

Natalya Goncharova 1881-1962

Background notes

Jane Angelini — 10 March 2021



Natalya Goncharova, *Self Portrait*, 1907

At a time when huge strides were being made in the artistic communities of both Europe and Russia, and as dramatic social and political changes were ongoing around them, Goncharova stood as a woman driving forward a movement that defined 20th-century art. An early leader in the Russian avant-garde, Natalia Goncharova blazed a trail with her experiments in art and design. During her dazzling and sometimes controversial career she created paintings, sculptures and religious series, refusing to let gender define her artistic approach. She also worked on stage sets, illustrated socialist newspapers and designed dresses, using diverse sources and influences – from Russian folk art and textile designs to the latest trends in modernism. Goncharova referred to the eclectic range of styles and media she embraced as *Vsechestvo* - as the idea of *everythingness*, giving the artist the possibility to apply any style regardless of time and origin: ‘... artwork does not depend on the time and place of its creation, therefore the works of Cézanne and those of the Egyptian craftsmen are still contemporary and of value.’ Sixteen other Russian avant-gardist have a manifold oeuvre, but Goncharova’s multiplicity of skills and her strategy of assimilating different styles distinguishes her.



Natalya Goncharova, *Women with Rakes*, 1907

Natalya Goncharova was fortunate in beginning her career in Moscow at a time when exceptional interest was shown in the arts. In the late 19th century the old Russian capital had produced a new class of patrons amongst the wealthy merchants and industrialists. Often descended from peasant stock with an innate taste for splendour but without upper-class conventions, they were not afraid to launch out in startling directions in their collecting zeal. They turned to exciting aspects of contemporary art and to old icons, hitherto largely ignored. The “Old Believer” sect were the first to collect icons for their artistic merit and in 1913 an extensive exhibition of icons was held in Moscow. Since there was practically no concept of secular art in pre-Petrine Russia, the exhibited items possessed not only historical and aesthetic value, but, above all, were objects of great religious and spiritual significance. This first public exhibition of the recently cleaned 12th-to 15th-century icons on such a grand scale had a tremendous impact on the future development of Russian culture, and affected the ‘first generation’ of the avant-garde in particular – Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich amongst others.



Natalya Goncharova, *Nativity*, 1910

The most spectacular collectors in Russia during the first decade of the 20th century were the two Moscow textile merchants, Shchukin and Morozov, the great collectors of French post- impressionist art and in the case of Morozov of contemporary Russian painters (including Goncharova). It was of vital importance for Russian art that young artists were allowed to see these collections, join the salon evening discussions, as well as visit the several exhibitions that were held in Moscow in this period. The effect of these visits was to undermine the very foundations of academic teaching of art, leading to heated discussions, feverish excitement, the formation of a succession of avant garde groups under various titles and a surge in creativity. It is to this milieu that Goncharova belonged and played a considerable part in shaping the direction of the Russian avant garde.



Natalya Goncharova, *Cyclist*, 1913

Natalya Goncharova was born in 1881 in the Tula region of Russia. As a child she was struck by the variety of customs still current amongst the peasantry; the colourful clothes, the singing and dancing, the wooden utensils, village processions and the solemn ceremonial in the village church and its icons left indelible impressions, later reflected in her art. A vast store of folklore, drawn from ancient legends, or bought from the East by traders was still kept alive in peasant oral tradition. Since childhood Goncharova was interested in drawing, which led to her studying at the Moscow School of painting, where she met the artist Larionov around 1900, a life-long friendship that had an enduring influence on her artistic development. Together they discovered the stimulus of French painting and of early Russian art. Her early works are a reflection of this and it was only when she felt she had “mastered all the light and freshness “ she had admired in the French impressionists, that she “shook off the dust of the West from her feet”, as she declared and found inspiration in her own country and in the East. This inspiration came largely from her interest in old Russian culture, icons in particular, and perhaps above all in a general quest to find a new kind of spirituality in art.



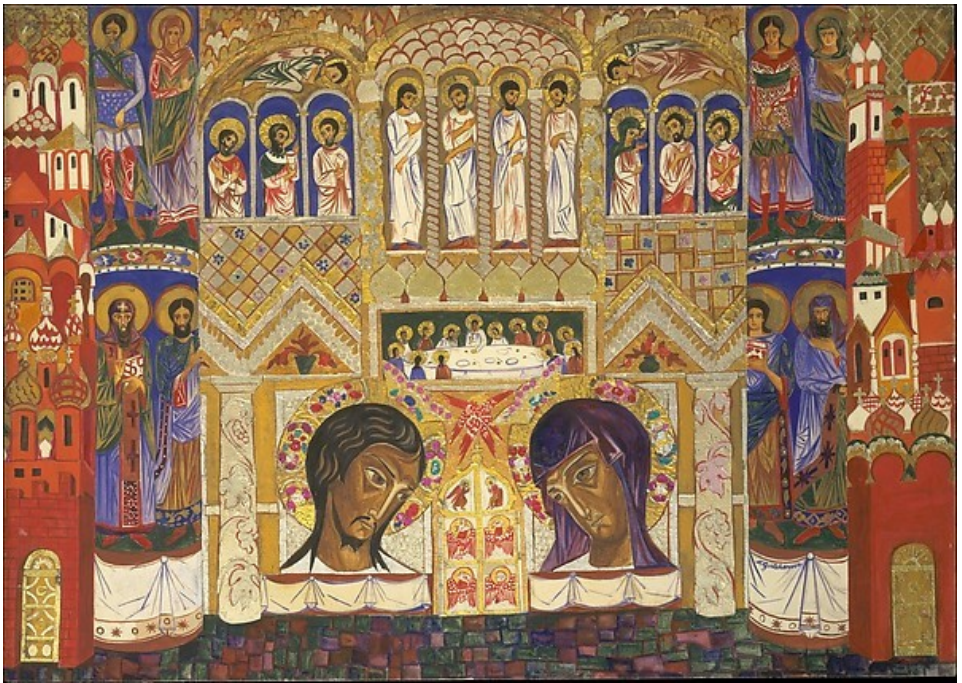
Natalya Goncharova, *Peasant Dance*, 1910

The year 1913 marked Goncharova's emergence into the avant-garde movement, and of the avant-garde itself finding prominence in Russian culture. Goncharova presented a colossal 800 works in a solo show, a retrospective showing works from different stages of her artistic career : Primitivism, Cubism, Rayonism, Futurism. The exhibition opened new channels and new perspectives and for Goncharova placed her at the very heart of Modernism in Russia. Gaining national acclaim following the show, she became a major determining factor in the recognition of the avant-garde as a whole. This is the most exciting and productive period of her career, when she was a dominant force in the avant-garde world.



Natalya Goncharova, *Rayonist Lilies*, 1913

In 1914 she worked as a stage designer in Le Coq d'Or for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris for the first time, heralding one of the turning points of Goncharova's career. The great impresario invited her and Larionov to return to Paris in 1915 to work for the Saisons Russes on a permanent basis. Sadly, she never returned to Russia. Living in Paris from 1919 onwards, she continued to work until her death: painting, designing sets and costumes for the ballet and theatre, producing schemes for interiors and creating clothing designs. Increasingly divorced from the French art world and cut off from her homeland, she fell into obscurity and has only gradually come to assume the position in art historical narratives that is rightfully hers.



Natalya Goncharova, Stage Set for Ballet, "Liturgie", 1915



Natalya Goncharova, *Costume Design St John*, 1913

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