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Keys to the Enigmas of the World: Russian Icons in the Theory and Practice of Mikhail Larionov, 1913

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The "Foreword" to the catalogue of the Exhibition of Original Icon Paintings and *Lubki* written by Mikhail Larionov, and hence the introduction to the exhibition itself (1), which he also organised, is outrageously disorienting. It represents a typical example of Mikhail Larionov's "bad-boy perversity" for which he deserved "to be spanked and put to bed rather than criticised".[1] As a foreword, the reader turns to it for clarification and guidance and yet receives none. In a passage reminiscent of the prophetic tone of Mme. Blavatsky, Larionov describes a "boor" who stumbles by accident into a period very different to his own.[2] The familiar parameters by which he structures his sad and dismal existence are pulled apart since this period operates according to very different laws than those of his own. He is dazed, staggered, his tongue quivers in his parched throat and, forced back upon a conceptual paradigm that is critically flawed and unequal to the demands of the new reality that presents itself, he is forced to perish, shipwrecked in a vessel of his own making that he cannot escape – "to die like Narcissus".[3]

As if this were not confusing enough for the reader of the catalogue / visitor to the exhibition, the narrative is suddenly disrupted by a second and third passage, both claiming to be from "an unpublished history of art".[4] Here, matters become even more confusing. The visitor to the exhibition discovers that they are no longer in 1913 but living in the reign of Hammurabi since sequential time is revealed as a fallacy and all epochs coexist and intersect! Cézanne lived and worked in the reign of Rameses II, whilst the Egyptian artists, who created the sculptural portraits of the scribes, practised in Aix-en-Provence. In other words, Larionov describes a space-time *continuum*, yet not one


ВЫСТАВКА
ИКОНОПИСНЫХЪ
ПОДЛИННИКОВЪ
И
ЛУБКОВЪ
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МОСКВА
Большая Дмитровка, Художественный
Салонъ 11
1913.

1 • Catalogue of Exhibition of Original Icon Paintings and *Lubki* Moscow, 1913, Private Collection, England

of "Einsteinean" science, but rather of "Bergsonian" flux, in which the reader of the catalogue / visitor to the exhibition slips and slides through the centuries and across the continents like Velimir Khlebnikov's "Ka".[5] The effect is profoundly disconcerting and deliberately so.

In suspending the laws of time and space and casting the audience into an abyss, Larionov pulls into play contemporary

metaphysical theories about the fourth dimension of space as discussed by popular philosophers such as Petr Demyanovich Ouspensky.[6] In his book, *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Enigmas of the World* (*Tertium Organum: Kliuch k zagadkam mira*), published in St. Petersburg in 1911, Ouspensky writes of the necessity for modern man to break free from conventional means of thought and understanding, to expand his consciousness and to grasp his true reality existing, as it does, he argues, in a four-dimensional world. The process is not easy. Many will fall by the wayside. Even the Ouspenskian "superman" who overcomes the trammels of conventional logic and enters this metaphysical realm "… will sense a precipice, an abyss everywhere, no matter where he looks, and experience indeed an incredible horror, fear and sadness, until this fear and sadness shall transform themselves into the joy of the sensing of a new reality".[7] It is this world into which Larionov's boor and we, the readers of the catalogue and the visitors to the exhibition, accidentally stumble. Larionov creates a world of free-fall in which the nature of art, our relationship to it and understanding of it is radically redefined.

Larionov is tendentiously avant-garde; he enjoys playing with his audience, subversively turning our preconceptions upside down and casting us into the world of the indeterminate. We are left, like the boor, utterly bemused, our tongues quivering in our parched throats unless, somehow, we can move beyond our narrow-minded philistinism to hear what Larionov is telling his audience. For beyond the apparent "bad-boy perversity" and confusion that the "Foreword" strews in our way, there *are* real lessons to be learned about art in general and about icons and *lubki* in particular if we allow ourselves to experience them in a new way.

Let us step outside our familiar way of looking at art and see to what extent Larionov's "Foreword" provides a key to the understanding of works on display in the exhibition and even of his own artistic response to them. The boor of the "Foreword" is none other than the dilettante art lover who, coming to the art work from the point of view of one of the refined gentlemen of the World of Art group (*Mir iskusstva*), such as Alexander Benois, completely fails to understand its real significance.[8] To judge the work of art from the point of view of the period, culture and place in which it was created, according to Larionov, is to entirely miss the point, to emasculate the art work and to rob of it is real significance – its intrinsic *artistic* quality. This quality, which lay outside of temporal and spatial parameters, was known as *faktura*.

