

Adoff, Julian

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In Search of the Archaic

A Review of: Irina Shevelenko, *Russian Archaism: Nationalism and the Quest for a Modernist Aesthetic*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press / Northern Illinois University Press, 2024. 294 pages. ISBN 9781501776342.

Julian Adoff (jadoff2@uic.edu)
University of Illinois, Chicago

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Irena Shevelenko's *Russian Archaism: Nationalism and the Quest for a Modernist Aesthetic*, originally published in Russian in 2017, considers Russian answers to the questions of nationalism and folk culture that dominated Europe from the 1800s onwards.¹ The 2024 English-language edition is not a word-for-word translation but, rather, a reworked version of the original. Through five chapters and an epilogue, Shevelenko explores how Russian artists, authors, and composers contended with Western influences and folk, pre-Petrine, and Byzantine cultural referents to attempt to define a 'new, unified culture' for Russia (p. 4). As was the case elsewhere in Central Europe, when discussing any attempt to create a so-called national style, the intellectual personas discussed in *Russian Archaism* built their ideas around a binary of acceptance or rejection of the European influences that had come to prominence in Russia since the Westernization of Russia under Peter the Great.

In her introduction, Shevelenko notes that while Western influences, European taste, Orthodox chants, and traditional Russian popular culture were to be found together, 'the coexistence of these two cultural traditions—the Russo-European and the Russian indigenous (native)—was nearly always a source of conflict and discord.' (p. 6). Shevelenko weaves together numerous examples that all share a common trait: interaction with ideas of the archaic. The text defines archaism as an amorphous practice that looked to the past when the region was supposedly free from Western influence. Shevelenko uses the language of the Russian Formalists to define archaism as the practice of applying 'premodern sources as points of aesthetic reference.' (p. 7) Archaism plays a central role in the different historical episodes discussed in the volume, dating from Russia's participation in the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris and ending with the 1917 Revolution.

The volume offers a study that covers great depth and breadth in its analysis of Russian aesthetic culture and is a must-read for anyone studying the region's art, literature, or culture. The first chapter begins with the Russian offering at the 1900s Paris fair. This episode is an ideal way to start a study that hinges on the relationship between Russia and Europe. Shevelenko's account of Russian participation begins with the rationale around the location of the Russian Pavilion (**Figure 1**), which was not located along the Street of Nations but instead near the colonial pavilions. The reader is immediately confronted with the opposition between acceptance and rejection of European ideas as the book recounts both the location

1) The original was published as: *Модернизм как архаизм: национализм и поиски модернистской эстетики в России*, Moscow: NLO Books, 2017.



Figure 1: Robert Meltzer, *Pavilion of Russian Asia and Siberia at the Exposition Universelle, Paris (1925)*.

Source: Brooklyn Museum / Wikimedia Commons.

and design decisions for the Pavilion. The Russian planners avoided any reference to Russian high cultural production featuring Western influences and instead presented an archaic version of Russia that turned away from the educated Russian class and towards the more rural, eastern villages. From here, Shevelenko presents a fascinating discussion that considers the effects of ethnographic study and the colonial relationship between St. Petersburg and Siberia. The chapter also introduces one of the book's main protagonists, the Russian artist and critic Alexander Benois (1870–1960), who wrote about the *Exposition Universelle* for the Russian-language journal *World of Art* (*Мир искусства*). Benois' review of Russia's presence in Paris was mixed. He noted that 'European' Russia did not seem to have a presence in Paris; rather, it was Siberia that did. Unlike the other European powers, Russia did not showcase its metropolitan centres in relation to far-flung territories; instead, it only opted to showcase the Russian peasantry. Benois' criticism of the exhibit does not seem to affect the Russian art world much, for the chapter concludes by outlining the 'national turn' in Russia following the *Exposition Universelle*. This national turn solidified the turn away from St. Petersburg and that which was conceived as European in favor of representing Russia in archaist terms.

