

MY REPENTANCE OF MALEVICH

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From autobiography of Timur Novikov, artist and art historian: “At nine years of age he was taken to Novaya Zemlya, a borderline region of human survival. He admits that the spatial peculiarities of that territory predefined his sensory perception. Peoples of the North — due to the necessity to recognize the kill by its contours and calculate the distance to the chase object by means of the horizon line — have the sign-oriented thinking that has been directing the artist’s creative activities ever since.”

Development of fine arts has lately took the way of further complication. The picture surface has been overloaded with piles of information. For this very reason, I tried to contrive an art that would satisfy demands of the majority of people leaving on Earth — the demand for the art that could be perceived adequately with no overload of information people actually do not need. For example, if you place a sign upon Malevich’ *Black Square*, you construe it in a humanistic way. By placing a circle on a black background we create an image of moon.

This process of humanization dates back to Malevich’s works. After his suprematist period he created his famous *Red Cavalries* and other paintings that make one feel that life returned into his abstract paintings. I was only following him.

Don’t you feel embarrassed that the work of art gets mixed with some household sensations, for this polka dot reminds one of the women dresses and pillowcases?

World is so close to us that it is hard to say at what point we can get rid of it. Initially, the choice of the material — the fabric — was based upon simple household requirements. The tribes that in ancient times inhabited the illimitable Russian plains were nomadic. Nomadic tribes always create art on textile — that is, fabrics, carpets, various appliquéés, etc. This is a light form of art: it can be easily folded, taken to a new camp and placed again. Fabric also had sacral functions – for example, serving as a dossal.

An important thing that people expect from art is relaxation. In the 20th century, relaxation is indispensable for a person who is constantly under stress. Art is often the only thing that provides us with some relax. In this case we are thankful to art. For this very reason I always tried to create the atmosphere of relax; I often painted waterscapes — psychologists say that waterscape is the most relaxing image. My works are not overloaded with details — a detail is never large, it is usually in the center of the picture and can be easily found. When one sees that there is nothing more but this detail, one does not need to regret that he missed something; one sees the core and this makes one feel relaxed.

There are no secrets and deep meanings in my works; everything they imply is lying on the surface. I always try to make the image accessible to a spectator and have no secrets from him. In the given work¹ the meaning lies on the surface; it may be unclear to a Russian reader or spectator but it is open to any enlightened Westerner, to Andy Warhol – an artist of bananas and flowers; it is simply a sorrowful picture. If you look at it carefully, you will see the moon turning into a banana — the banana elegized by Andy Warhol.

¹ Andy Warhol’s *Sorrow*, 1989. Acrylic paint on fabric. 205 x 194 cm. Collection of the Department of the Newest Movements at the Russian State Museum.

The famous banana of the great Warhol: a gray blouse and a black kitchen apron with white flowers on its fabric. It is the Russian symbol of sorrow experienced by the housewives all over the world when they get the gloomy moon from the sky for their children.

I consider this period of my work as the symbol of turning to pop art, to the things that are close to people. This is a very democratic art that allows everyone to create some works in order to decorate one's everyday life. The best way to use such art is to hang it over one's bed: when one gets up and sees the picture, one keeps the feeling of freshness and cheerfulness during the whole day.

Here are the swans, the famous marketplace ones, this is...

The by-bed art is the one closest to a person in the time of one's most intimate impressions. The revolution in fine art that occurred in the 20th century replaced the top position of Apollonism with that of modernist art that has its own aesthetics. However, classical concepts remained valid in other arts. Folk art, popular art, and applied art managed to keep reverence toward the classical notions of beauty for a longer period than the mainstream high art. High art turned to *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, *Black Square* and other modernist icons, to the *Gioconda* with mustache of Marcel Duchamp — whereas folk art kept to traditional landscape, traditional perspective, and traditional notions of the beautiful.

Swan Lake is the fundament of Russian mentality; it the profound thing every Russian and Soviet person knows and loves. First of all, I refer to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. Swan is a symbol that can be found in many philosophies, sciences, religions; it was swans who were meeting Apollo when he came back from the Hyperboreans.

