

Article

# 1905 and Art: From Aesthetes to Revolutionaries

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**Abstract:** This article examines the impact that the experience of the 1905 Revolution had on the political attitudes of professional artists of various creative persuasions and on the younger generation who were still attending art schools. It inevitably focuses on a few representatives and argues that Realists as well as more innovative artists like Valentin Serov and the World of Art group became critical of the regime and began to produce works satirizing the Tsar and his government. These artists did not, however, take their disenchantment further and express a particular ideology in their works or join any specific political party. The author also suggests that the Revolution affected art students like Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, who subsequently became leaders of the avant-garde and developed the style known as Neo-Primitivism. The influence of 1905 can be seen in their pursuit of creative freedom, the subjects they chose, and the distinctly anti-establishment ethos that emerged in their Neo-Primitivist works around 1910.

**Keywords:** 1905 Revolution; Nikolai II; Neo-Primitivism; realism; World of Art; satirical journals; Valentin Serov; Mikhail Larionov; Natalia Goncharova

On 9 January 1905, a peaceful demonstration of ordinary citizens, led by the Russian Orthodox priest, Father Gapon, was fired upon by Tsarist troops in St. Petersburg.<sup>1</sup> The massacre unleashed a series of mass uprisings, which became known as the 1905 Revolution. Although the Tsar made some concessions, ultimately the entire revolt was brutally suppressed by the Imperial government. The events shocked and outraged all progressive elements within Russian society, and the artistic community was no exception (Shleev 1987, p. 172). Numerous artists of very different political and creative persuasions, who were at various stages in their careers—from highly respected members of the Imperial Academy of Arts down to lowly students—were politicized by the revolution and reacted against the brutality displayed by the regime in suppressing the revolt.

In this article, I shall examine some of the initial responses to Bloody Sunday and the unfolding events of 1905 by established artists of various persuasions. I shall then go on to suggest that the reverberations of 1905 continued to be felt for many years afterwards, and that one of the long-term effects of the revolution can be detected in the decidedly anti-establishment ethos of the avant-garde artists who experienced the event and came to prominence in the Russian art world a few years later. Their lack of respect for the regime and their critical stance towards it were revealed creatively in the subject matter and style of their Neo-Primitivist paintings and socially in their provocative behaviour and shocking public performances. In developing Neo-Primitivism, which emerged in its mature form around 1909–1910, these innovative artists self-consciously rejected accepted aesthetic conventions and prevailing notions of good taste and frequently adopted a subject matter that deliberately challenged the aesthetic, social, and political values of the current artistic and cultural establishment.

Some of the initial responses to 1905 were perhaps predictable. This is particularly true of artists, like Ilya Repin, a celebrated realist painter, who is known for works such as *The Volga Barge Haulers* of 1870–73, which depicted men hauling a barge, their bodies broken by this back-breaking work, and *They Did not Expect Him* of 1884–1888 (both State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg), which showed a political exile returning to his family. Repin was



**Citation:** Lodder, Christina. 2022. 1905 and Art: From Aesthetes to Revolutionaries. *Arts* 11: 65. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts11030065>

Academic Editor: Dennis Ioffe

Received: 18 April 2022

Accepted: 1 June 2022

Published: 15 June 2022

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a prominent member of the Wanderers' group (The Association of Travelling Exhibitions), which had fought for artistic freedom in the 1860s and 1870s and saw its role as contributing to the revolutionary struggle in the widest meaning of the word, by painting Russian life as it was, warts and all, and exposing society's iniquities and inequalities (Valkenier 1989).

By 1905, these ideals had lost some of their original intensity. Repin, like most of his realist colleagues, had joined the artistic establishment and had become a respected Academician, executing several important government commissions, such as his enormous (4 × 8 m) composite portrait of 81 figures, commissioned by Tsar Nikolai II, *The Ceremonial Meeting of the State Council, 7 May 1901* (1903, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg). Recognition and prosperity may have muted the artist's radicalism, but his response to the events of Bloody Sunday showed that his political and social conscience were easily reawakened. He not only painted the study *Breaking up the Demonstration, Bloody Sunday* (1905, Central Museum of the Revolution, Moscow), but he also took the opportunity to make a public intervention on behalf of the revolutionary cause. On 20 January 1905, eleven days after the massacre, Repin and some fellow realists published a petition, entitled "The Need for Enlightenment" [*Nuzhdy prosveshcheniia*]. In this document, he and his colleagues called for "the foundations of political freedom" to be established in Russia, not in "a partial way as at present", but by means of a "full and radical transformation"<sup>2</sup>.

Other realist artists also demonstrated their solidarity with the victims of 9 January. For instance, on 26 January, the artist Mikhail Malyshev sent one of his paintings to the newspaper *Our Life* [*Nasha zhizn'*] as a contribution to the fund set up to help the victims of Bloody Sunday. He wrote, "wanting to help the families of workers, suffering from 9 January as much as possible, I can only offer my own work and therefore I humbly ask the administration of the respected newspaper *Our Life* to accept my painting *Hard News* ... and sell it for money" (Malyshev 1905; in Shleev 1987, p. 173).

Such sympathy from realist artists for the victims of the massacre was, perhaps, to be expected. Inevitably, too, these artists produced paintings that illustrated the events of 1905, conveying messages that were highly critical of the regime, such as *The Shooting* (Figure 1). The artist was Sergei Ivanov, a Wanderer, who usually depicted the hardships endured by ordinary citizens.<sup>3</sup> In *The Shooting* of 1905, the focus is not on the soldiers but on the dead victims. The soldiers on the left are hidden behind the smoke of their guns, while the demonstrators to the right are barely visible, their presence indicated by the red flag. The main focus is on the corpses lying in the sun. Ivanov used emphatic contrasts to emphasize the horror of the image. The dramatic play of light on a small part of the buildings serves to emphasize the shadows engulfing the rest. The dark buildings contrast with the starkly sunlit ground on which two small figures lie huddled and inert. They stand out in relief against the vast empty space, and their immobility is highlighted by the small running dog. To emphasize the revolutionary message of the image further, a red flag waves above the demonstrators, while the dark buildings present a rather forbidding presence, like the implacable oppression of the Tsarist regime itself.