In the second chapter, Benois and the *World of Art* take center stage. Shevelenko takes the reader through the early period of the journal's existence and dissects writings in the publication by Benois and other major critics of the time, such as Igor Grabar (1871–1960),

Sergei Diaghilev (1872–1929), Dmitry Filosofov (1872–1940) and Ivan Bilibin (1876–1942), in order to dissect the clashes that graced its pages as they attempted to define an aesthetic program for Russian modernism defined either as imperial (which, Shevelenko argues, was seen as westernized) and as pre-Petrine (or indigenous). The chapter devotes detailed attention to the different views of the *World of Art* writers and their perspectives on the role of the West in the foundation of Russian art. Diaghilev, for instance, put forward the belief that there was no opposition between Western schools of art and national authenticity. In contrast, the painter Victor Vasnetsov (1848–1926), an influential member of the arts and crafts Abramtsevo artists' colony, believed that Russian aesthetics were self-sufficient and needed no external—western—influences. In the wake of this ideological quest to define the Russian aesthetic, Benois takes centre stage, for, Shevelenko points out (p. 63), he argued in his *History of Russian Painting* (1901–1902) that a 'sincere, strong, and inspired' Russian art should 'struggle with all their powers to cast off finally the yoke of nationalism.' While he believed that Russian forms were 'exotic,' he was skeptical of the distinction between nationalist folk aesthetics and cosmopolitan ideas of the West. He ultimately claimed that the educated, artistic elite was not in sync with the people, and in their use of folk aesthetics artists were merely 'playing peasant' (Shevelenko, p. 69). This accusation of 'peasant play' led him to sharply criticize the artistic class as being full of chauvinism and faux populism. Using Benois's critique of the educated class's archaistic use of peasant and folk motifs, Shevelenko invites the reader to consider whether the national turn was truly rooted in vernacular culture or whether it was a middle-class invention. Ultimately, War and Revolution would change the landscape of the nationalist debate before a single national aesthetic could be defined.

Chapters 3 and 4 consider literary and musical responses to the Russo-Japanese War and the First Russian Revolution. The two chapters flow together well as both follow the path Benois' criticism set the stage for in the previous chapter. At this point, Shevelenko asks the reader to consider how archaism was transformed from an amorphous idea and practice to a form of ideological modernism. She offers close readings of literary publications that were founded in the early twentieth century such as *The New Path* (Но'вый путь), *Questions of Life* (Вопросы жизни), and *Libra* (Весы) to show how Russian nationalist thought changed from the early period of the Russo-Japanese War—where Russia was conceived of as a European colonializing power that would be the 'ruler of Asia' (p. 88–89). In a manner similar to Western European colonial ambitions, Russia viewed the war as a chance to bring a 'civilizing force' to the region. In his article 'Yellow or White' (1903) Petr Pertsov, editor of *The New Path*, described the Russo-Japanese War in terms of bringing about a 'Yellow Russia' by continuing to spread Russian influence east (this expansion was historicized as the next logical step after Russian expansion into Kazan (p. 90).

At this stage in the discussion of the national turn, Shevelenko turns her attention to the next stage of the archaist phenomenon; having first looked inwards and to the past in order to define the Russian nation, cultural institutions then turned outward in order to consider how Russia could influence the world around them. It is at this point in the book that we begin to see much more realized interactions with Russian artists and writers and their Western counterparts. Russian authors commonly wrote about Japan's status as a leading warrior state in the East and placed great importance on the fight between the two powers, for if Russia hoped to become 'the representative of Europe' in the region, the struggle would result in the 'enslavement of

one of the combatants' (Shevelenko, p. 91). As the Russo-Japanese war took a turn for the worse for Russia and it was bitterly defeated, followed closely by the first Russian Revolution of 1905, Shevelenko calls attention to the authors' shifts in attention. National sentiment declined, and, in its place, the pages of literary publications were filled with symbolic references to premodern times. Some, such as Viacheslav Ivanov, turn to Ancient Greece, while others turn to Rome to create a new myth of the nation divorced from the defeats of the early 1900s. Any discussion about Slavic myth-creation and language would be incomplete without discussing Pan-Slavism, and Shevelenko also offers a detailed and succinct account of the developments in this regard.