In my opinion, European art was integral from Renaissance up to the end of the 19th century. Artists and poets regarded themselves as the servants of Apollo – that is, they professed Christianity and at the same time worshipped Apollo in art. European museums arising at that time were understood as the dwelling places of Muses, companions of Apollo. This Apollonic art came to Europe from Greece; it was Greek culture that inspired European art for the whole period from Renaissance to the modernist revolution.

I regard this cult of Apollo in European culture as one of the highest achievements of European genius. Rejection of these values that occurred in the 20th century was a loss rather than a gain. In the end of the 20th century we are trying to revive these traditions of worshipping Apollo in arts because for St. Petersburg they are immanent from its very foundation. It was by no means an accident that Peter the Great was one of the first collectors of antiques in the city. He was followed by Catherine the Great. Even in its modern state, St. Petersburg resembles a Greek polis; some buildings (for example, the Exchange) are the copies of temples.

Timur Novikov is an ideologist of neoclassicism and the founder of the New Academy of Fine Arts that is located in the famous art lodgment on 10 Pushkinskaya street. Current appearance of the building symbolizes the ruined state of the grand imperial ideas.

Our general idea is that St. Petersburg was founded as a center of classic art; it should not be forgotten that Peter the Great wished the city to be the capital of the Great Russian Empire, which he regarded as the heir of Roman Empire. It was not an accident that the Russian coat of arms is a Roman double eagle symbolizing Western and Eastern empires. After the Great Empire split into two parts — the Eastern and the Western, the former was dominant while

the latter, Rome, appeared to be a breakaway province. Byzantine spiritual values of Orthodox Christianity were taken over by Russia that founded St. Petersburg, the capital of the new Roman Empire. What the new capital lacked was the Roman features. Thus, Peter created the new capital with orthodox soul and Western Roman appearance. This is why there are such cathedrals in St. Petersburg as St. Isaac Cathedral and Kazan Cathedral that follow the architectural traditions of Roman cathedrals. The capital created, Peters began to fill it with cultural values. During the 18th and 19th centuries the city was filled with European treasures — at the Hermitage, there are more pictures of Rembrandt than in whole Holland.

We have incredible cultural values at the Hermitage, the State Russian Museum, the Peter-Paul Fortress, the Artillery Museum, the Zoological Museum, the Mineralogical Museum, the Pushkin House, and the Kunstkamera.

As the center of cultural values, Petersburg today symbolizes the stronghold of classics that has not yet immersed on the modernism tempest. It is due to the geographical detachment from the main European events and the long period of official rejection of Western culture that we managed, on one hand, to fall behind the Western culture and, on the other hand, to preserve what the latter has lost.

According to Timur, the cult of Apollo may arise in the process of bringing the beautiful back into everyday life. The cult of Apollo may re-appear in the process of restoration of the old fabric – easily accessible to human eyes and human hands. This may be satin and China silks, velvet and brocade; this may be the old fabric that serves as a cover for a picture, a curtain or a dossal. It may be beaded and bugled; it may be decorated with gems and purls; it may be embroidered with gold and silver. This fabric appeals to the eye and delights the hand. It caresses the naked body.

The works we can see here are made in the tideway of traditional European applied arts. In every European church you would find a banner with some image in the center framed with beautiful vignettes, trceries, embroidery, etc. The same will you see on European flags and decorative wall panels. In these works of mine, I put some image into the center. It attracts most of spectator's attention. Every character I use should entail certain associations for me and must be close to me personally; this is the only way to make it close to other people, too.



T. Novikov. Photo G. Chef

There is a sentimental note in your works of which general public is very receptive.

No, this is not general taste. Rather, it is natural human bent for the beauty seen in different manifestations. It is the unnatural thing about modernism that modernist works need advertising, inculcation because otherwise they cannot be perceived. You won't make a spectator naturally perceive, say, Matisse without prior preparations and lectures. I saw art historians and museum guides explaining what is good about Matisse and the audience eventually saying— "Now we can see it". By contrast, classical art needed no preliminary explanations. At the same time we can find sentimental elements in Rubens' paintings — for example his work with a daughter breastfeeding her own imprisoned father. We can find same sentimentality in Rembrandt. Isn't spectator's sentimental sympathy a main purpose for making such works as Leonardo's *Madonna Benois* and *Madonna Litta*? They play on sentimental sympathy first of all. And then Dostoyevsky's novels should be regarded as pure sentimentalism.