Conventionally translated as "texture", the Russian term *faktura* really references the unique surface qualities of the art work created by the way in which the artist expressively *works* the medium and materials from which the painting or sculpture is made. In many of his writings Larionov addresses *faktura* and

2 • *Mother of God of the Sign*, 17th-18th centuries In, *Peasant Art in Russia,* London, The Studio, 1912

it is this to which he makes reference when, in his "Foreword" to the catalogue, he discusses the differing material qualities of the *lubok* both in the narrow sense of the term, referring to 18th and 19th century popular prints which are printed and hand-coloured in such diverse and expressive ways, and in a broader sense, to refer to the expressive handling of material to be found in diverse forms of art practice such as painted trays, lacquered snuff boxes, painted glass, wood, ceramic tiles, enameled tin, printed fabric, stencils, embossed leather, brass icon-cases, beads, embroideries, moulded and stamped gingerbread, wooden sculpture, weaving, and lace. As Larionov tells us, all of these art forms, which so clearly exhibit subtle and expressively worked surfaces, "all this belongs to the *lubok* in the broad sense of the term, and all this is great art."[9]

Faktura is also exemplified for Larionov in the diverse forms and surface qualities of the Russian icon. Although Larionov does not discuss the qualities of *faktura* in relation to icon painting in this specific essay, his close colleague, the Latvian artist and theorist Voldemar Matvejs, better known by his pseudonym Vladimir Markov, has much to say on the matter. In his book *Faktura*, written and published in 1914, Vladimir Markov often turns his attention to the unusual surface textures yielded by the icon tradition.[10] He draws attention to the darkened surfaces of the icons, rich in the depth of their brown and gold tones, to the *assist* (delicate lines of gold leaf that represent divine light, (3 •), to the applied decoration in the forms of the *riza* (metal overlay sometimes with gemstones inset) (2 •), the *venchik* (nimbus), the *opleche* (neckpiece), the *basma* (repoussé work

3 • *Coronation of the Virgin,* North Russia, 1860s

and inlays) and finally the *oklad* (the framework or setting).[11] It is interesting that in his book Markov specifically warns against the cleaning of icons since to do so is to remove that very *faktura*, be it intentionally created by the artist or unintentionally created by accretions over time, which is essential to its expressive function as a piece of art.[12]

For Markov it is *faktura* which makes the art of the icon, as well as that of the *lubok* print, the painted signboard and other types of folk art, special and different. It is the extent to which *faktura* is present in an art work that gives it life and distinguishes it from forms of realism and naturalism in art which, in his view, are the mortal enemy of *faktura*. These traditions, because they do not permit the artist to engage in the practice of *faktura*, are expressively and hence spiritually defunct.[13]

Larionov encourages us, both in the "Foreword" to the catalogue and, indeed, in the structure of the exhibition itself, to look beyond the petty descriptors of contemporary art history and art appreciation, which "box off" and emasculate the art work and to see instead not some dead artefact of a long-lost culture but rather a living, breathing expression of artistic intent which is as meaningful now as it was at the point of its creation since it transcends both sequential time and Euclidean space. He establishes the idea of contemporary art as pre-existent in the art of the past and the art of the past as contained within that of the present day: "for in the very essence of the principles that they express, they are of equal value".[14]

Entering Larionov's exhibition today we may be forgiven for responding to its contents like the boor of 1913, for we are, perhaps, that very boor who attended a century ago, intruding upon a world that we cannot comprehend or judge. Confronted with Russian icons of different centuries, *lubki* on different themes, statues from the Indus Valley, prints from China and Japan, art of the Tatars, Siberian drawings and folk art from diverse locations, our tongues may well quiver in our parched throats. Yet the whole point of the exhibition lies in its spatial and temporal diversity. In the post-Potter world in which we live it offers what we might call a "portkey" transporting us to a shamanic ritual in Siberia, to the ancient Indian sub-continent, to 19th century Japan and to an 18th century peasant *izba* where a *lubok* is being carved. The exhibition invites us to journey through time and space, across the whole world.[15] The art works on display and the exhibition as a whole are "portkeys" which transport us into a realm "beyond the looking glass" to a "nutcracker" world where art which is "pickled" in museums and dissected in books (such as those by Rovinsky), come to life and possess an eternal quality and significance as individual objects of creative impetus in their own right.[16] They will dance, sing and beat their shamanic drum if we allow them to and they do so through the artistic manipulation of their *faktura*.

