Natalia Goncharova: The Spirit of Russia

Description

Natalia Goncharova / 1916

âA spark of the spirit lives in us, it is connected with all spirit. It is divine. It is

drawn to other, similar sparks. This is the urge to creation.â

Natalia Goncharova was an explosive force of creativity, encapsulating the wild spirit of avant-garde Russia with painting, printmaking, performance and design. Throughout her long, prolific career she produced some of the most revolutionary works in the history of art – today her work has become the most valuable of any female artist, even outselling Georgia OâKeeffe and Frida Kahlo. Though she leapt across styles and techniques, there was a deeply spiritual thread running through all her art, one which united iconography from her native Russiaâs rich art history with Western avant-garde abstraction. On bringing her distinctively Russian art to Europe in the early 20th century she wrote, âI am reopening the way to the East, and I am sure, others will follow it.â

Natalia Goncharova Self-Portrait with Yellow Lilies 1907-1908

Born in the town of Negaevo in the Tula Province of Russia, Goncharova came from a distinguished family of landowners. She was named after her great aunt, Natalia Pushkin, wife of the monumental Russian writer Aleksandr Pushkin. On her grandmotherâs family estate Goncharova developed a lifelong appreciation of simple, rural life, where she witnessed people living and working in close harmony with the land. For the rest of her life she linked her identity back to this strand of her childhood, referring to herself fondly as a âcountry girl.â With her much loved grandmother she regularly attended church, observing with curious fascination the weight and gravitas religious icons could hold. After suffering series of financial strains, Goncharovaâs father moved his family to Moscow in 1891 when she was 10 years old.

As a young art student at the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, Goncharova met and fell in love with fellow student Mikhail Larionov, forming a creative and mutually supportive partnership that would last a lifetime. Goncharova observed, âLarionov is my conscience in my work, my tuning-fork. We are very different, and he sees me from inside of me, not of him. Like I see him.â Though she had begun studying sculpture, Larionov persuaded her to switch to painting, encouraging her natural sensitivity to colour.

Gardening / Natalia Goncharova / 1908

In 1903, while still a student, Goncharova visited the Crimea with Larionov, where she first began developing Impressionistic paintings exploring the flickering patterns of natural light. Back in Moscow Goncharova and Larionov became part of a thriving art scene, where they befriended various influential figures including art critic and patron Sergei Diaghilev, who persuaded them to exhibit their work in several European exhibitions. When Goncharovaâs paintings were included in Moscowâs Golden Fleece exhibition 1908 she encountered the rebellious and outlandish painting styles of Post-

Impressionism and Fauvism. Such progressive art was frowned upon by the Russian art establishment, but Goncharova was hooked. In the following year she was expelled from the Moscow Institute for failing to pay her tuition fees, but she was already integrating herself with a thriving art scene which would lay the foundation for her future career.

Still-Life With Pineapple / Natalia Goncharova / 1909

By 1910 Goncharova had begun working in a Neo-primitive style, blending Cubist and Fauvist styles of painting and printmaking with the traditional,

stylised motifs of Russian lubok posters and Byzantine icons, as seen in her sympathetic portrayals of peasants, workers and Jewish figures. Larionov joined her on this mission and the pair explored a distinctly Russian style of modern art that would come to rival their European contemporaries. In the same year, Goncharova and Larionov founded the revolutionary artist group the âJack of Diamondsâ, moulding themselves into Russiaâs leading avant-garde. The deliberately subversive name for their group made reference to the playing card character known as a rascal, or rogue, drawing attention to the irreverent, rebellious nature of their practices. Like Goncharova, many of the groupâs members had been expelled from the Moscow Institute, some for simply painting in the Post-Impressionist style.

Khorovod (Russian Circle Dance) / Natalia Goncharova / 1910

Peasant Woman from Tula Province / Natalia Goncharova / 1910

For the groupâs first exhibition catalogue cover in 1911 Goncharova designed a woodblock print representing the Archangel Michael as one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse, reflected the groupâs mission to bring about the death of the establishment and the birth of a new cultural and spiritual change. What initially began as an exhibition society for Russian artists soon expanded to include works by the worldâs leading creatives such as Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Wassily Kandinsky, Andre Derain and Henri Matisse.

In 1910 Goncharova held her first solo exhibition in Moscow, which attracted vitriolic criticism for its experimental techniques and non-traditional subjects. Two of her female nudes were referred to as âdisgusting depravationâ; after being confiscated by the police Goncharova was charged with indecency, but later acquitted. Goncharova was undeterred – in 1911 she spread her wings further, exhibiting with Germanyâs radical collective Der Blaue Reiter, sharing with the group a fascination with crude, expressive painting styles and heightened, artificial colours.