In these terms, should we accuse modernism of anti-humanism? Should we accuse it of rejection of common taste?

It is not common taste or common sense that modernism rejects, it is man as such — it suffices to recall modernism's deformation of human shapes, its deformation of the plastic, its distortion of the anatomical characteristics; for example, a man with three noses that is so much loved by modernists. It is no more than an anti-humanistic gesture. As a result, the further development of culture allowed for the representation of a hero with some zoomorphic entities (instead of human figures) like Mickey Mouse or Batman or Superman, a flying bulk of muscles.

Here is one of Timur's pictures that he created before he turned to classics; today he is not fond of recalling them. Looks like decent modernism blessed by the centenarian tradition. Painting à la fauvists (which means Wild Beasts). The latter lacked only appliqué with textured paper and photographs. Today many people would hang paintings like this over their beds.

Actually, our Academy is art and part in modernism. We often joke that our Academy should be called the Malevich Academy of Fine Arts, for we develop his tradition. By 1933-1934 Malevich seized painting suprematism for the sake of quite realistic painting in the manner of Italian Renaissance. For example, his self-portrait is close to Italian Renaissance portraits and the portrait of his daughter is close to Rembrandt. It is typical classic art. Against the background of his struggle with classics, this looks like penance for what he had done. I mean his experience of modernism — he was renowned as a modernist artist.

In his *The Glass Bead Game*, Herman Hesse describes the art of the 20th century in the following way: first, there will be feuilleton epoch (art descends to feuilleton) and then Castalian period will come and the artists will return to old art to create new forms. This turn to classics and to the task of its interpretation is the pathos of any modern artist who has lived through the feuilleton epoch. This artist turns to the higher and more valuable characters. The latter can be taken only from history.

As the struggle for ideals of beauty is still at its climax and we still live in the feuilleton epoch, the prophet of a new purgatorial idea puts on a feuilleton mask — the most popular one — to satisfy, in Hesse's words, the giant demand for exiguous amusement.

However, the revolution at the turn of the centuries could not occur out of the blue. It was to the advantage of African voodoo priests who directed the modernist revolution. Why was it so? For ages did Europeans wage invasive colonial wars with Africa, the only person an African could ask for help being a voodoo priest. Whereas the whites dwelling in Europe were protected by the powerful structure of Christianity.

Still, among Europeans there appeared a sort of blockheaded people who did not care about spiritual values and kept surrounding themselves with magic objects. They themselves were shamans. They were modernists.

The name of a French poet Guillaume Apollinaire is widely known. However, only a few people know that his true name was Kostrowitzki and that he was of Polish background. Why was Apollinaire imprisoned? Because he, with the assistance of his secretary, was stealing African art from the Louvre. He stole statuettes and masks that in fact were magic objects made for magic practices. Thus, the magic objects appeared in artist's studios. In every artistic studio of that time one would find some African totem that of course influenced its owner. Artists of the next generation, such as Joseph Beuys, professed that they were doing shamanism and their art was nothing but a voodoo act. They benighted Europe with shamanism.

It is hard for me to confess that Russia played a significant role in this process. It was not only American money that nourished Picasso or Matisse; those owe much to Shchukin and Morozov. But money is not the crucial point. Every French modernist had a Russian woman — either as a wife or as a mistress or as a secretary. Their influence cannot be ignored. It suffices to mention Picasso, Matisse, Aragon, Eluard, and Salvador Dali.

Satin Chinese blanket of 50s is a sort of banner from the early epoch of Chinese socialism with Timur's photo appliqué. The cup in the hands of white marble Salome, the head of Oscar Wild, the last prophet of the classical ideal of beauty who sang this ideal in his essay The Soul of Man Under Socialism. What we see is the finest art production à la Russian democratic feuilleton, "simple and ideologically clear", as it is defined in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia. What are the perspectives? Does neo-academism have future?

It is useless to dance round a statue of Apollo. No one needs this lost culture. No one but us. We enjoy our activities mostly because no one else enjoys it. We live at the turn of millennia and can't help thinking of the fates of culture as such — from the point of view of millennia, not centuries.



T. Novikov's works at the exhibition
“Secret Cult” in the Marbel Palace.
St. Petesburg. 1992

As it was said by some wished: the less joyful the days, the more beautiful the ideals.

1995.