For Larionov, therefore, it was not the historically and geographically-specific stylistic features of icon painting that attracted him but rather their distinctive and expressive approaches to *faktura*. At no point, for example, did he execute paintings "in the style of", say, 14th century Novgorod icons. As the "Foreword" to his exhibition catalogue makes abundantly clear, he did not look at art in this dilettante way. Like Vladimir Markov, Larionov thought it futile to simply copy the stylistic mannerisms of existing forms of art or indeed to try to copy specific approaches to *faktura*.[17]

Both artists believed that the task confronting them was to discover a new language of *faktura* that would act as an expressive means of communicating with the audience. To do this it was essential to become a fluent practitioner of the age-old language of the *lubok* (in its most general sense); to understand the ontology of *faktura* as it was displayed in the breadth and diversity of artistic practice in the exhibits on display in The Exhibition of Original Icon Paintings and *Lubki* in 1913 and elsewhere. In this way he not only infused his own painting with expressive vitality but participated in a living tradition. To take an analogy from Chinese philosophy, *faktura* for artists such as Larionov and Markov operated as a kind of Tao of art, a vital stream of energy that pulsated outside of time and space, manifesting in different ways and in diverse art forms that possessed a universal quality which could somehow put the viewer in tune with the infinite. As Markov notes: "*faktura* produces a sense of the mystical, conjuring forth a sensation and comprehension of new worlds and new forms of beauty."[18]

Be it in the form of a *lubok* print, a peasant woodcarving, a painted signboard or even an icon, their common deployment of *faktura*, no matter how grounded in the material qualities of the medium, all point in one direction: towards the immaterial. As Markov notes "... there is a tension established between two worlds: the outer and the inner, the tangible and the intangible. Both these worlds overlap. One is covered whilst the other is concealed. Through their common *faktura* they yield a sense of the mystical".[19]

Despite his protestations about connoisseurship and art history, Larionov was enormously erudite regarding the history and development of the icon tradition in the Russian context. Icons had been introduced into Russia by Greek priests following the Christian conversion of Prince Vladimir of Kiev in A. D. 989. At first Byzantine icons such as the *Virgin of Vladimir* (State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow) served as models for Russian icon painters and the earliest Russian icons betray these influences in the stately postures of the saints and their stern facial expressions. Cut off from Byzantium and southern Russia by the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, however, the arts in Novgorod and Pskov departed from the austerity of Byzantine traditions and developed their own distinctive approach. Russian icons of this period such as *The Miracle of St George and the Dragon* are distinguished by graceful curves, charming and imaginative compositions, and finesse in line and detail. Herein, according to Larionov, lay the essential difference between Greek and Russian icons. In a manuscript entitled "The Icons" / "Les Icônes", written during the 1920s he explained:

"The icons of the Russian schools are distinct from those of Greco-Byzantine ones by their graphic form and especially by their very clear and delicate colours, by their nuances and flat application which make the surface vibrate and confer on the Russian icon an infinite profundity. The Byzantine and Greek saints are made of flesh and blood, whereas the Russian ones are not. They are the abstract symbols of another life."[20]

In other words, for Larionov, it is the treatment of *faktura* that renders Russian icons different to those of their Greek counterparts and which confers upon the Russian icon the status of a touchstone, a "portkey", through which we can touch the world of the beyond.

In the 19th century, however, icon painting fell into decline at the hands of two competing forces: that of Academic realism, which yielded sentimental and naturalistically modelled images of a Caucasian Christ, Saints and Mother of God, and the emergence of the "paper" icon in the form of a mass-produced engraving, produced as cheaply as possible for wider public consumption. The effect of these developments was to relegate "original" icon paintings to critical obscurity on the grounds that they now looked "old fashioned", "archaic" and "primitive". This provides one reason why the avant-garde became interested in icons in the first place. To exploit the rhetoric of the "original" icon was a potent means of demonstrating their rupture with the Academic culture of the status quo that regarded "original" icons as embarrassingly archaic, crude and "tasteless", and with the mass-produced and standardising effects of modernity which placed the "artificial" over the "authentic" and the machine-made over the hand-made.

