

## PART 1

When discussing Russian art, historians often use the terms “classicism”, “romanticism”, and later “avant-garde”, or non-figurative art, but they hesitate to use the words “Russian Impressionism”. It may seem like Impressionism was not the right fit for Russia in the late 1800s, yet it slowly gained popularity - and evolved - among the more traditional styles, like Realism and Naturalism. At the time, the most promising graduates of the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg and of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture got a scholarship to travel to Europe in order to perfect their art. In the works that were created during these trips, we can see a mixture of the classic style that they had been trained in and the new notions that they picked up along the way.

The most popular destination was Paris which was the centre of the arts in Europe at that time. Painters travelled from Moscow or St. Petersburg via Warsaw, and visited Dresden, specifically the Dresden Gallery. The most universally impressive painting for them was Rafael's *The Sistine Madonna*. Ultimately, they always ended up in Paris.

Meanwhile, most Russian artists did not have access to European art, unless it was delivered to them. Surprisingly, the first glimpse of French Impressionism was delivered via an Industrialist Exhibition in 1896. Only one pavilion at the exhibition was taken up by the Galerie Bernheim of Paris. The Galerie brought works by Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, and Alfred Sisley, none of them ever before seen in Russia. Monet's *Haystack* produced such a strong impression on Wassily Kandinsky that he decided to give up his legal studies and dedicate himself to painting.

Kandinsky's attitude towards Impressionism did not reflect what most Russian artists thought of this movement. On the whole, Russian painters treated Impressionism as a messy art form, as something clumsy and ridiculous. To them, art had to be more precise and neat, more detailed. Russian painters were dedicated to the classic, academic approach to art.

For instance, Konstantin Korovin instinctively painted in the Impressionist style and was criticised for it by his professors at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. One of his teachers, Evgraf Sorokin, observed Korovin's process and made the following remark, “You use all the wrong colours for your objects and lay them on the canvas in spots. A painting cannot consist entirely of spots!” To which Korovin replied, “I see everything through spots of colour and tonal contrasts.”

At the time of the emergence of Impressionism in Russia, the dominant artistic style was Realism, which in its essence was considered very different from Impressionism. The paintings had to have a plot of social significance. This even applied to landscapes. The image had to be naturalistic and finely detailed.

Impressionism, in turn, neglected subject matter, but explored how light, space, and air create a certain impression. This is where the name of this movement came from, since its main task was to convey the artist's impression of a particular moment, place, or person, without focusing on the details.

With that being said, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Russian art went through a transformation. The extraordinary success of the Peredvizhniki movement in the 1870s and later in the 1890s highlighted the shift from the traditional style to more modern art forms. The older generation of Peredvizhniki was conservative and did not welcome the changes that people like Pavel Tretyakov, a famous art collector, encouraged. In fact, they judged Tretyakov for acquiring and displaying a number of Impressionist paintings that were, by contrast, so full of light and joy. Conversely, in his letter to a prominent Russian painter Ilya Repin, his colleague Ivan Kramskoi noted that “The time is now for Russian art to start moving towards the light, colours, and air”.

## PART 2

As the Russian artists began to travel more, their attitude towards painting started to change. They were excited about innovation and ready to experiment with styles and techniques. This is what really opened up the way for Impressionism in Russia.

Valentin Serov and Ilya Repin had the most influence among the early Russian Impressionists. They both got a sense of the French Impressionism when they visited Paris and incorporated that style into their own works. They were able to use the Impressionist techniques to tell the stories that carried weight in Russian society, thus uniting the artistic style of Europe with the Russian substance. Of course, combining the light French style with complex subject matter wasn't always a success but that didn't stop the artists from trying.

Ultimately, Russian artists found a way to make Impressionism their own. In portraits and family scenes, Russian artists painted them more honestly and with more depth of feeling. The national identity was just as important as the relationship to the tradition of realism. Impressionism, with its focus on spontaneous expression and modernity, gave new ways of expressing this. Depicting Russian country life was important culturally and emotionally to the Russian mentality. Artists like Isaac Levitan did this wonderfully. The famous brothers Alexei and Sergei Tkachev produced stunning works.

The Russian avant-garde painters were the third generation to be acquainted with French Impressionism. When Igor Grabar and Konstantin Korovin were at the peak of their careers at the turn of the century, the new avant-garde painters burst onto the scene and continued to explore the theme of light. They realised that showcasing light meant conveying reality through painting in a way that hasn't been done before. They were interested in finding ways to give reality a makeover and that's what Impressionism was perfect for. But they went even further in replacing the theme of light with the theme of colour. They were working with a technique that could make colours vibrate on canvas. That is how the themes of light and colour combined into an ultimate expression of ultra-colour and ultra-light.