

Louise Hardiman, Nicola Kozicharow, eds. *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2017. Illustrations. 447 pp. \$32.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-78374-338-4.

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Marking the centennial of the October Revolution, 2017 welcomed a number of new academic publications on Russian modernism, among them the richly illustrated anthology *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art: New Perspectives*, edited by Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharow. In the volume, ten authors shed light on the central role played by religion and spirituality in the works of several Russian and Soviet artists from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. As a whole, the book contends that during this epoch in Russian history, “extrinsic ideas and influences—and, most of all, those of Russian religious and spiritual traditions—were of the utmost importance in the making, content, and meaning of modern art” (p. 10). As Hardiman and Kozicharow note, several of the artworks that are analyzed in *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art* indirectly function as counterexamples to Clement Greenberg’s contention that the true significance of modernist art can be found primarily in its formal attributes.

In their introduction, the editors state that the anthology does not seek to offer a comprehensive study of spirituality in Russian art but, rather, “to illustrate precisely the diversity of approaches among modern artists to the notion of spirituality” (p. 31). Hardiman and Kozicharow use spirituality

as an “umbrella term” which encapsulates numerous perspectives on religiosity and religious practice (p. 12). The introduction presents the reader with a concise summary of Russian art history, specifically focusing on the significance of spirituality in the Russian visual arts from 1757 to the October Revolution. Following Pamela Davidson’s assertion that the early nineteenth-century painter Aleksandr Ivanov established the idea of “artist as prophet,” for instance, Hardiman and Kozicharow draw lines between different art historical eras by pointing out how such a view reappears in artists and writers of the silver age. Overall, the introduction provides a useful context against which to read the ten essays featured in the book. This is further supplemented by the select bibliography included at the very end of the anthology.

The first essay in the collection is Maria Taroutina’s essay on Mikhail Vrubel. While Vrubel is often celebrated as the first true Russian modernist due to his formal experimentation, Taroutina shows how Vrubel’s engagement with the Russo-Byzantine iconographic tradition had an immense influence on the artist. Through careful visual comparison between Vrubel’s frescoes made for the St. Vladimir Cathedral in Kiev and some of his more mature paintings, Taroutina argues that Vrubel mastered the painterly techniques of me-

dieval prototypes and incorporated these into his later works. As Taroutina notes, Vrubel's encounter with the medieval Russo-Byzantine visual tradition "not only contributed to the evolution of his painterly style, but also to his conceptual and theoretical approach to art" (p. 56). Interestingly, Taroutina suggests that Vrubel's incorporation of old artistic traditions also constitutes an important aspect of his modernist aesthetic.

Myroslava M. Mudrak also tackles one of the giants of Russian art, as she explores the link between Kazimir Malevich and the visual culture of the Orthodox tradition. Mudrak asserts that the simple form and flat surface that characterize Suprematist works stem from Malevich's interest in fresco painting. Although noting that Malevich was a secular artist, Mudrak contends that Malevich held a firm conviction "that art must reveal a common belief about spiritual transcendence, redemption, and supreme perfection" (p. 111). Mudrak thus highlights the *communal* element in Malevich's artistic approach. Similarly, in his essay on the relationship between the Russian icon and avant-garde art, Oleg Tarasov points out that "Suprematism was formed and conceived as a spiritual system with a universal cosmic dimension, endowed with the capacity to transfigure the world in accordance with the laws of 'pure form'" (p. 126). In his conclusive remarks, Tarasov maintains that Suprematism in itself stood forth as a new kind of religion.

The essays by Hardiman and Nina Gurianova in different ways address the question of how spiritual communities indirectly inspired the organizations and operations of various artist collectives. Hardiman turns to the Russian émigré Aleksandra Pogosskaia, who was associated with the Talashkino artists' colony in the early 1900s. Hardiman explores how Pogosskaia sought to pair the activities of the arts and crafts movements with the cultures of Theosophy. Pogosskaia was attracted to Theosophy partially due to its goal of transforming all of humanity into a universal brotherhood—a stance

that aligned perfectly with Pogosskaia's socialist and humanitarian stance, her admiration for folk culture, and her fight against materialism. Hardiman ultimately argues that, in the Theosophical movement, Pogosskaia recognized "her promotion of peasant art as a part of a wider religious campaign—one seeking to integrate human artistic endeavour with spiritualist philosophy" (p. 89). Focusing on the years 1912–15, Gurianova investigates how the artists Nataliya Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov looked to the Old Believers for both aesthetic and philosophical inspiration. While Goncharova was especially interested in ancient frescoes and icons, Larionov was drawn to the subjects and color palette of the Old Believer *lubki* (popular prints). According to Gurianova, the Old Believer tradition offered these avant-garde artists "a clean break with the established norm, and a promising possibility of the new model of art, which perfectly coincided with their search for abstraction and inner spirit in their work" (p. 148).

