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When, in 1910, the Russian critic Alexandre Benois coined the term “Byzantinism” to describe the flattened perspectives and glittering palettes of modernism, he was both praising and criticizing the antiquated qualities of this new painterly trend.[1] Citing this ambiguous term in the opening sentence of *The Icon and the Square,* Maria Taroutina unpacks the multiple paradoxes that it entails into an illuminating study of the Byzantine influences on Russian art at the turn of the twentieth century. In doing so, she draws Benois into a story of art criticism that is often dominated by Western writers such as Roger Fry, and expands its implications eastward.

The influence of medieval aesthetics on modernism may be a familiar art-historical trope, and yet, as Taroutina demonstrates, it is one which is all too easily simplified into a straightforward narrative of anachronistic appropriation. Rather than “a momentary rediscovery of a distant and ‘dead’ civilization,” this book makes the case for Byzantinism as a cohesive method, a collaborative mindset that reveals a “continuous, evolving, and exhaustive inquiry into the origins of Russian religious, philosophical, and visual culture” (p. 5). The book traces the influence of the Russo-Byzantine revival from many different angles, exploring the creation, display, and reception of art. The result reveals the influence of Byzantine heritage to be less a single strand weaving through Russian modernism, but more akin to an invasive aesthetic species in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first few of the twentieth.

In her introduction, Taroutina challenges the concept of artistic “revivalism” itself. As she compellingly argues, the simple framework of past-as-prologue fails to contain the nuance inherent to the creative revival of bygone eras. For her, the complex blend of nostalgia and nationalism woven throughout revivalism can only be understood through a rethought temporal structure. Thus, *The Icon and the Square* is a chronological
compression of sorts, one which dispenses with the linear propulsion of “a steady teleological narrative” (p. 7) in favor of an expansive, elliptical course that winds through both artworks and art criticism from the medieval to the modern era.

The book’s structure supports the weight of its ambitious argument about Byzantinism as a many-layered phenomenon. The first two chapters chart the lay of the land, mapping the field of late nineteenth-century cultural production in Russia. This section explores the interlocking institutional histories that supported and promoted art production: the church, the Crown, and the Academy of Arts. Among this institutional infrastructure, Taroutina weaves in stories and studies of more unofficial dynamics, those of dealers, exhibitions, reviewers, restorers, and critics. The result is a vivid image of a lively cultural space, one that enables Taroutina to demonstrate how these forces drove the momentum of many of the radical artistic developments that appeared (with misleading seeming spontaneity) at the start of the twentieth century, notably those of the Soviet avant-garde. It also calls attention to the multiplicity of stakeholders and invested actors involved in this story, demonstrating that “the Russo-Byzantine revival was not simply an innocent recovery of a lost artistic tradition but an invested, purposeful, and contingent phenomenon” (p. 4).

The subsequent chapters build on this birds-eye institutional view of the Russo-Byzantine revival to consider the concrete artistic impact that medieval visual codes had on individual artists. Three chapters provide close case studies of iconic works by Mikhail Vrubel, Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Vladimir Tatlin. The enduring impact of the Russian icon on each of these artist’s oeuvres has been widely remarked upon in previous scholarship (notably by Andrew Spira, The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition, 2008; and Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas Greenfield, Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity, 2010). However, The Icon and the Square complicates this legacy further through rigorous reviews of contemporaneous aesthetic theory. The writings of Nikolai Tarabukin, Pavel Florensky, and Nikolai Punin are utilized to contextualize each artist’s work amid their prevailing critical reception and demonstrate how modes of modernist viewership can be traced back to encounters with medieval artworks.

A particular delight of The Icon and the Square is the way by which Taroutina reinforces her argument just as much through images as through written analysis. The book’s lavish production values incorporate a rich repertoire of full-color illustrations as supporting evidence for its claims. Each chapter opens with a full-page, zoomed-in image of medieval Christian art, as if to immerse the reader in the aesthetic logic of the era. We see Kandinsky’s colored gouache grids juxtaposed with the jigsaw of Byzantine mosaics, and the gilt of ceramic tiles compared to the gilded impasto of Vrubel’s fractal brushstrokes. The sparse austerity of fresco plaster reveals an illuminating comparison to the minimalist aesthetics of the avant-garde palette. The interlinked images show modernism as method, revealing multiple lines of aesthetic continuity and allowing the reader to make connections across time. Thus, when paintings of six-winged seraphs precede Symbolist portraiture, the reader intuitively grasps how both the sacred and secular arts invoked the celestial human body and how these many-layered histories feed into a “circular narrative,” one spiraling forward into the many-sided forays of modernism.

