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Sergei Konenkov and the “Russian Art Exhibition” of 1924*

On 5 January 1924 a small item in the New York Times reported that Constantine Somov, "one of the most talented and distinguished of living Russian painters' was planning to organize an exhibition here, representing in some 800 paintings the work of Modern Russian Artists." On 19 February a longer article had the headline “Russian Art to be Shown, Extensive Exhibition Will Open at Grand Central Palace, March 4.” By 4 March the exhibition had not in fact, opened but, on 6 March it was reported to be in the final stages of preparation with “a small army of artists, carpenters, and painters, setting up this largest exhibition ever held of Russian art outside Russia.” Among the members of the supervisory committee, in addition to Somov, were such persons as I. D. Sytin, former owner of the Russkoe slovo, and Igor' Grabar', artist, art historian, restorer, and director of the National Tret'iakov Gallery in Moscow. Included in the committee was the name of Sergei Konyonkiev (sic), the sculptor. For this particular Russian artist the exhibition inaugurated a sojourn that was to last for more than two decades and involve a successful American career.

When Sergei Timofeevich Konenkov left Russia for the United States at the end of 1923 he was nearly fifty years old and at the height of a distinguished Russian career. He came for a visit, with the hope of staying on for a while beyond the term of the exhibition. He did stay on—somewhat longer than he had expected. But in 1945 (twenty-one years later), aged seventy-one, Konenkov returned to his native land, where he was to outshine, at least in Soviet glory, the great majority of his fellow exhibitors at the Grand Central Palace.2 Stalin had invited him to return and had arranged for a

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1. KONENKOV—English spelling, Konenkov. In the United States from 1924 to 1945 the name was pronounced "Konyenko." The present preferred pronunciation, given by officials of the Konenkov Memorial Museum in Moscow, is "Konyonkof."

2. The Tret'iakov Gallery alone contains thirty-six of his works executed between 1898 and 1917: see catalogue Skulptura i risunki skulptorov kontsa XIX nachala XX veka, from the Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow, 1977. It is noteworthy that fifteen of Konenkov's fellow New York exhibitors of 1924—all painters—were included in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art 1977 showing, "Russian and Soviet Painting." See
special ship to carry his plentiful oeuvre back to Moscow, where Konenkov was to launch another twenty-six year career as the officially designated doyen of Soviet sculpture. He was to be the recipient of every artistic honor and privilege that the Soviet Union could bestow.³

It is odd that an artist, so long lived, so productive, and so honored in his native land, has not been remembered more vividly in the United States. Much is known and texts of all sizes have been written about Konenkov’s early and late periods in Russia but neither Russian nor American scholars have yet examined, with serious interest, his American years. What brought him here? Why did he stay on? What was the nature and significance of his work—and his life—in America? And what eventually took him home? It is not possible to answer all these questions in a short article, but one can begin the search for answers by looking to the huge and much publicized Russian Art Exhibition of 1924—interesting in itself—for the beginnings of ties, personal, professional and financial. One can also go back to the Grand Central Palace for an introduction to Konenkov’s work and to the man himself.

In his memoirs, Moi vek (My Times), Konenkov wrote: “In December, 1923, I was leaving for America and, as it happened, for a long time. My trip was arranged by the Committee for Organizing Foreign Exhibitions and Artistic Tours at the all Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK). It was planned in the winter of 1921-22, but owing to circumstances the departure was delayed until the end of 1923.”⁴

The initiator of the exhibition was Professor Ivan Ivanovich Troianovskii, medical doctor, art collector, and collaborator with the Sytin publications. Grabar’ indicated that the idea of an exhibition had arisen in the winter of 1921-22, but that he had been invited to participate, and was included in the committee for the exhibition only a short time before it left Russia in the fall of 1923. By that time, he said, plans had been made down to the smallest details. The list of participants was already made up, the jury for the selection had been chosen, and the exact schedule arranged. Departure was set for 23 November. The members of the committee listed by him were: Grabar', the catalogue Russian and Soviet Painting, introduction by D. V. Sarabianov, catalogue information by E. Y. Korotkevich and E. A. Uspenskaia, translation, foreword, and bibliography by J. E. Bowlt. Grand Central Palace was on the northeast side of Lexington Avenue and forty-sixth street. The building no longer stands.

3. Pavel Korin, “The Doyen of Soviet Sculpture,” Soviet Stars—Soviet Fine Arts (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), number three in the series Lenin Prize Winners. Korin’s is the first of four articles devoted to Konenkov that were condensed from other publications and appeared in English translation in this collection.