Yet it was not just creative figures associated with the Wanderers who responded critically to "Bloody Sunday". There are several instances where artists' responses to events seem out of character with what we know of their activities and social and political allegiances prior to this date. Such reactions highlight the degree to which the events of 1905 seem to have made artists rethink their political positions and radicalized their outlooks.

Valentin Serov was one of these. A former pupil of Repin, he was also an Academician and had established a reputation as an artist who employed an acceptable degree of experimentation in his painting. He was a successful and popular portraitist among the upper echelons of Russian society and had produced numerous paintings of members of the Court and the Imperial family. In 1896, he had painted the Tsar's coronation and had subsequently produced more than one flattering portrait of Nikolai II, which showed him in a positive light (Figure 2). Serov seems to have been a rather urbane figure, and although it is difficult to establish precisely his political allegiances before 1905, his works

and activities make it extremely hard to believe that he had any revolutionary inclinations. But this changed completely during 1905. He actually witnessed the events of “Bloody Sunday” and saw the soldiers firing on the peaceful demonstrators on the Troitskii Bridge. On 20 January, he wrote to Repin, “I will never forget what I saw from the windows of the Academy of Arts on 9 January—the restrained, majestic, unarmed crowd, going to meet the cavalry attack and pointed guns—it was a horrific spectacle.” (Golubev 1941, p. 32; Shleev 1987, p. 174).



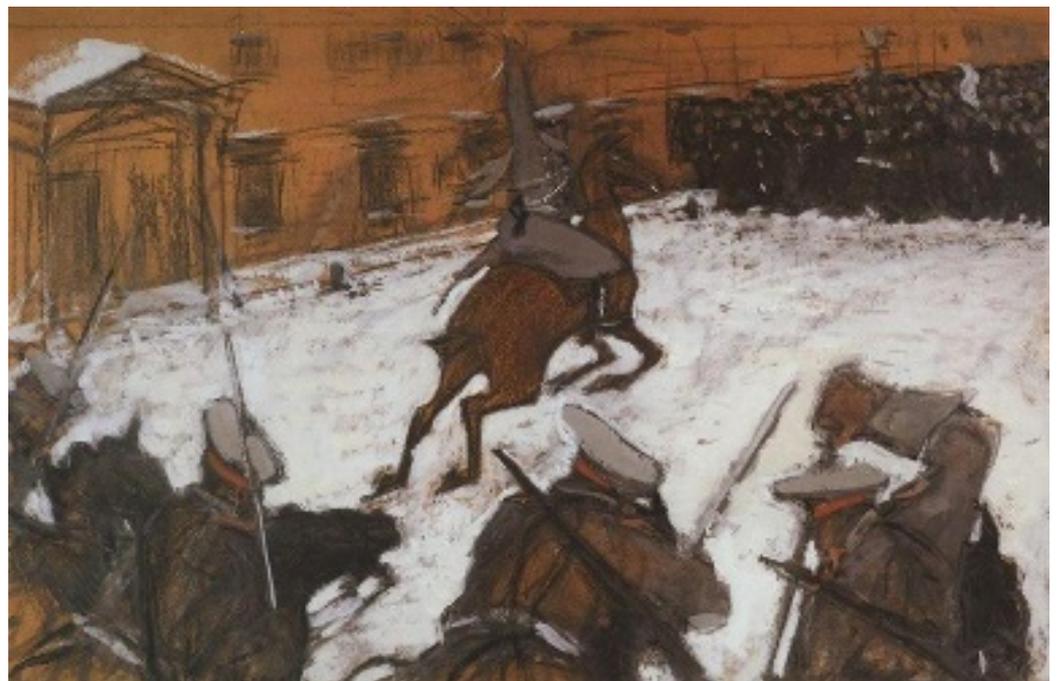
**Figure 1.** Sergei Ivanov, *The Shooting (Rasstrel)* also known as *Soldiers Shooting at the Demonstration*, 1905, oil on canvas, State Museum of the Revolution, Moscow.

A few weeks later, Serov wrote a letter to the Academy protesting about the events. This was not an empty gesture because the president of the Imperial Academy of Arts was none other than Prince Vladimir Aleksandrovich Romanov, who was also commander in chief of the troops in St. Petersburg, and ultimately responsible for the massacre on “Bloody Sunday”. Serov’s letter was not read out to the Academy. Outraged at being deprived of his voice in this way and horrified by the Academy’s association with the bloodbath, on 10 March, Serov took the drastic step of resigning (Serov 1937, pp. 102–3). Since the Imperial Academy was very closely associated with the Imperial household, his action signalled the intensity of his feelings of disapproval and the strength of his desire to disassociate himself from the government. The action also entailed a certain degree of financial sacrifice on his part because it removed him from the significant sources of patronage that were exerted by the court as well as by the Academy, which still dominated artistic life in Russia at this point.

The strength of Serov’s feelings was subsequently expressed in a painting *Soldiers, Good Fellows! Where is Your Glory?* (Figure 3). The title is particularly ironic, because it comes from a popular military song of the time and seems to have been deliberately chosen to emphasize the disparity between the values that the soldiers (in theory) held dear and their actual deeds. It also implies that their skills, which should be used to defend the country against enemy attack, are now being employed to murder the country’s citizens, the very people whom the army should be defending.



**Figure 2.** Valentin Serov, *Portrait of His Imperial Majesty Nikolai II, Tsar of All the Russias*, 1902, oil on canvas, 117 × 89.50 cm., Trustees of the Regimental Trust of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, on loan to the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh. Nikolai Aleksandrovich Romanov is shown in the full uniform of the Royal Scots Greys to which he was appointed colonel-in-chief by Queen Victoria in 1894.