Chapter 4 turns to music, notably the ballet, in the aftermath of the first Russian Revolution. Sergei Prokofiev, Diaghilev, and Andrei Rimsky-Korsakov are the main discussants of this chapter and are successfully contextualized by writings from other critics such as Benois and Leon Bakst, one of the chief contributors to Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* enterprise. Central to this chapter is the unrealized ballet by Prokofiev, *Ala and Lolli*, which Diaghilev rejected as too 'international' for production. Shevelenko traces the rejection of the ballet to the creation of Prokofiev's later work, the *Scythian Suite* (1915), which Rimsky-Korsakov regarded as too aligned with Diaghilev's penchant for the 'primitive as an expression of the national' (p. 19). Shevelenko's use of numerous primary sources here is exceptional and offers a rich point of comparison with the written and visual arts of previous chapters. As with Chapter 2, her field of study shows that the field is complex and layered, for the boundaries between international and Russian were not distinct from one another. Drawing attention to Benois' writings in *Apollo*, Shevelenko stresses the importance of this period for Russian art, and, she argues, it changed the nature of the debate in Russian aesthetics. It was no longer concerned with the question of working with or against the West, but rather, with working in the West to create a 'universal culture.' (p. 152) By staging productions of fervently Russian performances in Paris, Shevelenko furthers the suggestion that these performances marked a shift to a new stage of Russian nationalism. The successful staging of Stravinsky's ballet *The Firebird* in Paris in 1910 is treated as a prime example of the use of Russian folklore that 'forever burst open the dam of Western European complacency, as northern barbarians victoriously defeated the Rome of the Present' (p. 163). The appeal of Russian archaism and the idea of a collective primitive past was seen as the reason for *The Firebird's* success and led to Stravinsky becoming one of the best-known Russian composers in Europe. Even after Stravinsky's success, Shevelenko stresses that the debate around nationalism was far from over. Disagreements around the appropriation of folk motifs, the revival of historical traditions, and arguments around claims to authenticity and critiques of the barbarically primitive continued.

The final chapter considers the legacy of Russian icon painting and its role in shaping the Russian imagination in the twentieth century. Debates around the status of icon painting and newly published historical studies of medieval icons offered artists in the early 1900s unprecedented access to an art form that had been unavailable to earlier generations of artists. The book traces the process by which the icon was secularized, politicized, and transformed from being a religious object to a marker of national identity. A small epilogue considers the months following the February Revolution and sees a new era of national art. Calls for democratization of the arts and shifts towards class discussion resulted in a fusion of political

and aesthetic programs that resulted in new sociopolitical orders that pushed much of the national and aesthetic debates discussed in this book to the margins.

All in all, the book offers a vital contribution to the English-language study of early Russian modernism, and the main characters of Benois and Ivanov offer compelling figures for even those only casually familiar with Russia. Those familiar with the larger region of Central and Eastern Europe will have some qualms, notably when it comes to the perception that the study appears to support a claim that the binary of acceptance or rejection of the European influences expressed in the book is unique to Russia. Quoting the Russian Art Historian Nils Åke Nilsson, Shevelenko brings forward the argument that the engagement with the archaic and primordial was something that ‘expressed Russian uniqueness amid European discussions about the new art’ (pp. 7–8). However, this practice appeared as a common lexicon across much of Central Europe if not all of Europe more broadly. Overall, Shevelenko argues that the cultural milieu in Russia began as an extension of Western trends but then moved beyond them in a different direction, in part because of this pull of archaism. The success of this argument hinges on the definition of ‘West’ she employs, something that is not made explicit. While she does a wonderful job interpreting the exchanges between the aesthetic and political that informed the pull towards archaism in Russia and shows that the binary of the dualism of East and West is not as resolute as it may appear, the structural components between the two sides are left standing—perhaps as a device to aid those only somewhat familiar with the dialogues taking place between the boundaries. If France, Britain, Spain, Italy, and, to some extent, Germany are defined as ‘Western,’ then the book does indeed succeed in offering a rich exploration of Russia’s particular aesthetic of nationalism. The mixing of folk, premodern, and marginalized traditions used by the creative practitioners in the volume does indeed show a ‘fusion of national particularism and radical universalism’ (p. 16) that is altogether different from what we see in France and Britain. If, however, anything to the west of Russia constitutes ‘Western,’ the goal remains unrealized, for there are numerous artistic, literary, and musical examples in the amorphous and equally hard-to-define Central European region that depict a similar fusion of particular and universal, and the struggle to either emulate or reject Western ideology in the quest for national styles. In this manner, the volume becomes part of the Russian versus Western ideological debate.

As the original Russian version is dated to 2017, this book predates the quickly evolving dynamics in the region after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Questions of nationalism and imperialism are at the forefront of not only the volume’s historical examples but also occupy the minds of scholars of Russian art, history and culture. This reviewer wonders how the 2024 English-language revision could have utilized the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Given the importance of political influence on aesthetics for Shevelenko, there is a rich possibility for connecting the current political crisis to the events discussed in the book. The third chapter’s discussion of the Russo-Japanese War and Russia’s attempt to become the ‘ruler of Asia’ is one such location that a discussion of the 2022 invasion might have offered great insight into how this link between archaism and imperialism has been maintained.



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