

Timur Novikov

NEW RUSSIAN CLASSICISM

The fall of the Iron Curtain, the collapse of the USSR and politico-economic changes in Eastern Europe led to the appearance of a number of new states on the map of the world, states that, to one degree or another, “broke” with their recent pasts. This realization by nations of their right to “self-determination” also gave birth to the largest of these states - Russia. As early as the late 80s the process of perestroika in the USSR allowed many young artists to study Western art - known before this time mainly through “legends” and “fairytales”, through art journals and numerous “exposO” publications - more closely. During the Cold War infrequent exhibitions of contemporary Western art helped to form notion that creative freedom is a political and civil liberty. The struggle of the creative intelligentsia for its rights furthered the Soviet empire’s collapse. This victory significantly fortified an already well-developed feeling of “independence”. New contacts, the abolishing of cultural borders and an intensified study of the Western experience gradually deprived late Soviet art of its “otherness”. At the same time Western art ceased being unattainable for the artists of perestroika: the “legends” and “fairytales” became vulgar reality. Soviet art faced a choice, but did not succeed in making it - a democratic revolution took place in Russia. The New Russia decisively broke with its Soviet past. The question of cultural heritage arose before the new state: what the new Russian art would become depended to a large extent on the answer to this question.

The first five years of the stormy formation of Russian art are behind us now and we can now examine things more closely: who we are? Whither and whence are we going?

“New Russians” are the more visible element in contemporary Russian society. It was they who seized power in the country after the dictatorship of the proletariat was overthrown. Since state funding has been significantly reduced, the direction in which the young, past-Soviet, Russian culture would develop depended to a large extent on the cultural orientation of this segment of the population. In the Soviet Union it was socialist realism which enjoyed state support. Non-official art received financing primarily from the West. Even after funds had grown quite scarce, these sources did not change the beneficiaries of this allocation of resources, which allowed both artists’ unions and all manner of avant-garde artists to survive. In “search of sponsors”, both groups attempted to get their foot in the new Russians’ door, mainly without success: with some exceptions the New Russians had already chosen their “true values”.

In Russia the initial stage of the accumulation of capital was accompanied by bloody terror, political and economic stability. Perhaps for this reason new Russians preferred not to spend their money on art, but to invest it. The sharp rise in prices for antiques - especially for Russian “chrestomathic” art of the pre-Soviet period (Aivazovsky, Shishkin, Repin, etc.) - demonstrated the trend of these investments. The “rejection” of the socialist-communist past also affected the way the Russian avant-garde, as part of the “negative” experience, was

perceived. “The return to traditional values” is perhaps the only ideological directive to have been issued from the “unideological” (for the time being) Kremlin. In the fine arts this directive was confirmed by the government’s support of a number of “traditionalist” masters - Glazunov, Presekin, Klykov, Andriyaki, Shilov.

Post-modernism was already prevailing in the West during perestroika. Cynical young artists lost faith in the truth of modernist doctrines. In this atmosphere the values of classical esthetics that modernists had rejected and discredited proved very attractive for a number of post-modernist masters: in the late 80s and early 90s Cindy Sherman, Pierre and Gilles, Jeff Koons, Peter Greenaway, Yasumas Morimura, Bernard Prince, MacDermott and MacHugh, Irwin and many other artists began to “classicize” visibly. Charles Jencks already saw in post-modernism indications of neoclassicism. At the same time the attractiveness of beauty was being exploited more and more actively by fashion and advertising. Beauty rose in value, the significance of photography - the only form of visual art capable of delivering this beauty to the viewer with maximal idealization - increased sharply. The prestige of traditional methods for objectifying beauty - athletic competitions and all manner of beauty contests - rose. Arnold Schwarzenegger, repeat champion of the “Mr. Olympia” contest, said in an interview: “For me bodybuilding is the art of creating a beautiful body and I consider my performance among ancient statues in a museum the peak of my career. There for the first time my art was demonstrated in its true context.” Along with other facts and factors enumerated above, the growth of the significance of “man” and “body” in discourse gives us a picture of a cultural situation that boldly interpret as “Renaissance”. If we take into account the fundamental Western culturological mythologeme from the cold war years (the West is progressive, modernistic; the East is traditionalistic, conservative), then Eastern European “totalitarian classicism” might be considered one of the sources of this renaissance. The construction of “a new world order” made actual the principal sign of the classical - “order”.