**Figure 3.** Valentin Serov, *Soldiers, Good Fellows! Where is Your Glory?* [*Soldatushki, bravy rebyatushki! Gde zhe vasha slava?*], 1905, gouache on board, 47.5 × 41.5 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

Serov's image focuses on the action of the soldiers, and particularly on the role of the commanding officer, waving the punitive force forward. His face and actions are exaggerated and dominate the center of the composition. He is almost grotesque (Sidorov 1969, p 120). Yet the image does not place any revolutionary emphasis on the demonstrators or the victims. There is no red flag. Instead, the icon held aloft indicates the religious aspect of the demonstration, evoking the leading presence of Father Georgii Gapon and emphasizing those very qualities that Serov himself had stressed in his earlier letter—the “restrained and majestic” quality of the crowd.

In fact, Serov identified this image as a representation of the dispersal of a demonstration that took place in Moscow, close to the School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in October 1905 (Serov 1971, vol. 1, p. 84). There is no reason to doubt his testimony, since the work was not published until December 1905 (*Zhupel*, No. 1 (1905), p. 5). Nevertheless, the art historian Vladimir Shleev has suggested that it was really a visual expression of Serov's horror at what he had witnessed earlier that year in St. Petersburg. Shleev cites the nature of the buildings and the snow lying on the ground as reasons for identifying this scene not with October in Moscow, but with January in St. Petersburg (Shleev 1987, pp. 174–75).

Whatever the precise location and time of the action depicted in Serov's painting, the image is clearly directed against the men who were responsible for leading the soldiers and inciting them to mow down their own people. The work is an extremely powerful criticism of the regime. Even so, one should beware of jumping to conclusions. The work expresses Serov's protest against a specific government policy and action, it does not necessarily indicate that the artist, at this time, was completely disenchanted with the Tsarist regime to the point of becoming a revolutionary or joining any political party. There is, for instance, no red flag, which might signal such an ideological position.

Nevertheless, Serov was clearly becoming increasingly critical of the regime and particularly of the Tsar himself. This is revealed in a drawing, entitled *1905: After the Suppression* (Figure 4). This is a sharply satirical composition, which shows the commanding officer, the Tsar, rewarding his troops (Sidorov 1969, p. 120). Serov's caricature of Nikolai II stresses his moustache and beard, and shows him holding a tennis racket under one arm, while stretching out the other to pin a medal on a soldier. The Tsar ignores and, indeed, has his back to the numerous civilian corpses, unarmed and innocent, which lie in rows in front of the soldiers. The carriage in the background being driven towards the group of men is clearly coming to take the Tsar away for a game of tennis.



**Figure 4.** Valentin Serov, 1905. *After the Suppression* [1905-oi god. *Posle usmireniia*], 1905, pencil on paper, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Serov's drawing makes the Tsar the center of the composition, standing between the victims and the perpetrators of the crime. This serves to highlight visually Nikolai II's responsibility. The fact that he has his back turned to his victims and is holding a tennis racket

racket suggests that he is callously indifferent to the suffering of his people. It implies that his mind is too full of trivial pursuits, like tennis, to be in a position of such responsibility or to give much thought as to how he should command his troops. The notion of Nero fiddling while Rome burned has been translated here into the idea of the Tsar thinking of tennis while his military representatives slaughter his subjects.

I would argue that this drawing reveals a substantial change in the artist's political stance, which over 1905 had developed from, at the beginning, inherent support for the regime to criticism of the Tsar's soldiers, and ultimately to criticism of the Tsar himself. Before 1905, Serov's work does not display any indications of revolutionary sentiment or anti-establishment attitudes. His 1902 painting of the Tsar in the uniform of the Royal Scots Greys (Figure 2) shows Nikolai as intelligent, serious, responsible, and even heroic. Serov's 1905 painting of *Soldiers* criticized the military commanders for their brutality, not the Tsar. The later drawing, however, places the blame firmly on the Tsar himself, whom Serov portrays as an irresponsible, frivolous, and immoral leader, incapable of ruling his country.

Serov was not alone in reassessing his political allegiances in response to the events of 1905. His painting *Soldiers, Good Fellows! Where is Your Glory?* appeared in the first issue of the satirical journal *Zhupel'* [*Bugbear*], which was politically linked to the Social Democratic Party. Founded and edited by Zinovii (Zeilik) Grzhebin, three issues of the journal were published (December 1905–January 1906) by Sergei Yuritsyn in St. Petersburg. Mstislav Dobuzhinskii and his colleagues who collaborated on *Bugbear*, namely Evgenii Lansere and Konstantin Somov, were attached to the World of Art Group. Set up in 1898, the group rejected the realism of the Wanderers and the idea that art should provide some sort of social commentary. Instead, they celebrated purely artistic values and sought to evoke purely aesthetic and sensual sensations in their audience. Their works often portrayed Versailles and themes from the eighteenth century, expressing a poetic nostalgia for an age of elegance and dalliance, while visually relying on tonal harmonies and linear rhythms (Kannedy 1977).