Several of the essays bring up the importance of the Russian icon as a creative influence. Considering the history of the icon in a more explicit fashion, Natalia Murray writes about Nikolai Punin and his role in the Russian avant-garde's rediscovery of the icon in the 1910s. According to Murray, Punin viewed the icon "as a revelation, and as the highest ideal for the newly emerging avant-garde" (p. 218). Punin stressed that the icon was not simply an object of historical and aesthetic importance, but should be understood from a spiritual perspective. The history of the Russian icon is also the topic of Wendy Salmond's piece, in which she offers an impressive account of the making, translation, and reception of Nikodim Kondakov's *The Russian Icon*—the first English-language monograph on the subject, published in 1927. Through her careful study of Kondakov's writings and correspondence with the book's English translator, Ellis H. Minns, Salmond shows how iconography is not only a matter of spiritual importance but also

a subject of fierce historical, ideological, and scholarly debate.

In their respective essays, Sebastian Borkhardt and Kozicharow turn to the reception and activities of Russian artists abroad. Centering on the reception of Vasily Kandinsky's art in Germany in the period 1910–37, Borkhardt investigates “spiritual” interpretations of Kandinsky in the German press. These interpretations did not place Kandinsky within a greater tradition of Russian religious art; rather, they announced that the spiritual component to Kandinsky's work stemmed from its inherent Russian or eastern quality. Kozicharow's essay focuses on one of the most important centers for Russian Orthodoxy in the postrevolutionary years—the parish church of the Saint-Serge Theological Institute in Paris. Here, Dmitry Stelletsky executed the iconostasis and several murals, and Kozicharow notes that Stelletsky adhered to the rules of traditional iconography but nevertheless added something radically new in his decorations. Kozicharow suggests that Stelletsky ultimately proclaimed *aesthetic* rather than religious concerns to be more important to his artistic contributions at Saint-Serge: Stelletsky did not strictly obey the Orthodox canon but instead incorporated a neo-Russian style into his work, thus embracing a modernist approach to both art and tradition.

The last chapter in the anthology is written by Jennifer Brewin and revolves around the Soviet Georgian painter Ucha Japaridze. Brewin explores how Japaridze depicted spirituality in a manner that evokes the cultural mythologies of Georgia. Through her detailed visual analyses, Brewin argues that Japaridze often promoted the figures in his paintings as “spiritual guardians of the Georgian nation” (p.260). She further asserts that when viewed in such a manner, the spiritual component in Japaridze's art can be interpreted as a manifestation of political and national dissent.

Arranged in approximate chronological order covering the period 1890 to the 1960s, the ten essays all offer valuable insights into the role of spiri-

tuality in Russian art. A great strength of the anthology on the whole is how it strikes a nice balance between indirectly addressing both specialists of Russian (art) history and its students. The essays paint a vivid picture of the various ways in which spirituality may be and has been approached, and also shed light on what the term means in different times and contexts. Read together, the essays in *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art* exhibit how the concept of spirituality is intimately connected to even bigger themes, such as religious tradition, nationalism, ideology, and aesthetic innovation. However, whereas spirituality is thoroughly approached from a number of viewpoints, “modernism” receives less attention both in the introduction and in the anthology overall. Although the term is promoted in the book's title, it is not clearly defined by the editors, and very few of the authors explicitly state how modernism is understood in relation to their research. It is thus uncertain whether “modernism” simply refers to the period covered by the book or whether it is used as a formal designation. Since many of the artists and art objects discussed have distinct historical, ideological, and aesthetic orientations, I wish that the question of how they specifically adhere to the paradigm(s) of modernism had been examined in more detail. This could, for instance, have further encouraged a debate regarding the place of spirituality in modernity, and helped challenge preconceived notions of the origins, development, and characteristics of modernism as a movement. While this could potentially have strengthened the theoretical component of *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, the anthology is nevertheless a useful, interesting, and much-welcomed contribution to the vibrant field of Russian visual arts and culture.

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