Virgin Mary (with ornamental motif) / Natalia Goncharova / 1911

Fractures were gradually appearing within the Jack of Diamonds collective,

with some members favouring Russian styles and others Western art. Both Goncharova and Larionov led the Russian strand away into a new group called the âDonkeyâs Tailâ in 1912. In this new collective Goncharova mainly exhibited paintings based on Russian icons from the Orthodox Church, tapping in to her fascination with art as a gateway into the spiritual world. Yet her contemporary take on religious paintings was heavily criticised by the church, while her lifestyle choices further angered traditional establishments; she lived unmarried with Larionov, wore menâs clothes, and with Larionov walked the streets topless painted with body and face art. Writer John Bowlt reflected on the ways her persona influenced the reception of her art: âGoncharova enjoyed a licence that only actresses and gypsies were permitted, and perhaps because of this dubious social reputation rather than as the result of any apparent innuendoes in her paintings, she was said to traverse the boundaries of decency and to âhurt your eyes.ââ

The Expulsion / Natalia Goncharova

As influenced by the rising trend for Futurism, Goncharova and Larionov spearheaded a new style of painting called Rayonism, which deconstructed rays of light fractured off objects in space. Enlisting a band of followers, they wrote a manifesto in 1913, describing their style as âa sum of rays proceeding from a source of light – these are reflected from the object and enter our field of vision.â In these paintings Goncharova came closer to abstraction than ever before, aiming to represent the immaterial world just beyond the human eye, or in the âfourth dimension.â

Goncharovaâs Rayonist paintings brought together an encyclopaedic range of subjects, collapsing together multiple ideas in a practice she referred to as

âeverythingismâ, aimed at capturing the frenetic pace of modern, industrialised Russian life. One of her recurring themes was the abstracted forest, acting as a passageway from the real into the metaphysical world, as seen in *La Foret, (The Forest),* 1913, in which, as writer Tim Harte puts it, ââ¦a primordial spirit permeates the natural landscape.â

Jews (Shabbat) / Natalia Goncharova / 1911

In 1913 Goncharova also organised an epic retrospective exhibition in Moscow, featuring over 800 of her artworks from the past ten years, revealing what a prolific and inventive artist she had become. She was the first member of the Russian avant-garde to take on such an ambitious

project and though public reactions were divided the show attracted a huge crowd, cementing her reputation as one of the countryâs most radical artists.

Linen / Natalia Goncharova / 1913

The Phoenix (Harvest) / Natalia Goncharova / 1911

Alongside her Rayonist paintings Goncharova collaborated with several

writers who had joined the ever expanding Donkeyâs Tail group. Projects included the creation of delicateÂ lithography illustrations for Sergei Bobrovâs poetry in *Gardeners over the Vines*, 1913 and in 1914, a response to the outbreak of war in Russia with the powerful and moving portfolio of patriotic lithographs *Images of War,* 1914.

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Khristolyubivoe voinstvo (Christian Host) from Misticheskie obrazy voiny. 14

litografii (Mystical Images of War: Fourteen Lithographs) / 1914

Goncharova and Larionov moved to Paris in 1914, where their close friend Diaghilev had founded his widely acclaimed Ballet Russes; he encouraged both artists to design sets and costumes for his theatre productions to gain a secure income. In the years that followed Goncharova became primarily recognised as a stage and costume designer, working with Diaghilev for the next 15 years and travelling widely around Europe with his troupe. Her eye catching designs incorporated elements of traditional Russian art, contributing greatly to the success of his theatrical productions.

Leonid Myasin, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Igor Stravinsky (sitting

down), LÃ©on Bakst / 1915

Throughout her travels she was particularly drawn to Spain, where the countryâs patterns and colours had a profound influence on her design work, writing âI love Spain. It seems to me out of all the countries I have visited, this is the only one where there is some hidden energy. It is very close to Russia.â When the Russian Revolution struck in 1917 Goncharova and Larionov were forced to relocate permanently to Paris, though she missed her home country deeply. Work with the fashion house Mybor in the 1920s gave her room to reminisce back to her native, beloved Russia, with designs featuring the patterns and colours of Russian folk art.

Н. Гончарова. 910.

Three Young Women / Natalia Goncharova / 1920

While the later part of her career was dominated by stage and fashion design, Goncharova never gave up her practice as a painter, continuing to discover ideas that would inform her design work, writing in a letter to a friend, ââ¦painting is an inner necessity for theatre design, not the other way around.â After settling in Paris her paintings became increasingly abstract, while in her later years she continued to depict realms just beyond our grasp with her âSpaceâ series, made after the launch of the Sputnik satellite.

Breakfast / Natalia Goncharova / 1924

Since her death in 1962 art history has tended to enmesh Goncharovaâs legacy with that of her partner Larionov, who died two years later. They undoubtedly worked intimately together, crossing ideas back and forth in an ongoing creative interchange, but some historians have wrongly suggested Larionov was Goncharovaâs mentor, rather than her equal. In recent decades various major showcases have disentangled Goncharovaâs work from Larionovâs in order to celebrate her legacy in its own right, revealing the ways she tapped into artâs ancient spiritual properties with a distinctly Russian voice, and merged it with Western Modernism. Such ideas fed through into the practices of countless artists to follow,Â such asÂ Wassily Kandinsky, Kasimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, whileÂ contemporary Russian, female artists who follow in her footsteps include Sasha Pirogova, Irina Taus Makhacheva and Isis Irina Korina.

Spring, Spanish Women in White / Natalia Goncharova / 1932

Natalia Goncharova Theatre costume for the Coq d'Or in the Ballets Russes production of 'Le Coq d'Or' (The Golden Cockerel) / 1937

Later this year Tate Modern will house Goncharovaâs first ever UK retrospective, revealing the breath-taking scope of her hugely varied career. Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva summed up her legacy: âShe has the courage of a Mother Superior. A directness of features and views. Such is Goncharova, with her modernity, her innovation, her success, her fame, her

glory, her fashionâ¦ To sum her up? In short: talent and hard work.â

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