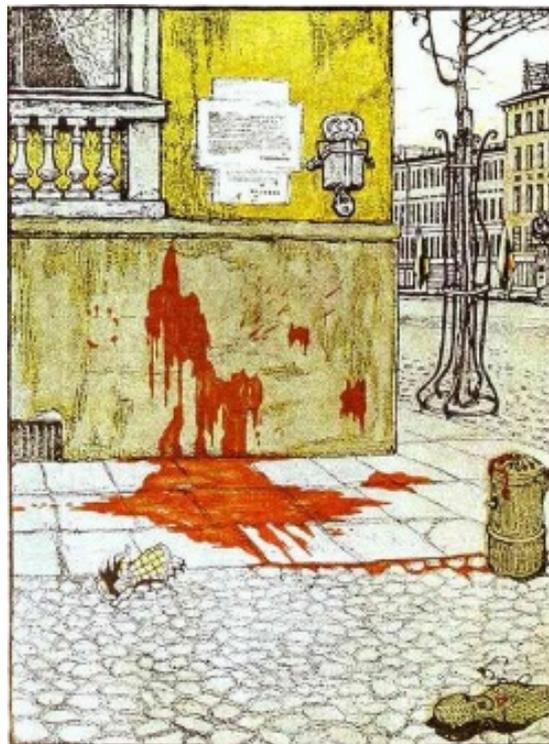
This creative approach, which is often labelled "art for art's sake", initially went along with a profound indifference to politics, a fact that makes these artists' involvement in a satirical journal like *Bugbear* all the more surprising and significant. It seems to indicate a fundamental change of direction among these members of the World of Art—a change that signified their transformation from aesthetes into revolutionaries or at least into critics of the regime and sympathizers with those espousing revolution.

This change in attitude is further demonstrated by the fact that they sought and indeed managed to secure the co-operation of the revolutionary realist writer Maxim Gorky. Dobuzhinskii explained "This idea of inviting Gorky at first seemed rather wild (Somov, Benois and Gorky!). But it seems that from this something unexpected could result. Of course, his name is important, and that is precisely what is needed at this time." (Revoliutsiia 1977, p. 24). Lansere explained to Benois (who was in Paris at this time), "I know that you have a great antipathy to Gorky. And I do not know how long we will be able to go along with him—but it seems to me that we need to try this partnership and try it with an open heart, because something very significant and totally new could arise from it." (Gorkii 1957, pp. 359–69). Being present and involved in the events was clearly crucial; Benois never became as fervently anti-establishment as his colleagues, who remained in Russia and experienced the 1905 revolution first-hand.

In November 1905, the World of Art artists, Dobuzhinskii, Somov and Lansere, published a declaration "The Artists' Voice" [*Golos khudozhnikov*]<sup>4</sup>. In political terms, this could be characterized as liberal, rather than revolutionary. It seemed genuinely to welcome the Tsar's promise of partial democracy in the October Manifesto as inaugurating "a great renewal of the country". The artists' main concern, however, inevitably centred on the role that art would play in performing the new tasks that now confronted the nation. The artists expressed the hope that "beauty would not be forgotten", that "art and beauty [would] become a part of life", and that they would help to "establish a link and a mutual

understanding between the artist and not just society, but the people". They argued that such a link would be facilitated by a thorough reform of the Imperial Academy of Arts. Demanding reform of an art school might seem quite innocuous, but it was not. Given the close links between the Tsar's household and the administration of the Academy, and especially the close association between the events of Bloody Sunday and the President of the Academy, the call for reform was not without political implications. On the contrary, it was implicitly radical; it challenged the regime's control of art and the art world, demanding freedom from ideological control.

The actions of the artists matched their words. In December 1905, they actively participated in the publication of the satirical magazine *Bugbear*, and so they became publicly involved in the current political debate, and "a part of life". The first issue of *Bugbear* in December 1905 contained not only Serov's image *Soldiers, Good Fellows! Where is your Glory?* but also Dobuzhinskii's *October Idyll* (1905, Figure 5). Not surprisingly, the magazine was confiscated by the authorities (Sidorov 1969, p. 122). Dobuzhinskii's image shows the corner of a city street after a demonstration has been forcibly dispersed. Traces of violence are still present. Blood trickles down the wall and a few items lie discarded on the ground—a child's doll, some glasses, and one shoe. There are no people; instead, the discarded objects poignantly emphasize their absence and suggest the horror of their experiences and their fate. The title refers to the Tsar's October Manifesto, which is posted on the wall. The reality behind the false promises of the declaration, however, is dramatically represented by the blood beneath, symbolizing the bloodshed and the brutality that accompanied the repression of the revolution.



**Figure 5.** Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, *October Idyll* [*Oktiabr'skaia idilliia*], reproduced in *Bugbear* [Zhupel], No. 2 1905.

The third issue of *Bugbear* contained Ivan Bilibin's image of a donkey, enshrined amongst the imperial regalia and clearly intended to represent the Tsar (Figure 6). The Griffons refer to the house of Romanov. This irreverent image is drawn in precisely in the same style that Bilibin had used in his illustrations for children's books and his record of Russian peasant costumes. Its meaning was clearly apparent, and, for his pains, Bilibin was arrested and briefly imprisoned.



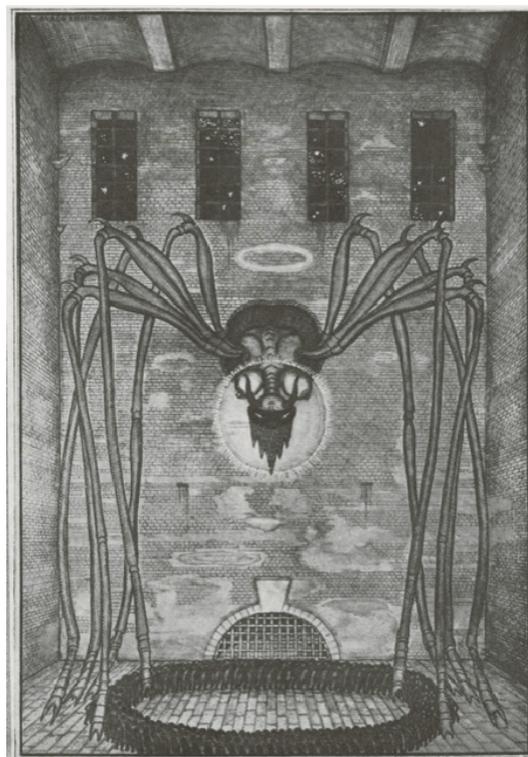
**Figure 6.** Ivan Bilibin, *The Donkey at a Twentieth of its Natural Size* [Osel v 1/20 natural'noi velichiny], reproduced in *Bugbear* [Zhupel], No. 3, 1906.

