The Dress Rehearsal? Russian Realism and Modernism through War and Revolution

AARON J. COHEN

Alexandre Benois (Aleksandr Benua), late Imperial Russia’s foremost modern art critic, remembered the unusual reaction among Russian artists when war with Japan came in 1904. They faced “the first real war” since 1878, he wrote, yet “at the beginning no one considered it completely real; instead “almost everyone treated it with surprising casualness, as toward some kind of trivial adventure from which Russia could only emerge victorious.” Contemporaries and historians have considered the war in Manchuria too distant to command public interest for long; nor did it evoke extensive public mobilization or patriotic enthusiasm. The significance of the Russo-Japanese War in Russian history has thus almost always been located in its relationship to other events, the Revolution of 1905, World War I, or the Revolution of 1917, and not in the war experience itself. In 1904 and 1914 an initial burst of public enthusiasm accompanied the outbreak of war, but in each case a failed war effort led directly to revolution. But was the Russo-Japanese War only a “dress rehearsal,” as many believed, for later events?

In the world of Russian art the experience of war and revolution was much different in 1904 and 1905 than it was a decade later. The Russo-Japanese War caused little disruption in the institutions or practices of the art world, and artists did little to mobilize themselves to support the war effort through the production of patriotic imagery or participation in charity work. This lack of professional and social mobilization stemmed in part from the incomplete nature of artistic engagement with the broader public and commercial culture in 1904, not just from the unimportance of East Asia in the public eye or the more limited need to mobilize for a colonial war. Aesthetic modernists in this “Silver Age” of
Russian culture, moreover, had rejected the aesthetic social engagement of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia, and the Russo-Japanese War showed the failure of nineteenth-century realist aesthetics, embodied in the work of the Wanderers (peredvizhniki), to capture warfare in the public imagination of the early twentieth century. Artistic engagement with broader public issues did occur in the Revolution of 1905, as many artists, even modernists, depicted revolutionary events and participated in contemporary political discourse. Yet revolution did not bring radical social or political change to the country, and it did not bring dramatic change to the art world. Instead it stimulated a renewed focus away from public engagement toward professional development, which expanded the size of the art world and magnified its connections to surrounding culture and society. Artists seemed irrelevant in 1904 but believed they could make a difference in 1914, when artistic mobilization was far more pervasive in professional and personal terms.

An aesthetic and professional war was already underway in Russia for several years before military conflict came in 1904. In the words of one critic, the art world was divided into two groups based on aesthetic orientation: the realists of the Wanderer tradition and a new, growing movement that put “artistic tasks, color, plein air technique, [and] light and shade over ideological [ideiny]m] tasks.”4 The latter were the fin-de-siècle aesthetes, art nouveau stylists, impressionists, and symbolists who congregated around the Petersburg art journal Mir iskusstva (“World of Art”) and its affiliated institutions around the turn of the century.5 The main aesthetic issue that separated modern artists from artists in the realist or the academic tradition was the modernist emphasis on the primacy of the individual artistic vision over all else.6 For aesthetic modernists, art should not be bound to restrictive institutions or practices, as it was in the Imperial Academy of the Arts, nor should it reflect the external world to impart a didactic lesson about contemporary life, as socio-critical realist critics argued in the nineteenth century. Art should instead reflect inspired visions of beauty, truth, and freedom, and these eternal values were to be discovered and expressed through the imagination and free creativity of the individual artist. Aesthetic modernists thus searched for subject matter that emphasized eternal values over the everyday life, depicting mythical or imaginary pasts, personal visions, and decorative designs. Their “art for art’s sake” ideal rejected the notion that art should contain representations of political or social themes ("tendentiousness" in contemporary language) or contemporary life.

Modern artists in the World of Art, however, did have political opinions and an agenda for social and political change. Art, a medium of truth, beauty, and the eternal in life, could save humanity from a modern civilization where the ugliness of current events, the banality of daily life, and the sameness and artlessness of mass production reigned. They considered the Wanderers a failure precisely because the realists sought to develop a distinctive national style through imitation of European art with Russian content. Russia could be integrated into