Icons had already been studied from a historical point of view in the 19th century and artists such as Vasnetsov, Polenov, Nesterov and Vrubel had done much to revive interest in them as an art form. It was chiefly in the early 20th century, however, that artistic interest in icons boomed, following their "rediscovery" in 1904 when Andrei Rublev's *Old Testament Trinity* of c. 1411 (State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow) was cleaned to reveal its original colours.[21] As a result, icons were increasingly collected, cleaned, and appreciated for their simplified yet graceful forms and rich colour palettes, and not only by the avant-garde, many of whom were decisively influenced by them, but by the wider art establishment. Artists from abroad such as Matisse were both fascinated and inspired by icons.[22]

Whilst there was value for both Larionov and Markov in investing in the "otherness" of the "original" icon, in partaking of its "archaic", "authentic" and "primitive" connotations to emblematise their dissatisfaction with the state of modernity and contemporary culture, it is their enthusiasm for the *faktura* that is distinctive. Other members of the avant-garde did, however, share their views. The artist Pavel Filonov, who practised in St. Petersburg and was a member of the Union of Youth (*Soiuz molodezhi*) group, came closest to their views in developing his theory of "madeness" (*sdelannost*) which, in emphasising the crafted quality of the art work, rubbed shoulders with the concept of *faktura*. Consequently, Filonov approached the icon in a similar way to Larionov and Markov and tried to develop a pictorial analogue in his own work for the qualities of "madeness" that he saw exemplified therein.

In addition, the concept of *faktura* and the appreciation of its qualities as demonstrated in the icon formed an important ideological tenet of The Donkey"s Tail and Target (*Osliny khvost i mishen*) groups of which Larionov was a leading member. Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Natalia Goncharova, Alexander Shevchenko and Vasily Chekrygin all sought to align themselves, to some degree, with Larionov's and Markov's understanding of this most ancient and yet, by Larionov"s own admission in his "Foreword", most modern of art forms.

4 • K. Malevich, *Portrait of Kliunkov*, 1912. Lost

The first works by Malevich to reflect a study of icon painting are *Women in Church* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) and *Portrait of Kliunkov* of 1912 (4 •) in which Malevich adopts the frontal and planar depiction of the saints that is found in icon painting. The principles of *faktura*, however, as demonstrated in the combination of materials so central to the icon tradition are also revealed in the artist's subsequent use of collage a little later in 1914, a technique that is conventionally attributed to the influence of Synthetic Cubism. Indeed, the importance of the icon in Malevich's theory and practice can be traced up to 1915 when he hung his famous *Black Square* (State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow) across the corner of the room at the 0.10 exhibition. The *Black Square* usurped the traditional throne of the icon and in this culturally subversive action Malevich consciously appropriated the traditional role of the icon for his new art of Suprematism.[23] In his early years, Tatlin practiced as an icon painter in a traditional studio near the Kremlin and later declared:

"If it wasn't for the icons I should have remained preoccupied with water drips, sponges, rags and aquarelles."[24]

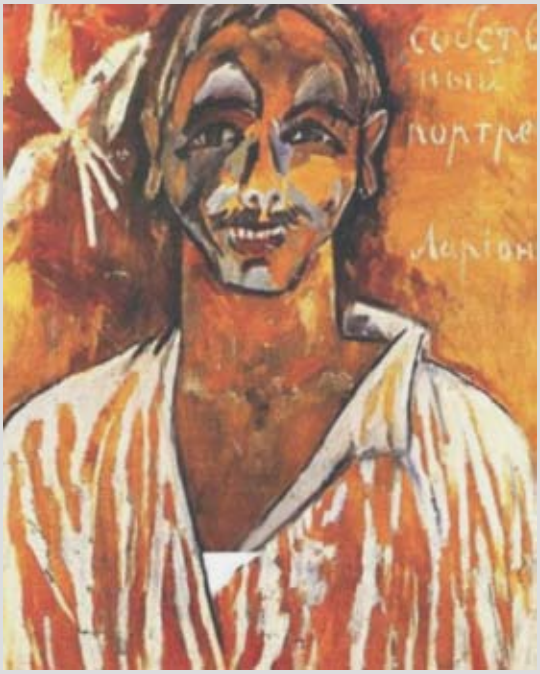
The impact of the icon tradition is often advanced by Tatlin scholars as in important influence upon his own manipulation of materials in his reliefs and, indeed, upon his own discussion and understanding of *faktura*.[25]

