

Russian Art Andrew Spira

While the names of the great Russian writers and composers are household names – Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev – the artists that worked alongside them remain relatively unknown; indeed, there is not a single Russian painting in the National Gallery. This study day will explore the neglected story of Russian art.

The story begins in the 10th century when Prince Vladimir of Kiev converted to Orthodox Christianity and brought the sacred art of icon painting from Byzantium to Holy Rus. Here it developed into a highly distinctive form of art, closely adapted to the temperament of the people and the resources of the land. For several hundred years the icon remained the dominant type of image in Russia, deeply couched in the rich and evocative atmosphere of the Orthodox Church.



It was not until the reign of Peter the Great at the beginning of the 18th century that Russia experienced anything resembling a ‘Renaissance’. This development is the theme of the second lecture. Peter’s most powerful statement was to sever ties to tradition, which were enshrined in ancient Moscow, and to build a new city - St. Petersburg, a window on to the West. For over a hundred years, Russia shoe-horned itself on to the stage of European politics by adopting and adapting the cultural conventions of western Europe. These included the ‘novel’, the ‘symphony’ – and ‘oil painting on canvas’.

But by the end of the 19th century, increasing numbers of Russians began to feel that their country had sold its soul to the West and there started a movement to define a distinctively Russian form of cultural life that matched the experience and aspirations of modern society. As explored in the third talk, many individuals looked to ancient traditions for precedents that would help them achieve this end. Among the many manifestations of change that occurred during these momentous years was Kazimir Malevich’s ‘Black Square’ (1915), painted on the eve of the Russian Revolution, and opening a new chapter in the history of Russian art

10.00 Session 1

Explores the Sacred Tradition of Icon Painting from the 10th. Century onwards.

11.00 Coffee Break

11.30 Session 2

The Westernising Reforms of Peter the Great and the foundation of St. Petersburg.

12.30 Lunch Break

14.00 Session 3

The 19th. Century development of National Identity in Russia and the origins of Modern Art.

15.00 – 15.15 Questions, Answers & Close