*Bugbear* was closed down after its third issue, but Grzhebin founded another journal to continue its work, *Hell's Post* [Yadskaiia pochta]. In the second number of the new publication, Lansere, like Serov and Dobuzhinskii, expressed his disgust with the regime in *The Funeral Feast* (Figure 7). Like Serov, he focused on the soldiers and their indifference to their bloodthirsty actions. His image shows the military elite feasting and celebrating (presumably rejoicing in the deaths of the demonstrators), instead of mourning the victims and being ashamed of their actions and the bloody reprisals that they had taken and were still taking against their fellow Russians.



**Figure 7.** Evgenii Lansere, *The Funeral Feast* [Trizna], reproduced in *Hell's Post* [Adskaiia pochta], No. 2, 1906.

Such critical images were not unique amongst the work of these artists but formed part of a much larger and sustained satirical output. Dobuzhinskii produced a striking image of evil in *The Devil* (1907, Figure 8), which was reproduced in the literary and artistic journal *The Golden Fleece* [*Zolotoe runo*] in 1907. With its essentially symbolist orientation, this was a serious and intellectual publication, rather than a political or satirical magazine. Dobuzhinskii produced his image for an issue devoted to the satanic, but he took the opportunity to associate the devil with incarceration and control, and in this respect his vision was clearly directed at the regime.<sup>5</sup> The beard, and the halo echoing the imperial crown, suggests the Tsar, while the prison scene, with the dwarfed figures going around in circles, suggests the inescapable oppression imposed by the government. The image recalls the composition of Vincent van Gogh's *Prisoners Exercising* of 1890 (Pushkin State Museum of Arts, Moscow), which itself seems to have been inspired by Gustav Doré's print of Newgate Prison, London.



**Figure 8.** Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, *The Devil* [D'iavol], reproduced in *The Golden Fleece* [*Zolotoe runo*], No. 1, 1907.

The politicization of professional artists during 1905 led them to engage either implicitly or explicitly with political themes in their work, but it did not necessarily lead to political activism as such. Although these artists were concerned to “express publicly their sympathy for the Revolution and protest against the Tsarist establishment,” (Minin 2009, p. 16), this did not lead them to go further in opposing the *status quo* by becoming politically active or joining any of the revolutionary parties.<sup>6</sup>

This absence of a specific political allegiance distinguishes the work of the realist and World of Art artists from some of the more ideologically charged and partisan caricatures, such as *The Hare and the Lion*, produced by Mikhail Chemodanov (Figure 8). He had been producing caricatures since the 1880s, while working as a dentist, and published this image in 1905, in the first and only issue of *The Sting* [*Zhalo*], a pro-Bolshevik publication (Figure 9).<sup>7</sup> Basing his image on Ivan Krylov's fable of “The Hare and Lion”, Chemodanov indicated that, although it was the workers who were bringing the regime to its knees, it was the liberal bourgeoisie that was reaping the benefit. This message reflected the Marxist

notion of class conflict, indicating the author's allegiance to communism<sup>8</sup> Even more explicitly revolutionary was his image *Two Perspectives*, which was issued as a postcard in 1906 (Figure 10). Such images throw the works produced by the Wanderers and World of Art painters into relief. The extreme revolutionary ideas expressed by Chemodanov were absent from the satirical output of professional painters, who were politicized to the extent of producing images that explicitly attacked the regime but did not produce works that espoused specific revolutionary ideas or tactics.



**Figure 9.** Mikhail Chemodanov, *The Hare and the Lion* [*Zaiats na lovle*], October 1905; reproduced in *The Sting* [*Zhalo*], No. 1 (1905). The Lion is labelled “The Proletariat”; the Bear “Power”; and the Hare “The Liberal Bourgeoisie”.



**Figure 10.** Mikhail Chemodanov, *Two Perspectives* [*Dva Perspektivy*], postcard (Moscow, October 1906). On the left, the Tsar is dancing on a pile of corpses. The caption reads “The triumph of battlefield autocracy (More than 300 executions in two months)”. On the right, the Tsar is hanging from a noose and the caption reads “It will end badly!”.

Not surprisingly, the events of 1905 seem to have politicized not only artists who had already established themselves as professional painters, but also those who were still

studying. The artist, Aleksei Kravchenko, then a student at the Moscow School of Painting Sculpture and Architecture, recalled how the school became a focus for revolutionary activity and how the students handed it over to the striking workers:

The autumn of my second year of study, 1905, found me and my colleagues more often in a series of demonstrations in streets filled with banners and people, and rarely in the studios, where, instead of plaster casts, there now stood young, burning faces, deathly quiet and with fiery eyes. The doors of our school were wide open—and in the basement one could constantly hear gunfire. The university, the conservatory, technical institutions, and we represented the avant-garde movement among the student youth. (Dmitrieva 1951, pp. 152–55)

Even without such sentiments, the students and staff at the school would have found it difficult to remain completely aloof from the conflict. The school building stood at the top end of Miasnitskaia street, just near the Central Post Office, which meant that it was very close to the frequent and often violent confrontations between strikers and police (Sharp 2006, p. 70). Indeed, at one point, the school's dining room was used as a hospital to tend the wounded (Dmitrieva 1951, p. 154). We know that several students were arrested as a result of such activities and that the school was temporarily closed by the authorities. This was contested by the students who demanded the director's resignation (Dmitrieva 1951, p. 154). Not surprisingly, the police regarded the institution with deep suspicion and continued to keep it under surveillance (Moleva and Beliutin 1967, p. 282).