Goncharova, on the other hand, painted many easel works on icon themes including *The Four Evangelists* (St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum), *The Coronation of the Virgin, The Holy Trinity*, *St. Panteleimon* and two triptychs, *Christ and Archangels* and *The Mother of God with Ornamentation* (Moscow, State Tretiakov Gallery) amongst others. All these works call into play both the imagery of the icon tradition and its *faktura*. The "Saints", "Saviours" and "Mothers of God" that fill Goncharova's work at this time are represented with the same strong yet gentle curves, the same elongated bodies and limbs, hieratic postures, refined gestures, bold and stylised draperies, and delicate colour harmonies found in the original icons on display in the exhibition.

Goncharova also paid careful attention to the *faktura* of each painting, the worked and expressive surface that reveals the symbolic intent of the imagery, the metaphysical reality with which the image deals. Indeed, it is interesting that it was this very feature, the unique textures yielded by each painted surface, that proved her downfall. When these works were exhibited in St. Petersburg in 1914 the popular press charged her with blasphemy and called for her excommunication from the Orthodox Church not so much because she, a woman, had breached the male parameters of the icon tradition, nor because of incorrect iconography but rather on the grounds that the expressive execution, the emphasis on *faktura*, reminded one of the coarse and common *lubok* print. The paintings were "treated in the same deformed-abominable manner as the rest of the daubs in the exhibition".[26]

Larionov's own love of icons is demonstrated by the extent of his personal collection which was displayed in this very exhibition. Their date of execution and style are unknown but their titles, recorded in the catalogue, show that the collection comprised both Old and New Testament images from almost every tier of the traditional iconostasis and that the subject matter was extensive and representative. Larionov also emphasised the traditional means of painting icons by exhibiting two stencils and six drawings. These were known as "tracings" and were important because they preserved the authorised canon of forms derived from the Byzantine icons which were considered "prototypes". Such tracings were gathered together and preserved in the form of manuals to which icon painters were expected to refer and to follow. In Russian the term *podlinnik* was used to designate such authoritative manuals and it is this term that Larionov seems to employ in the title of his exhibition when he refers to it as *vystavka iknonopisnykh podlinnikov*, literally an "exhibition of icon manuals" (though actually no manuals, as such, were exhibited) giving rise to the more conventional translation of the title as an *Exhibition of Original Icon Paintings and "Lubki"*.

Larionov was also extremely knowledgeable about the history and traditions of the icon. His library contained important works on icon painting in the seventeenth century including a critical monograph by N. P. Likhachev on the Royal Isographer Iosif, an icon painter who was employed by the Moscow Armory



5 • M. Larionov, *Self Portrait*, 1912
Ex-Tomalina-Larionova Collection, Paris

6 • St. Thomas, Novgorod, 15th century
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

to fulfil royal commissions, and two copies of a book on the small yet distinctive icons of the Stroganov school.[27] Larionov wrote about icons not only in his catalogue introduction to the Exhibition of Original Icon Paintings and *Lubki* exhibition of 1913 but also later in his unpublished essay entitled, "*Les Icônes*", written in Paris in the 1920s.

The importance of the icon for Larionov lay more in the realm of the ontological nature of its *faktura* as opposed to its iconography. There are, for example, no paintings by Larionov on biblical or Christian themes in which he might, like Goncharova, have breathed new life into an "authentic" tradition that had fallen into decline at the hands of an "enlightened" Russia that had bought into Academic naturalism as its cultural guarantor. He rarely imbued his works with the iconographic patterns and stylistic conventions of icon painting, although we do, on occasion, find them.