The chapter on Vrubel is one of the most compelling, not least for the pressing historiographic gap it fills (Vrubel remains undeservedly overlooked in Anglophone scholarship despite being one of the most influential Russian artists of his era). Moreover, he occupies a critical, if convoluted, position as a precedent to the canonical artist who succeeded him, as Taroutina notes:
“Vrubel's trajectory toward a modernist style was redolent with inherent contradictions, which simultaneously both reflect and complicate the avant-garde paradigm. On the one hand he was a trained academician, while on the other he was largely rejected by official critical and artistic establishments as a ‘decadent’” (p. 98). Taroutina’s detailed exploration of Vrubel's signature brushstrokes (a “masterly combination of pictorial flatness with depth and volumetric solidity,” p. 107), convincingly argues that the artist was more significantly influenced by his Byzantine heritage than the most common (and more Western-centric) reference, Paul Cezanne. Thus, not only does this chapter succeed in remapping the competing forces of Vrubel’s artistic influence, but it also contributes to the book’s overall chronological compression, by exploring the extent to which Vrubel emerged as an unlikely precedent for subsequent Soviet artistic activity. Taroutina reconsiders how art critics like Nikolai Tarabukin attempted to rebrand Vrubel in the 1920s to replace his mystic associations with mechanical ones and ultimately present him as a viable precursor to the Constructivist and Productivist movements. This unexpected analogy offers a fascinating insight into how contemporaneous critics sought to understand the artistic trajectories of their time.

In chapter 4, “Vasily Kandinsky’s Iconic Subconscious and the Search for the Spiritual in Art,” Taroutina provides an alternate reading of Kandinsky’s artistic debt to the Russian icon by developing the concept of the “Iconic Subconscious.” As she observes, “In Kandinsky’s mind, religious imagery in particular could trigger certain subconscious associations in the viewer, allowing him or her to engage with an image on a deeper level than mere aesthetic contemplation” (p. 153). Thus, deviating from the familiar narrative about how the icon’s bold colors and flattened planes facilitated Kandinsky’s path to abstraction, The Icon and the Square provides an alternate reading rooted in viewershhip as active engagement, a mode of seeing that developed from encounters with religious artifacts. The two most canonical parts of Kandinsky’s legacy—his innovations in abstraction and his explorations of the spiritual in art—are thereby refashioned and reconsidered from an alternate point of origin.

The final chapter gathers all these strands into an analysis of one of Russian modernism’s most iconic moments: Malevich and Tatlin’s contributions to the 1915 exhibition 0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting. While Malevich’s hanging of his Black Square in the gallery’s “Holy Corner” may be one of the most famous curatorial decisions of the avant-garde, Taroutina explores other, subtler ways by which this exhibition “invoked a specifically Russo-Byzantine artistic genealogy.” Beyond “rhetorically breaking with the pictorial traditions of the western European avant-gardes” (p. 217), she observes that the two artists appropriated the phenomenology and philosophy of religious icons to rethink the very nature of realism in art, adapting it toward radically new ends.

The Icon and the Square ends with an epilogue that extends the chronological reach of its argument even farther, bringing it to the present day. Taroutina discusses one of the most controversial and globally renowned acts of Russian cultural iconoclasm this century: Pussy Riot’s 2012 performance at the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. As she observes, “Following the reestablishment of Orthodoxy as the principal religion of the Russian Federation in the 1990s, a second wave of Russo-Byzantine revivalism has swept through the country and its neighboring regions” (p. 221). The irresistible overlap of tradition and transgression thus remains a generative force in contemporary art, one of which “it would even be fair to say that the polemics surrounding questions of faith, power, national identity, and radical forms of artistic expression have only intensified in present-day Russia” (p. 220). Rather than concluding, then, the narrative invites the next chapter and makes the point that the study of icons is always implicitly tied with a parallel, hidden history.
of iconoclasm, one that inexorably returns, not so much as a circle but a spiral, winding from past to prologue to present.

An achievement of this book, then, is that it paves the way for further study by laying a solid methodological groundwork that invites further analysis of its core themes, perhaps with regard to more contemporary art. Although primarily aimed at an academic audience, Taroutina’s clarity of prose makes it also suitable for general readers, albeit perhaps those with a vested interest in the topic. The book would be particularly valuable as a teaching aid and addition to reading lists for undergraduate and graduate courses. Its reassessment of canonical artists, including Kandinsky, Tatlin, and Malevich, would benefit numerous introductory and specialist art history courses, and the universality of its central themes would make it a valuable addition to modernist studies curricula.

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