The other main art school in Moscow, the Stroganov School of Applied Arts, was similarly engulfed by revolutionary fervor. Nikolai Globa, its director, reported that the students "have become incapable of serious work" (Kurasov et al. 2015, p. 45). The basement of the students' hostel on Miasnitskaia became a shooting range, while the main hall was devoted to combat training. Students engaged in the fighting and, at one point, were responsible for cutting the telephone connection between Moscow and St. Petersburg. As a result, the school was closed through most of 1905 and only reopened on 1 September 1906 (Kurasov et al. 2015, pp. 45–46).

Elsewhere in Russia, the future sculptor Naum Gabo described being caught up in a pogrom, of almost being burnt alive by the black hundreds, and how this experience made him a revolutionary overnight (Gabo 1970; Hammer and Lodder 2000, pp. 17–18). In Moscow, the painter Kazimir Malevich recalled fighting on the barricades, fleeing the victorious Tsarist troops, and taking shelter in the room of a stranger who was celebrating his birthday (Malevich 1930; and Bowlt and Konecny 2002, p. 165).

Among other artists who were politicized by witnessing or participating in the events of 1905 were Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova, who five years later emerged as leaders of the avant-garde and spearheaded the development of Neo-Primitivism. During the events of 1905, they were students at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, which was one of the centers of the revolutionary student movement (Moleva and Beliutin 1967, p. 281). Although neither Larionov nor Goncharova seem to have been actively involved in revolutionary activities in 1905, they were clearly sympathetic to the revolutionaries and knew some of the activists, maintaining relationships with them even after they had been arrested. Larionov, for instance, visited fellow students imprisoned over the period, including Nikolai Vinogradov, who was studying architecture and was "in charge of ammunition for the school's insurrectionist armed force" (Moleva and Beliutin 1967, p. 281). Larionov and Vinogradov remained friends and later, in 1913, co-operated in exhibiting popular woodcuts, bringing what were considered low forms of art to the attention of the art establishment and asserting (rather provocatively) the right of these works to be taken as seriously as high art.<sup>9</sup>

There is no evidence that the experience of 1905 prompted either Larionov or Goncharova to become political activists or join any political party, but it clearly did produce a more critical attitude towards the status quo. This seems to have taken a creative rather than an ideological direction. Like Dobuzhinskii and other artists active during 1905, they became concerned with artistic freedom—the freedom of artists to paint whatever they

wanted in whatever style they wanted. This inevitably entailed challenging the establishment's control of art. Moreover, given the close connection between the Imperial Court and the Imperial Academy of Arts, this inevitably involved some inherent opposition to the regime. It was, however, an anti-establishment ethos that was expressed in artistic, rather than explicitly political, terms.

Hence, Goncharova and Larionov enthusiastically embraced the latest trends coming from France, which offered exciting, new, and definitely non-academic approaches to painting. The young artists may have initially encountered Impressionism and Post-Impressionism through their teachers or seen examples at the exhibition of French Painting, which was open in Moscow from 26 December 1896 to 26 January 1897 (*Ukazatel' 1896*)<sup>10</sup>. This celebrated show included two paintings by Monet, two by Renoir, three by Sisley and one pastel by Degas. At the same time, the two students might have had access to the important collection of French masterpieces amassed by the Moscow merchants Ivan Morozov and Sergei Shchukin, as well as reproductions in journals and first-hand accounts (Baldassari 2016, pp. 437–66; Baldassari 2021, pp. 487–512).

In 1906, Larionov seems to have been working in an Impressionist idiom as epitomized by his painting *Fishes* (1906, Centre Pompidou, Paris). In September that year, he visited Paris with Sergei Diaghilev to help organize the Russian section at the Salon d'Automne. There, he saw Paul Gauguin's retrospective (227 works) and paintings by the Post-Impressionists, including Paul Cézanne, the Nabis, and the Fauves. The opportunity to study the latest French innovations in quantity and at first hand had an enormous impact on his own work and stimulated his interest in primitive art. This led Larionov and Goncharova to develop the style known as Russian Neo-Primitivism, which combined the latest Western developments with various features taken from Russian folk art, the icon, the *lubok* (popular print), children's art and toys. This mixture of diverse art forms—high and low, sacred and profane—undermined accepted conventions and was highly offensive to the artistic establishment, even when the subject matter was relatively innocuous, such as still lifes and portraits.

Western developments were harnessed by Russian artists and played an important role in the drive to create a vitally new and profoundly nationalist Russian art. Several years later, in spring 1913, Goncharova made this clear in an unpublished statement of her creative position:

Contemporary Russian art has reached such heights that, at the present time, it plays a major role in world life.

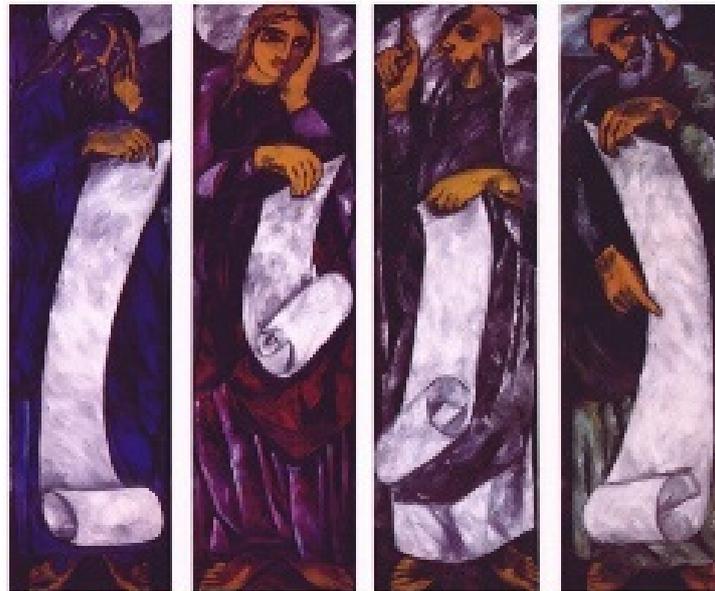
Contemporary Western ideas cannot be of any further use to us.

