of the coordinator of the doctoral program at the University of Milan: "Georgij Jakulov did not invent the wheel." A few years later, as a young researcher at Ca' Foscari, I again had to struggle with a system that considered Russian art "non-existent": the topic was out of place in the Slavistics program, while art historians found it undignified to focus "only" on Russian art.

However, the quote by Lotman that I chose as a title inspired me to pursue these disciplinary cross-contaminations, although this choice may have affected my career. Ten years ago, on March 6, 2011, thanks to an enlightened dean, Carlo Carraro, and to Giuseppe Barbieri, then director of the Department of Art History and Criticism—a rigorous yet "undisciplined" scholar who changed my academic life forever—we managed to create the

Center for Studies on the Arts of Russia (CSAR), which quickly grew to become the most active institution in this field in Western Europe. Since then, we have organized more than 40 art exhibitions dedicated to different periods; 15 film festivals; more than 10 national and international conferences; about 20 seminars addressed to Ca' Foscari students but open to the general public; and we have published conference proceedings, translations, and catalogues.

The exhibitions, organized with some of Russia's greatest art institutions—the Hermitage, the Tretyakov Gallery, the Pushkin Museum, the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, the All-Russian Decorative Arts Museum, the Museum of Contemporary History of Russia, the State Museum and Exhibition Center (ROSIZO), and other regional museums and prestigious foundations—have set a new standard for the promotion of Russian art in Italy. Our contemporary “Western” perspective was always rigorous and respectful, we made original use of information and communication technologies, reached out to an enthusiastic audience of almost one million people and received highly favorable reviews.

Our Center is committed to a number of highly qualified international partnerships (thanks to a scientific committee composed of members of Italian, Russian, U.S., and German universities and museums) and has become a place where people who care about advancing the study of Russian culture can meet and exchange their views. Based in the international hub that is Venice, CSAR is recognized as a platform connecting two countries and two cultures. Its staff currently includes lecturers, Ph.D. candidates, researchers, and students involved in both research and field work, and the Center always tries to maintain high academic standards in its outreach activities.

Reconciling all this with my work as a lecturer, researcher, and curator was an existential choice that I would never have made were it not for my deep passion for Russian art. If this were a novel, I would say that to me Russia was a choice sealed in my destiny: it has changed my life and continues to do so through my students. Now, as in the past few years, I am working on building a small, passionate school of brave scholars committed to pursuing these topics.

Disregard for Russian art, however, is also a larger culturological issue linked to the impossibility of organizing its history into Eurocentric and fixed categories and timelines. Secular Russian painting emerged only in the eighteenth century and therefore did not go through the Renaissance (in the European sense of the term); or one could say that Russia did not experience a cultural shift comparable to that of the Renaissance until the eighteenth century; or, even more categorically, one could argue that the eighteenth century was the age of the Russian Renaissance. However we formulate it, the crucial—and regularly disregarded—point is that there is a fundamental asymmetry between the timelines of Russian and Western painting, and that the former followed a different evolutionary path.

Although Russia has always looked at foreign models, it has also undertaken several processes of fundamental self-revision. As Boris Uspensky noted, “foreign” and “alien” forms, when transferred to Russia, acquire “new meaning and new functions.” There is a special *rhythm* to Russian art, an intimate and original “timing” that proceeds by jumps, rifts, stases, changes of mind, memories, and awakenings; it includes different traditions and measures itself not only against the parallel trajectories of European schools, but also against the various hypostases of a multifaceted East. In its cultural history the styles, rather than following one another according to the linear manner typical of Europe, coexist, cross-contaminate, change and become hybridized. The resulting “mischievous” chronology, sometimes hard to understand, becomes even more intricate in the twentieth century. It should not be “normalized” in order to be understood: trying to identify the Russian

counterparts of Raphael, Canaletto, or Poussin would be a shortsighted attempt at a reassuring homologation.

What we should do, rather, is try to catch the original value of Russian art with an open mind that does not see it as a backward subspecies of European art. Talking about the expressive revolutions that marked the beginning of the twentieth century, the Swiss scholar Harald Szeemann notes that the “primary artistic gestures of our century: a Kandinsky of 1911, Duchamp’s *Large Glass*, a Mondrian, and a Malevich.” Of the four artists mentioned by this great art historian, two are Russian. Yet the West continues to show surprisingly little consideration for the origins of Russian artists: Kandinsky is regularly described as “German”, although his work cannot possibly be understood without taking his Russian origins into account; the same goes for the “French” Chagall, who was born in Vitebsk and always had a complicated relationship with his motherland.

We could say the same of many other artists who, in some way or another, have absorbed specific elements of their national culture, from Sonja Terk Delaunay to Nicolas De Stael, Mark Rothko, or even unexpected ones such as Sol LeWitt, the son of Russian Jewish émigrés. Of course, this does not mean that we should obsessively be looking for Russian roots in every contemporary artist. However, it would be even worse to examine Russian artists through the lens of an entomologist, as if they were an exotic phenomenon from a temporally and spatially remote limbo. Unfortunately, I feel that the perception and appreciation of Russian art, at least in the West, are distorted by a vague aura of exoticism or, at best, of an extended and superficial form of “agnosticism.”

While the impact of Western culture on Russia has been studied by many, also on a theoretical level, it would be equally useful to do the opposite. The West too needs an “Other” for its self-awareness and self-description. It is time to consider the relationship between the two areas not in terms of Western influence on the “barbaric” Russian culture, but also in terms of Russian influence on the West. As soon as we adopt this perspective, we are bound to realize that the Russian artists of the early twentieth century acted as a cultural detonator for Western art, taking a step for which the West was clearly not yet ready, and paving the way to a new artistic direction.

## Early Soviet Cinépoetry and Visual Culture Studies

ALEKSANDAR BOŠKOVIĆ, *Columbia University*

Can Visual Culture Studies prompt a certain emancipation in the field of Slavic studies? My initiation in the field of visual studies felt precisely as such an emancipatory experience. I learned to *see* a literary work as a visual “technology” and to *read* an image as a discursive event, which could be called imaginary.

As a scholar of Slavic and comparative literature interested in modernist studies, I started my research with interwar poetry books illustrated with photomontages or diverse techniques involving photographic material. These artifacts were much more appealing to art historians than literary scholars. While the former focused primarily on book design and illustrations, the later were interested in poetic texts that exhibited profound connections with early cinema. One of the rare scholarly works on this subject was by the literary scholar and comparatist Jan Röhnert, who classified such lyrical texts in three different types: those dealing explicitly with the theme of cinema and its contents (*das kinogedicht*,