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A "Direct Perception of Life"

How the Russian Avant-Garde Utilised the Icon Tradition to Form a Powerful Modern Aesthetic

This paper will examine how the Russian avant-garde sought to utilise the profound symbolism and metaphysical significance of the icon tradition, in combination with other noteworthy art forms, as a means of creating works which resound with universal spiritualism, and have the power to generate social and psychological change. It will look at case studies by Natalia Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich and Mikhail Larionov in order to illustrate how these artists manipulated the icon tradition to fit their purpose. Firstly, it will examine Goncharova's Neo-primitive rendering of *St Panteleimon* (1911), an image with evident aesthetic parallels to the icon tradition. Yet this painting will be reinterpreted in a mystical light to demonstrate Goncharova's apparently archetypal expression, an expression which enabled the artist to achieve her manifestly ameliorative aim, spiritual and psychic healing at the social level. Subsequently, it will consider the nihilistic geometricism of Malevich's Suprematism and how it may have been inspired by the use of icon ontology and transcendence. Indeed, his renowned *Black Square* (1915) was exhibited in the "fair corner", the conventional place of an icon in the Russian home, and was described as a "living royal infant." Finally, it will attempt to demonstrate how the icon tradition inspired the pure abstraction and modernity of a Rayist canvas. Indeed, Mikhail Larionov will be shown to have been influenced not only by the formal, visual elements of icon-painting, but also the metaphysical significance and deific ontology which defines the icon object. Thus this paper will discuss the Russian avant-garde's use and adaptation of icon conventions in order to create works which could act as a transcendent mediums, capable of not only transmitting a metaphysical message, but which, through the power of their aesthetic, had the potential to heal society at a spiritual and psychological level. Consequently, it will provide an innovative way to perceive and interpret icons in the modern context, as a "direct perception of life."