The aims I advance are as follows:

The creation of new forms in art and, through this, new forms of life. (Sharp 2006, p. 276)

As Neo-Primitivism developed, the new style, with its creative fusion of indigenous forms and the latest Western innovations, including Fauvism, Cubism and Futurism, embraced a more contentious range of subjects. A more explicitly critical and focused anti-establishment ethos began to emerge. Increasingly, the artists chose to depict the less elevated aspects of everyday life, such as brawls (Larionov, *Quarrel in a Tavern*, 1911, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid), and people on the fringes of society, like prostitutes, gypsies or Jews (e.g., Larionov's *Jewish Venus*, 1912, Sverdlovsk State Art Museum, and *The Gypsy*, 1909, private collection, France; or Goncharova's *Wrestlers*, 1909–1910, and *Bread Seller*, 1911, both Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris).

Simultaneously, the mixture of stylistic and compositional devices taken from high and low art became more pronounced as in Goncharova's *Evangelists* (1911, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, Figure 11). The painting was removed from her exhibition along with other religious works because it was considered blasphemous, being a religious painting, based loosely on an icon format, but produced in a secular style, by a woman (Sharp 2006, pp. 238–44).

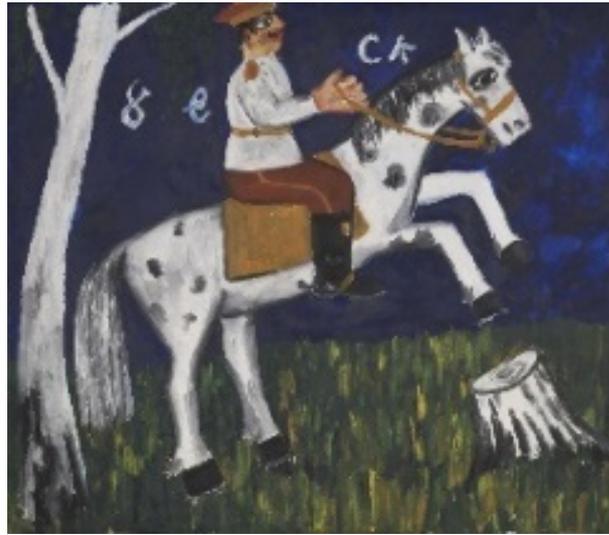


**Figure 11.** Natalia Goncharova, *The Four Evangelists* [Evangelist], 1911, oil on canvas, each canvas 204 × 58 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

Goncharova had challenged establishment values and asserted the rights of artists, including women artists, to paint whatever subject they wanted, in whatever style they wanted. She continued to assert her creative freedom by painting works like *Model (against a blue background)* (c. 1909, State Tretyakov Gallery), which shocked the establishment not only because it was a nude painted by a woman, but also because it was anatomically explicit and showed pubic hair. She was accused of having “stepped beyond the boundaries of morally correct behavior” and producing “blatantly corrupting pictures” (Sharp 2006, p. 104ff).

The assertion of creative freedom is combined with a more implicitly political resonance in Larionov’s *Soldier on a Horse*, also identified as *The Cossack* [Kozak], of 1911–1912 (Tate, London, Figure 12),<sup>11</sup> which mixes high and low sources of inspiration, while also challenging the conventional conception of soldiers as heroes. The pigment is applied in a crude emulation of Cézanne’s constructive brush stroke, while the organization of the image, including the addition of lettering and the absence of volume and space, emulates the style of the *lubok* images of popular heroes, which were sold at fairs. Although the stance of the horse and its salient features, such as its full-frontal eye in the profile face, are almost identical to those of Eruslan Lazarevich’s mount in the *lubok* depicting the mythic hero (Figure 13), Larionov’s soldier is far from heroic (Parton 1993, pp. 80, 82, 83). He looks like a harmless plaything, painted by a child.

The inscription is “8th Squadron” [8—esk] (Pospelov and Iliukhina 2005, p. 98). There were over 100 squadrons of Cossack cavalry and some Cossack regiments also served in the Imperial Guard. The Cossacks were famous for their prodigious fighting skills and their brutality in repressing the unrest during 1905. Yet Larionov’s *Cossack* does not look like a ferocious fighter but more like a toy soldier sitting on a wooden horse. Artistically, Larionov was subverting the style and the accepted iconography of the long-established genre of the heroic general on horseback. Indeed, Larionov’s painting is the antithesis of the traditional type of gallant rendition of military leaders, epitomized by Serov’s dignified *Portrait of Prince Felix Yusupov—Count Sumarokov—Elstone* of 1903 (State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg).



**Figure 12.** Mikhail Larionov, *Soldier on a Horse*, also known as *The Cossack [Kozak]*, 1911–1912, oil on canvas, 87 × 99.1 cm, Tate, London.



**Figure 13.** Anon., *The Powerful Hero Eruslan Lazarevich [Sil'nyi bogatyr' Eruslan Lazarevich]*, 18th century woodcut, 35.6 × 29.8 cm, private collection.

Politically, too, Larionov depicts the soldier not as a noble hero and respected representative of the Tsar's military might, but as a toy, a powerless entity only activated by the will of the Tsar. Larionov's *Cossack* does not inspire hatred or fear, but a certain indifference and disdain. Inevitably, this lack of respect extends to the Tsar himself. It could be argued that Larionov was mocking the Tsar indirectly by mocking the troops on whom the Tsar relied.

