

COLLECTORS' FOCUS

RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE PAINTING

Despite scarce material – and a number of fakes – Russia's new collectors are driving a market that is still being discovered by the West, writes **Isabel Andrews**.

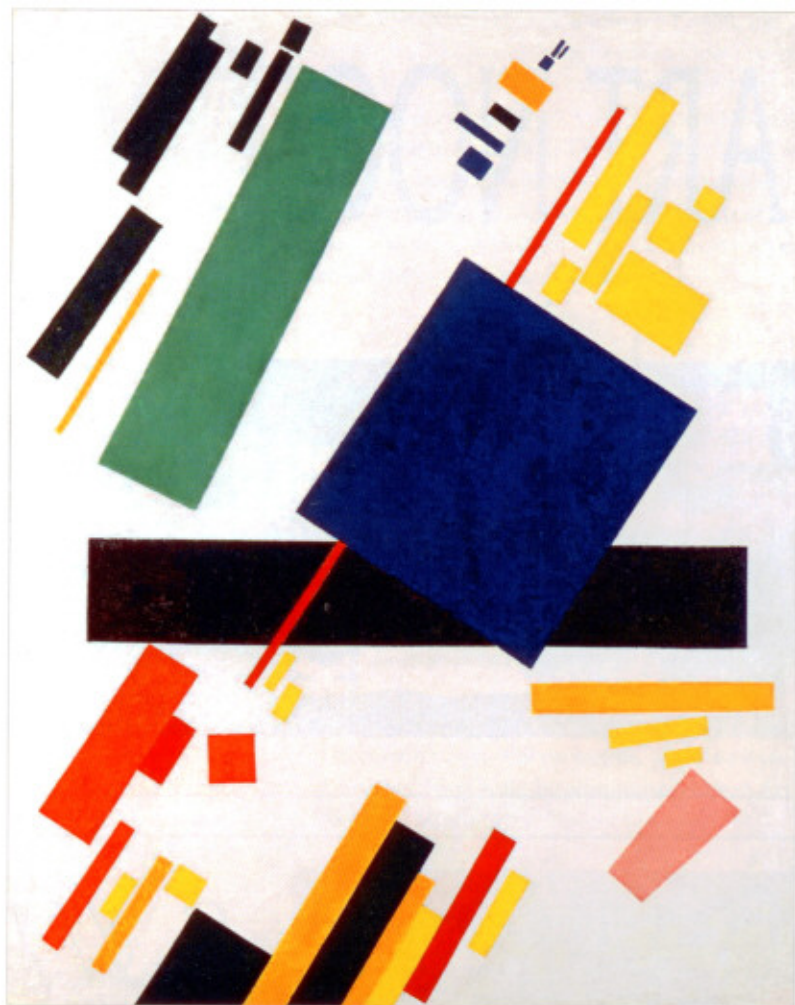
Early-20th-century Russia produced a frenzy of innovative art, sparked by Russian artists' increased association with current European styles, and by ideas surrounding the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Although these artists are highly respected in the West (many emigrated to Europe and the US), the recent spectacular boom for the avant-garde – encompassing Futurism, Rayonism, Constructivism, Suprematism and other movements – is driven almost exclusively by Russia's new collectors, who in the past decade have been aggressively repatriating their heritage. The most sought-after names have shot up in value by 200%-300%, while the rest of the world is discovering a raft of artists previously unknown outside Russia.

Giving an overview of the rapid market growth for all Russian art, Peter London, director of London's Russian Art Fair, explains, 'The global figure for specialised Russian art sales in London and New York in 2000 was £7.6m. This rose to £85m in 2006. In 2007, the Russian art sales results for Sotheby's and Christie's alone totalled £180m – a 45% rise on 2006, and that doesn't include spectacular results achieved by both Bonhams and MacDougall's.'

William MacDougall of MacDougall's in London – the only auction house specialising in Russian art – explains that 'Russian buyers in the late 90s bought very conservatively, tending towards 19th-century painters such as [Ilya] Repin because they had been taught this at school, but this was superseded by demand for the avant-garde.' Sofia Komarova of Galerie Artvera in Geneva adds, 'The real explosion began around five years ago, when Russian buyers appeared at auctions. Three years ago, the price of 20th-century Russian painters began to exceed the symbolic \$1m mark, for example, artists such as Rockline (Fig. 3), Baranoff-Rossiné and Konchalovsky.'

