

THE RUSSIAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649151707

The Russian school of painting by Alexandre Benois & Avrahm Yarmolinsky

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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ALEXANDRE BENOIS & AVRAHM YARMOLINSKY

**THE RUSSIAN
SCHOOL OF
PAINTING**



NICHOLAS II

Valentine Sycroff

THE RUSSIAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING

BY ALEXANDRE BENOIS

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
CHRISTIAN BRINTON

WITH THIRTY-TWO PLATES



NEW YORK · ALFRED A. KNOPF · 1916

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PLATES ENGRAVED BY THE WALKER ENGRAVING CO.
PRESSWORK AND BINDING BY THE PLIMPTON PRESS
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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1874

An Epistolary Preface

By

CHRISTIAN BRINTON

My dear Alexandre Benois:—

It is with a sense of pleasure and privilege that I assume the responsibility of commending your résumé of Russian painting to the American public. To you who are so familiar with the intellectual and artistic physiognomy of your country the preparation of these pages was a labour of love into which you put the full measure of your scholarly exposition and discriminating analysis. It was at your congenial quarters in the rue Cambon, Paris, during a memorable engagement of the Ballet Russe, where, as you doubtless recall, we first projected an English version of this work. The pressure of other matters prevented the consummation of our plans, which have meanwhile happily materialized, thanks to the discerning initiative of a young publisher who vies with us in the admiration of Slavonic letters and art.

When, my dear Benois, you and I met so fraternally in Rome, Paris, London, and elsewhere Russian art, and more specifically the art of the theatre, was at its

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apogee. You were then *Directeur artistique* of the Ballet Russe, and not only were you officially allied with that incomparable assembly of mimes, musicians, and *metteurs-en-scène*, you were also co-author of such productions as *Le Pavillon d'Armide* and the racy and poignant *Petrouchka*. For the time being, indeed, the vogue of the ballet obscured the more substantial and not less significant triumphs of Russian brush and palette as seen in studio or on exhibition wall. The general public was ignorant of the fact that such men as Syerov, Roerich, Anisfeld, Golovin, Vrubel, and yourself were painters in the more explicit meaning of the term. And still less did the average person realize that the ballet was but a phase of certain deep-rooted æsthetic impulses which had been coming to focus during the past score of years.

The one thing, however, the public did sense when face to face with these stimulating spectacles was their effective fusion of motives Oriental and Occidental. The Slav looks eastward as well as toward the west, and this, you will assuredly concede, is characteristic of your country's contribution to the field of artistic endeavour. Despite the drastic Europeanizing process inaugurated by Peter and continued under Elisabeth, Catherine, and subsequent sovereigns, that typically Slavonic note which we instantly recognize and relish

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was by no means obliterated. Changes took place along all lines of activity. And yet while Peterhof became a miniature Versailles, and French was prattled in the salons and beneath the protecting trees of Tzarskoye Sélo, much that was old continued untouched and echoes of the passionate, enigmatic East still persisted.

In art as in life a sturdy racial integrity is with each Russian an inevitable birthright. The Russ everywhere reveals his power of direct, concrete observation and his ability to grasp the vital aspects of a given scene or situation and to achieve in their presentation a convincing measure of actuality. It is such salutary tendencies that, my dear Benois, mark the earlier portions of your comprehensive and sympathetic monograph. The floodtide of realism whether historic or contemporary was, as you have indicated, reached with the work of Repin and his successor, Valentin Syerov.

The movement during the past two decades has been away from realism and naturalism and in the direction of decorative symbolism. The ideals of the "Mir Iskusstva" men have been continued by the younger spirits who to-day write for "Apollon." Your own contributions whether with brush or pen, as well as those of your colleagues Somov, Bilibin, Ostroumova, Lebedeva, and Lanceray follow logically in the wake of that striving for more purely æsthetic conquests which had

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its inception in the early nineties. Colour, a distinct feeling for decorative design, and the free play of fancy and passion are the characteristics of the newer school. The particular group to which you belong has revived the graces of former days and transmuted the fragrance of the eighteenth century into something spirited and modern yet instinct with poetic sensibility.

It is, however, far from my intention to usurp your function as an interpreter of Russian art. In your triple capacity of writer, painter, and dramatist you possess unique qualifications for the task in hand. I can only add that you have here achieved your habitual success, and that I am particularly happy for the opportunity of acknowledging even a small portion of the debt I owe you and your ever complex and inspiring country.

Believe me, my dear Benois,

Faithfully yours,

CHRISTIAN BRINTON.

Ardrossan Park,

September, 1916.