In his series of *Self Portraits* (5 •), for example, Larionov uses the same frontal pose and planar treatment as that found in the icons of saints. His portrait fills the picture space, the arms and shoulders compressed by the width of the canvas, and the crown of the head extending to the top of the painting. In addition, the crude inter-play between the ochre and white verticals of the shirt recall the stylised folds of vestments worn by the saints in icons (6 •). The sharp edges of the collar resemble the stole around the neck of the saint. The script on the right hand corner of the painting, which identifies the work as a "Self Portrait of Larionov", occupies the place where an attribution to the saint appears in the icon painting (6 •). The symmetry of the icon is achieved by the inclusion of three white feathers on the left of the portrait, and the elongation of Larionov's torso, neck and head is reminiscent of similar conventions in icon portraiture. Larionov uses ochres and browns to depict the flesh and to suggest the effect of a wooden panel as opposed to canvas, upon which his portrait is painted. The ensemble is completed by a darkened nimbus around Larionov's head.

There is without doubt an element of parody at work in which Larionov, the "bad boy" of Russian art, paints himself as a latter-day saint, perhaps, even an anti-hero, given his mocking grin, his unkempt appearance and the darkened halo around his head, all of which reinforced his public reputation as a cultural iconoclast. These works are not an attack on the tradition of the icon, however, but rather on the prim, proper and well-groomed manners of a morally bankrupt middle-class. In its approach his *Self-Portrait* is no more a criticism of the icon tradition as Gauguin's self-portrait in *The Yellow Christ* of 1889 (Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo) is a criticism of Breton Catholicism.

Larionov's *Seasons* paintings of 1912 present another interesting case of the artist's tangential reference to the icon tradition for controversial ends. The personification of *Autumn* (Musée national d'Art moderne, Paris), who is observed from the front with her forearms raised, imitates the posture of the *Mother of God of the Sign* (2 •).

7 • Target, March 1913, Moscow.
Left to right: M. Larionov, Moris Fabri, M. Le Dentu, N. Goncharova, Obolensky, S. Romanovich
Paintings left to right: M. Larionov, *Jewish Venus*, 1912, Panels of the *Seasons: Autumn, Summer*, 1912

Furthermore, the assemblage of the four *Seasons* paintings into one large panel at The Target (*Mishen*) exhibition (7 •), seems to parody the iconostasis, the screen of icon paintings that separates the clergy from the laity and the holy from the profane in the Orthodox Church.

In addition, we know that Larionov appreciated the schematic notation with which the icon painters depicted their subjects,[28] the unusual spatial conceptions of icons, the inverse perspective, and the depiction of objects as seen from the respective viewpoints of the characters within its picture space. These features suggested some of the strange spatial resolutions in Larionov's Neo-Primitive works.

Above all, however, icons demonstrated the spiritual possibilities that both abstracted form and *faktura* could yield. In the popular imagination the icon was believed to be the saint's materialised image and so it offered a direct means of contact with the world beyond. The icon stood as an interface, a "portkey", connecting the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. For artists such as Larionov, Malevich, and Kandinsky, the abstracted forms of the icon, those "keys to the beyond", doorways to other worlds, were of particular importance as each sought to develop the visual medium as a means of expressing the spiritual in art. Larionov's essay, "*Les Icônes*", succinctly summarizes this point of view:

"The Russian icon painters were boldly led towards an important abstraction. This abstraction manifested itself in the use of schemas and pre-established formulas related to a predetermined style through which they expressed the abstract and mystical sense of life.... It is through the nuances of colour and the finesse of the graphic forms that the religious and mystical state we experience when contemplating icons manifests itself.... The beauty and finesse of the drawing of these stylised forms and the fascinating abstract harmony of their colouration aspire to render the world of the beyond... It is a kind of spiritual realism.... You really believe that they concern another life."[29]

Here Larionov suggests that icons reflect the spiritual through their abstracted forms and colours and it is this understanding and experience of the transcendental role of art that underpinned Larionov's ideology and practice of Rayist painting. In his manifesto, "Pictorial Rayism" / "Le Rayonnisme Pictural", published in the French journal *Montjoie!* in 1914, Larionov addresses the importance of colouration in Rayist works in a way similar to his discussion of the colouring of icons:

"The specific and continuous existence of the coloured masses in the Rayist painting forms in the mind of the observer a synthesis-image which slips outside of time and space. One glimpses the famous fourth dimension – since its width, its breadth, the density of the superimposed colours are the only signs of the visible world – and all the other sensations, born from the image, are of a different order: of this super-real order that man must always seek.…"[30]

8 • *Rayist Construction of a Street,* 1913
In, *Rayism / Luchizm*, 1913

9 • *Sunny Day (Pneumo-rayist Colourful Structure)*
1913 Musée national d'Art modern, Paris

The spirituality and mysticism, which for Larionov is evoked by the abstract graphic forms of icons and by their subtle colouration and display of *faktura*, is clearly exploited in his own work. It is by these means that the artist can "orchestrate" *timbres* that reverberate in the spectator's soul.[31]

In addition we may note that in his aim to create a transcendental art, he specifically exploited one key aspect of the iconography and *faktura* of the icon, an aspect to which Vladimir Markov had also drawn attention in his book *Faktura* of 1914: the *assist* – the thin gold-hatched lines which represent divine light (3 •).[32] It is lines such as these which represent the key motif in Rayist painting and it is with these that Larionov conjures forth a sense of "the super-real". In works such as *Rayist Construction of a Street* (8 •) these mysterious lines do not describe a tangible reality into which one can imagine oneself walking but rather an immaterial world which we cannot grasp. As Larionov describes it:

"The picture appears slippery, it imparts a sensation of existence outside of time and space – it creates the sensation of what one might call the fourth dimension".[33]

We are cast into a world which, like that of the boor in Larionov's "Foreword" or, indeed, like that of the Ouspenskian neophyte, cannot be accommodated using the old canons of thought for this is a transcendental art which, like the "original" icons, seeks to lead the spectator into an experience of the spiritual through the language of *faktura*.

Finally, we should not forget that one of the key aspects of the *faktura* of the icon, as identified by Vladimir Markov, is that of the very combination of materials that goes to make up the whole. The wooden panel of the icon is a veritable palimpsest, playing host to a succession of "superimposed" layers of paint, gold-leaf and metal and gem adornments. For Vladimir Markov it is the ensemble that establishes a unique *timbre* which calls people to "beauty, religion and God" and for Larionov, too.[34] It is the *timbres* of the surfaces of his paintings that he seeks to articulate through the expressive working of the materials; and these may be diverse.

In 1913 Larionov began to explore the expressive potential of collage in works such as *Sunny Day (Pneumo-rayist Colourful Structure*) (9 •) in which he employed *papier mâché* to give the surface of the work an uneven, textured feel; to create a certain *timbre* that would attune the soul of the spectator. Again, we feel ourselves sliding into a world that we cannot comprehend through logical thought. *Sunny Day* invites us to leave the world of familiar three-dimensional, material phenomena and to experience a noumenal world of the spirit. This world, as Larionov states so often in his manifestos, is beyond time and space. It is a world of simultaneity where Cézanne lives and works in the time or Rameses II, where Egyptian artists work in Aix-en-Provence and where exhibitions of icons and *lubki* take place in the reign of Hamurabbi. *Sunny Day* invites us to slip and slide through warps of time and space, just like the eponymous hero of Khlebnikov's long poem "Ka", the ancient Egyptian spirit who weaves between the epochs. And that invitation is made explicit by Larionov's inclusion of the name "KA" in the centre of the work. *Sunny Day* invites us to overcome the enigmas of time and space that bedevil our three-dimensional existence and, through the *faktura* of the medium, to seek liberation in an immaterial realm of the spirit.

In his collages of 1914 and 1915, Larionov became more diverse in his use of extraneous materials to add to the sense of *faktura* that was so central to his aesthetic ideology at the

time. In his *Portrait of Goncharova (Plastic Rayism)* (State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow) of 1915, for example, he used torn papers, pieces from posters and a lock of Goncharova's own hair, whilst in his collage *Iron Battle* (now lost) he employed diverse materials including match-sticks. Later works such as *The Smoker* (Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna), executed on the support of a wooden tram seat, incorporated gypsum, card, tin tacks, a cigarette and cotton wool.