Western collectors have a lot of catching-up to do. All the experts that spoke to APOLLO estimated that Russian collectors account for around 80% of



1 *Suprematist Composition* by Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), 1916. Oil on canvas, 88.5 x 71 cm. Sotheby's, New York, *Impressionist and Modern Art* (3 November 2008). \$60m

the avant-garde market. 'Russian fine art is not on the radar', explains Jo Vickery of Sotheby's. 'There is a lot of it inside Russia and for political reasons it hasn't come out so there's not much knowledge of it in the West.' However, recent exhibitions have raised the subject's profile, notably last year's show of Russian paintings at the Royal Academy, London, and 'Rodchenko & Popova: Defining Constructivism' at Tate Modern this year. Will they encourage new collectors? MacDougall says, 'An interesting comparison is with Chinese contemporary art. It became very expensive following Chinese interest, and then the world rushed in. There's no obvious sign that this will happen with the Russian market. It's just showing internal increasing interest at the moment'. Peter London agrees, saying, 'I don't foresee US or European collectors outbidding the Russians for the main pieces that hit the market.'

Yet, as Vickery points out, 'The bridge between European and Russian Modernism is very close. We should see more Russian artists among the global stars of art. These are artists of international top

quality – not just Russian painters.’ One such artist is Kazimir Malevich. In 2008 Sotheby’s, New York, sold his *Suprematist Composition* (1916) for \$60m, an auction record for both the artist and a Russian work (Fig. 1). As Vickery explains, ‘Everyone who saw the piece was transfixed. It is one of the most important works from the 20th century and links Russia with what was happening elsewhere. It was a very rare opportunity.’

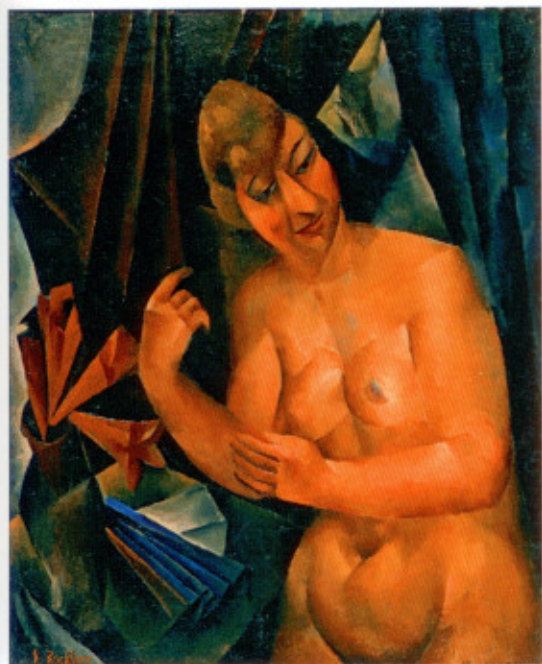
Equally important was the painting’s provenance – it was in the Stedelijk Museum collection for 50 years before it was restituted to the artist’s family – because the avant-garde market is plagued by fakes, encouraged by the extreme scarcity of these works. In March this year French police confiscated 180 pictures attributed to Alexandra Exter from private collections on show at an exhibition in Tours. All the Exter works were fake and only one of the 80 pieces on show by other avant-garde artists, including Malevich and Jawlensky, was genuine. Komarova emphasises that ‘what gives a piece its high price is a good certification of authenticity and its provenance – not always easy’.

Russian collectors are particularly interested in work by the Jack of Diamonds group (also called the Knave of Diamonds). Founded in 1909 by Mikhail Larionov and his wife, Natalia Goncharova, it included Malevich, Ilya Mashkov and Pyotr Konchalovsky. In 2008 Christie’s, London, sold Goncharova’s *Les Fleurs* for over £5.5m (Fig. 2), making her the world’s most expensive female artist. She tops the surprisingly long list of Russian female avant-garde artists – Popova, Stepanova, Exter, for example. Komarova identifies ‘well-known painters who participated in important



2 *Les Fleurs* by Natalia Goncharova (1881-1926), 1912. Oil on canvas, 93 x 72.6 cm. Christie’s, London, Impressionist and Modern Art (24 June 2008), £5.5m

3 *Female Nude* by Vera Rockline (1896-1934), 1919-21. Oil on canvas, 100 x 82.2 cm. Galerie Artvera, Geneva



European movements, such as Jawlensky and Kandinsky’ as particularly appealing to collectors, as well as Paris-based artists such as Chagall, Popova and Soutine. Peter London tips a future growth area: ‘Top Russian collectors make a clear distinction between the avant-garde and the Soviet Realist period, which is in demand among collectors from Europe and the US, but not yet deemed sufficiently exclusive to stir the attention of major players. Works from the Soviet era are likely to attract stronger bidding from both Russians and Western collectors in future, and is one of the few areas worth investigating for the astute collector.’

Last November’s Russian sales suggested that the market was taking a battering. As *APOLLO* went to press, all eyes were trained on London’s June Russian sales for signs of further recovery after strong results in New York’s April sales this year. Vickery describes a ‘recalibration at the moment since the economic slump last year’ and MacDougall explains, ‘Since last June prices are down around 20%-40%. The very good works are still doing extremely well and all auction houses will keep these at a similar level’. Komarova adds, ‘During this crisis period, the little and medium prices will certainly suffer, but we will always find a buyer for an important piece.’