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Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts

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This history of interaction between Russian artists and their Western counterparts begins with a revolution. In 1863, fourteen students at the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg refused the assigned topic for their final gold medal competition. Rejecting the historical subject matter painted in neoclassical style that was then *de rigueur*, they wanted instead to paint scenes from contemporary life. In this they were in step with their contemporaries in Europe.

In a series of essays by art historians at distinguished universities in the U.K. and the U.S., this book examines several facets of the exchange of ideas over the ensuing century between Russian and Western artists working in a variety of media, as well as professional and official attitudes within Russia towards Western art forms.

From the beginning, Russian artists were pulled in two directions. There was an imperative to found a national art distinct from foreign influence, as well as a desire to avoid stagnation by incorporating contemporary Western developments, says Columbia University's Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier in her essay "Opening Up to Europe." This tension is evident throughout the book, particularly during the Soviet regime.

Soviet architecture provides particularly good examples. In "Soviet Schizophrenia and the American Skyscraper," Sona S. Hoisington, an associate of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard, examines this dichotomy from the perspective of "the double image of America in the Soviet Russia of the 1920s. On the one hand, America epitomized the evils of capitalism; on the other, it stood for efficiency, technology, progress, and success."

The skyscraper in particular, she says, fired the imagination of Soviet architects. Professional journals of architecture in the U.S.S.R. regularly ran articles in which architects praised the skyscraper as "the supreme embodiment of technology, efficiency, and modernity." When the decision was made, in the mid-1930s, to make the Palace of Soviets in Moscow a skyscraper, a group of architects was permitted to visit the U.S. to study American construction methods.

But by 1947, when the Soviet Council of Ministers announced plans for seven such buildings that would redefine the Moscow skyline, the American influence was downplayed through linguistic gymnastics. The Russian word for skyscraper, *neboskreb* (from *nebo*, sky, and *skreb*, scraper), was no longer used, replaced by the term *vysotnye zdaniia* ("tall buildings").

Russian Art and the West is written by and for academics. But an opening chapter by the editors (Blakesley is senior lecturer in history of art at the University of Cambridge, UK; Reid is senior lecturer in Russian visual arts at University of Sheffield, UK) provides a context, and the style is accessible. It should find a broader readership among Cold War buffs, for whom it will open a new window on a still dimly understood era.
MARILYN BOWDEN (February 8, 2007)

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