Larionov had adopted a style and approach that are completely different to those of Serov and the painters of 1905. Yet Larionov had clearly reached the same conclusion as Serov—that the soldiers are merely the pawns of the regime. There is no evidence that Larionov's *Cossack* relates directly, or in any way, to the events of 1905, since it is one of a series of soldier paintings that Larionov produced while he was doing his military service—from autumn 1910 to August 1911 (Pospelov and Iliukhina 2005, p. 363). Yet, any image of soldiers made little more than five years after the bloody reprisals of 1905–6 inevitably raised (and still raises) associations with those events.

Of course, it is also possible that Larionov was inspired by Serov's example. Serov had been one of Larionov's teachers at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, which the young artist had attended intermittently between 1898 and 1909.<sup>12</sup> Larionov

would, therefore, almost certainly have been familiar with Serov's work, including his portraits of the aristocracy, as well as with his 1905 image of charging soldiers, which had been reproduced in *Bugbear* and had become well-known in Russia's artistic circles (Figure 3). Larionov might also have been aware of his later drawing, *After the Suppression* (Figure 4). In January 1909, Serov resigned from the Moscow school because the administration had rejected his petition to have the sculptor Anna Golubkina readmitted as a student following her expulsion for political activities in 1905 (Sharp 2006, p. 71). This made Serov a figure of respect amongst the student body. In fact, the students wrote a collective letter to the administration lamenting the departure of this "irreplaceable" teacher (Sharp 2006, p. 71). Although Larionov's painting shares very little stylistically with Serov's works, Larionov followed Serov's example in focusing on soldiers and viewing these soldiers as pawns of the Tsar. Both artists showed their distrust and contempt for the regime—Serov explicitly and Larionov implicitly.

The Neo-Primitivists' lack of respect for figures in authority, their disregard for social and artistic conventions, and their powerful assertion of and demands for creative freedom were politically provocative—implicitly and explicitly. Both the style and subject matter of the works produced by the Neo-Primitivists tended to offend, and indeed were conceived deliberately to offend the conservative tastes and refined sensibilities of the establishment. This anti-establishment element in Neo-Primitivism seems to have derived in part from the artists' own first-hand experiences of 1905, but may also have taken inspiration from the example of mature professional painters of the time, such as Serov, Dobuzhinskii, Lansere et al. Younger artists were perhaps emboldened by the freedoms that these artists had grasped and the biting satirical images that they had produced. In this respect, the Neo-Primitivists can be considered to have continued the critical and confrontational attitudes towards the regime that had been adopted by many professional painters in 1905. In turn, this anti-establishment ethos of younger artists may have predisposed them to react favorably towards the destruction of the Tsarist establishment a few years later and led them to support—either passively or actively—the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917.

The 1905 Revolution had politicized a wide range of creative figures. It had profoundly affected artists like Serov and Dobuzhinskii, who had been relatively apolitical, and had transformed them into harsh critics of the regime. It also affected the outlook of a younger generation of artists who had witnessed these events and who had observed the reactions (both practical and creative) of their teachers and other painters whom they respected. This experience, along with exposure to the uncompromising innovations of Western painting, fueled the emergence of Neo-Primitivism and the fundamental challenges that it posed to the artistic, cultural, social and political establishment of Tsarist Russia.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In 1918: Russia adopted the European calendar. "Bloody Sunday" took place on 22 January 1905 (New Style), but 9 January 1905 (Old Style). The crowd is estimated to have numbered around 80,000 and the brutal soldiers were members of the Preobrazhenskii Regiment of the Imperial Guards. For more details, see Williams (2005).
- <sup>2</sup> Repin Ilya. 1905. "Nuzhdy prosveshcheniia," *Nasha zhizn'* (20 January 1905); *Rus* (27 January 1905); and *Nashi dni*, No. 22 (1905).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Sergei Ivanov, *On the Road. Death of a Migrant* (1889, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), which highlighted the poverty and plight of the dispossessed peasantry, wandering through a harsh landscape in search of work and sustenance, accompanied by a few paltry possessions.
- <sup>4</sup> Dobuzhinskii, Mstislav, Konstantin Somov, and Evgenii Lansere, 1905. "Golos khudozhnikov," in *Rus'* (11 November 1905); *Syn otechestva* (12 November 1905); and *Nasha zhizn'* (2 November 1905).

- <sup>5</sup> For a discussion of imprisonment as an image of despotism, see Burrow (2000), pp. 28 ff.
- <sup>6</sup> Many artists remained sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. For instance, Boris Kustodiev, who was associated with the World of Art group in 1905, produced an image of the 1905 massacre, under the month of February, for the Revolutionary Calendar of 1917. See *Kalendar' 1917*; reproduced in Sidorov (1969, p. 138).
- <sup>7</sup> This was later produced as a postcard in October 1906, as *An Old Song Played to a New Tune* [*Staraia basnia na novyi lad*]. See Mathew 2018, pp. 192–93. On the symbolic use of the Bear to represent the regime, see Riabov (2020).
- <sup>8</sup> Chemodanov was subsequently arrested and died in prison in 1908; (Mathew 2018, p. 170).
- <sup>9</sup> *Pervaia vystavka lubkov organizovannaia D. N. Vinogradovym 19–24 fevralia 1913* held at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. *Ikonopisnye podliniki i lubki organizovannaia M. F. Larionovym*, 24 March–7 April 1913, at the Khudozhestvennyi Salon, Moscow. For translations of Larionov's text in Vinogradov's catalogue and Goncharova's articles in Larionov's publications, see Sharp (2006), pp. 273–75.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ukazatel' Frantsuzskoi khudozhestvennoi vystavki 1896*. Moscow
- <sup>11</sup> Larionov's *Soldier on a Horse* is given the title *The Cossack* [*Kozak*] in Pospelov and Iliukhina (2005, p. 98), reproduced p. 102. Pospelov and Iliukhina do not give their reasons for this change in title.
- <sup>12</sup> Larionov was awarded the title of Painter of the Second Class on 25 September 1910. (Pospelov and Iliukhina 2005, p. 363).

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