But let us return to Russia. All that we have expounded above (the “independent” mentality of the Russian intelligentsia, the collapse of modernism, the thirst for “traditional values, “renaissance” in the West, “the dictatorship of the beautiful image” in advertising, the partially preserved classical art education, the commercial success of surviving forms of classical art) created a propitious climate for the emergency of that esthetic phenomenon which I henceforth will call “NEW RUSSIAN CLASSICISM”. The classicism of “new Russians” differs, of course, from the previous waves of classicism. The appearance and institutionalization of “contemporary art” led to the formation and widening of the gap between the “contemporary” and the “classical”. Many phenomena of “pre-contemporary” art that in their own time were “heretical” with respect to classicism (romanticism, the Peredvizhniki, etc.) became themselves classics after the “revolution in art”. Often alluding to the art of primitive peoples, archaic and ethnic art, the modernists did not take along with themselves into the feature “classics” ranging from ancient Greece to the late 19th century European “salon”. It is precisely this vast cultural stratum that became the source of inspiration for “new Russian classicists.” New Russian classicism is a multifaceted gem. I will describe some of these facets in more detail.

New Russian Classicism in Current Art

With the appearance of a New Russia the search for a “fundamental direction” (apparently, owing to the habitual orientation towards “the general line”) intensified in the current art of Moscow and St.Petersburg. In the early 90s Moscow art critics concentrated their attention on a phenomenon conventionally known as “Moscow radicalism” The names Alexander Brener, Oleg Kulik and Anatoly Osmolovsky filled both the pages of “The Moscow Art Journal” and gutter press publications. But despite the “notoriety” of these artists, the works they produced might have served as a model of imitation only for “difficult teenagers”. Having exhausted the fascination of this scandalous novelty and perhaps having reflected on the character of the radical values they had extolled, Moscow art critics gradually began to forget about the phenomenon which had so agitated them. Upon closer inspection, moreover, this “radical novelty” proved to be merely a repetition of the sots-artists of the 80s with a slight increase in the degree of scabrousness. At this same time the main mass of Moscow artists was looking for other ways, ways far from radical. In that milieu for some reason known as “Moscow conceptualism” a number of masters matured. Aidan Salakhova, Anatoly Zhuravlov, Inn and Dmitry Topolsky, Alexander Mareev, Valery Koshliakov, Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe, Dmitry Gutov, Vladimir Dubosarsky, Alexander Vinogradov, Alexander Yakut, Ivan Razumov, Ilya Piganov and many others were interpreted as conceptualists only through the blindness of the critics. In their works the rays of new Russian classicism were already brightly shining.

As early as the late 80s a new style known as “neoacademism” was taking shape among the vanguard artistic community of Petersburg. Having avoided total “conceptualization” in the 80s, less inclined toward the “general lines” of the Moscow parties and used to self-limitation for the sake of self-sufficiency, Petersburgers turned to that the treasure which abounds in Petersburg in plenty - to the classics.



The New Academy's professors:
O. Malov, O. Tobreluts, T. Novikov,
B. Matveyeva, A. Khlobystin.
St. Petersburg, 1999.

The realization of the value of a classical esthetic “not so bad that one could reject in once and for all” led artists to create the new Academy of the Fine Arts, an organization called to carry out educational, research and propaganda programs. The neoacademists’ first exhibition, “Youth and Beauty” (1990), showed the breadth and actuality of this movement. In the following years the new Academy carried out a very active program of exhibitions - more than one hundred exhibitions in the museum of the Academy itself, as well as in other Petersburg galleries and museums. In these years scores of artists participated in the Academy’s work: Petersburgers Bella Matveeva, Denis Egelsky, Oleg Maslov, Viktor Kuznetsov, Olga Tobreluts, Vladislav Mamyshev, Stanislav Makarov, Georgy Gurianov, Aleksei Semichev, Andrei Kuzmin, Viktoria Ukhalova, Viktor Tuzov, Andrei Popov, Vladimir Abramov, Konstantin Goncharov, Yulia Strausova, Alexander Filipchenko, Andrei Ventslova, Andrei Khlobystin, Irena Kuksenaite, Victora Buivid, Timofei Abramov, Linas Petrauskas; Muscovites Aidan Salakhova, Dmitry Prigov, Sergei Anufriev, Alexander Dugin, Sergei Shutov, Inna and Dmitry Topolsky, Anatoly Zhuravlev, Ivan Razumov; Berliners Svetlana Kopystianskaya, Igor Kopystiansky, Alexander Sokolov, Vladimir Gusman, Yevgeny Sheffer, Anatoly Milagros, Andrey Barov and many more.

But it was not just the neoacademists who were concerned with preserving the classics. Petersburg traditionally has been a well-known center for the study of the European artistic legacy. An entire army of specialists from the Hermitage, the Russian Museum, the Academy of Arts, the Institute of Art History, Petersburg State University, Pushkin House and a number of other museums and institutions supported - at first with mistrust, but then with enthusiasm - the neoclassical aspirations of the youth.

New Russian Classicism and Mass Culture

That “new Russians” prefer “true values” the country’s population learned for the first time from a television commercial for the country’s first private bank, Inkombank. After this, many commercial organizations began using works of classical art, as well as the classical esthetic itself, in their self-presentations. Through an appeal to the classic style, television and magazine advertisements, logotypes, the names of companies and stores, shop windows, bank and store interiors were intended to inspire confidence in the reliability of businessmen.

Private construction started to develop at the same time. Apartment and dacha interiors are often stylized “in the old manner”. The demand for plaster copies of ancient statues has risen a hundredfold. One can observe analogous tendencies in Russian fashion. In recent years Vyacheslav Zaitsev, Valentin Yudashkin and other “couturiers” clearly have been gravitating towards the classical style. On the other hand, “independent” designers Konstantin Goncharov and Vladimir Bukhnik do not conceal their passion for historical costumes. The “golden” intelligentsia dresses itself up in coats and tails; costume balls are becoming popular; various “historical societies” dress their members in “pre-contemporary” uniforms. Photographers working for mass publications have in concert taken up staged photography stylized “in the old manner”. The unbelievable popularity of the work of the Italian designer Gianni Versace among “new Russians” is also evidence of this phenomenon. In the apparently dying Russian film industry neoclassicism is manifested quite brightly. In the mass of “historical films” two

pictures dedicated to antiquity - "Socrates" and "Daphnis and Chloe" - particularly stand out. One of main roles in "Socrates" was played by the popular DJ Gabriel Vorobyov. However strange it may seem, club culture in Petersburg and Moscow is also rich in manifestations of new Russian classicism. We can observe this in several club interiors, in special programs (the projects "Coliseum" and "Odysseus") and in the design of flyers. When asked how he relates to neoacademism, the well-known figure of Moscow club culture Ivan Salmaksov answered: "Other than neoacademism I haven't noticed any other contemporary art". For several years already the Petersburg club "Rechniki" has been holding poetry evenings in parks and palaces, evenings at which the neoclassical lyric poetry of Viktoria Vernye, Timofei Abramov, Stanislav Makarov and many others is heard.

New Russian Classicism in the Mirror of Art Criticism

In the early years of its existence new Russian classicism remained practically unnoticed. Depending on their orientation, critics saw in it conceptualism, simulationism, kitsch, vulgar historicism and even radicalism. Perhaps the first serious reaction to this phenomenon was a special issue of the journal "Decorative Art" (1992) dedicated wholly to this subject. In the following year the Moscow Institute of Contemporary Art published an anthology of essays, "Neoacademism Circa 1990". In the same year a number of monographs on the work of several neoacademists and a special issue of the journal "Kabinet" (#4) were published. Then the majority of Russian publications and many Western publications dedicated their pages to far from indifferent commentary to the processes going on in Russian art. Apparently as result of its activeness, the largest volume of publications fell to the lot of neoacademism.

Petersburg authors Alexander Borovsky, Ivan Chechot, Olessia Tourkina more than once took up the theme of neoacademism earlier, but as if waiting for a signal the Moscow critics preserved their silence. Dan Cameron's project in the Moscow gallery "Regina" (Fall 1995) was this signal. In his essay "On Beauty" Cameron writes: "Even the act of formulating questions about beauty seems to invite derision, as if it were impossible to solve the world's problems by starting at the surface level. [...] [T]he act of releasing critical language from its state of perpetual servitude can only have positive results for all involved. [...] Until such time, beauty will not be able to seek its own level, but must remain as a kind of invisible prisoner, a stranger unwelcome in its own home".

And the long-awaited liberation happened. One after another, critics offered ever newer definitions. Elena Kurliantseva: "Durable traditionalism of the renaissance persuasion". Andrey Kovalev: "Petersburg neoclassicism is an anarchic way of life attempt to socially legitimize itself". Elizaveta Plavinskaya: "Tender and hearty fighters for the classical". Fyodor Romer: "Neoacademism is a form of mass psychosis". Ekaterina Degot: "Neoacademism, it goes without saying, is not an ideology: it is a form of spending leisure time and a career move". Nikolai Palazhchenko: "Neoacademism is not art, but a well-crafted myth about art". Andrei Kovalev: [Neoacademism] is taking on the revolutionary significance of a radical aristocratic opposition to the neofascist ideology of shop-keepers". Leonid Lerner: "Neoacademism is an attempt to adapt the ideas and methods of Moscow conceptualism".

Sergei Epikhin: “Technotronic euphoria [and] hedonistic pseudo-schizophrenia”. Milena Orlova: “A general wakening of interest in the classical”. And so forth.

In conclusion I would like to quote from Elena Selina’s article “The Specter of Neoclassicism”: “Don’t despair, friends, look around you! The specter of neoclassicism is drawing over Moscow. He is positive and recherche, this little chap who is being born - soon, very soon he will began to manifest himself in all spheres of Moscow artistic life, from conceptualism to radicalism. Soon one will be able to find his “footprints” in hard-edged metaphysical installations and in minimalistic dryness; in computer graphics and in large-scale staged photographs, and even in frenzied baroque compositions”.

After the aforesaid it remains only add one thing: New Russian Classicism is already Reality.

1996.