All of this leads us back to the icon, to its unique and expressive displays of the material qualities of the mediums employed in its creation and to the way in which the "vibrations", the "sounds" and *timbres* that are created thereby reverberate in the spectator's soul permitting us to touch the spiritual. This, as Larionov notes:

"makes the surface vibrate and confers on the Russian icon an infinite profundity. The Byzantine and Greek saints are made of flesh and blood, whereas the Russian ones are not. They are the abstract symbols of another life." [35]

As Markov states, it is through the surface of the icon that two worlds intersect, as they do through the surfaces of Larionov's vibrant canvases, making them, in a very real sense, Ouspenskian "keys to the enigmas of the world".

Footnotes

[1] The theatre critic of *Vogue* magazine in discussing Larionov's designs for the ballet *Chout*. See: *Vogue*, Early December 1921, 61.

[2] The first passage that Larionov supposedly quotes is from "Chapter 7" of "Radabai". "Radabai" (in English "Rhada Bai") was the pseudonym adopted by the mystic and Spritualist Mme. Helena Blavatsky, the founder the The Theosophical Society. Mme. Blavatsky was an extremely prolific author on the question of the necessity of the spiritual in a world in which the principles of Postivism, materialism, rationality and logic were perceived to have failed in their mission to deliver the progress that they had promised. The quotation is, in all likelihood, a spoof, invented by Larionov since at the present time this passage cannot be discovered in any of Mme. Blavatsky's writings. Larionov therefore, perhaps to some extent tongue in cheek, appropriates her prophetic and apocalyptic tone to articulate his views.

[3] M. Larionov, "Foreward" / "*Predislovie*", in *Vystavka kartin ikonopisnnykh podlinnikov i lubkov*, Moscow, 1913, 5.

[4] Ibid., 5-6.

[5] "Ka" is the eponymous hero of Velimir Khlebnikov's prose piece of the same title, written in 1915. Here "Ka", referring to an aspect of the Ancient Egyptian human soul that was held to manifest upon death, is personified as a character that slips through time and space appearing at one and the same moment in different centuries and in different locations.

[6] The concept of a supposed "fourth dimension of space", a metaphysical realm in which mankind's true reality was held to be located, as opposed to what we commonly take to be our ultimate, material existence in three dimensions, was much debated in the early 20th century. For an excellent overview of the subject and its impact upon the visual arts see: L. D. Henderson: *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Revised Edition), Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013. Peter D. Ouspensky, a contemporary popular philosopher well-known to the Russian avant-garde wrote on this theme in his books *Chetvertoe izmerenie: Opyt issledovaniia oblasti neizmerimago*, St. Petersburg, 1910 and *Tertium Organum: Kliuch k zagadkam mira*, St. Petersburg, 1911. The latter was later translated into English as *Tertium Organum: A Key to the Engimas of the World*, London: Kegan Paul / Trench Trubner, 1923.

[7] P. D. Ouspensky, Ibid. (1923), 244.

[8] Alexander Benois was one of the leading artists and critics of the "Silver Age" group of artists, writers and philosophers who gathered together under the banner of "The World of Art" (*Mir iskusstva*). Although these artists and writers played a fundamental role in turning academic attention to indigenous traditions in Russian art, they did so very much from an "archaeological" point of view.

[9] M. Larionov, "Foreword" / "*Predislovie*", *loc. cit*. [3], 9.

[10] V. Markov, *Printsipy tvorchestvo v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh*: *Faktura*, St. Petersburg: *Soiuz molodezhi,* 1914. An illuminating discussion of the work of Vladimir Markov, including a full translation of his text *Faktura*, is to be published in 2015. See, Howard, J. (et al.): *Vladimir Markov and Russian Primitivism: A Charter for the Avant-Garde*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate (Forthcoming 2015).

[11] Ibid., 53 and 59.

[12] Ibid., 49-50, 51-53.

[13] Ibid., 31.

[14] Larionov, "Foreword" / "*Predislovie*", *loc. cit*. [3], 6.

[15] The concept of a "portkey", which can transport the person with whom it comes into contact to different times and

places, was first devised by J. K. Rowling in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, UK: Bloomsbury, 2010, Chapter 6. The concept of "A journey across the whole world" is the subject of a poem of 1912 by Aleksei Kruchenykh, a close friend and colleague of both Larionov and Goncharova. His poem, entitled "Puteshestvie po vsemu svetu" was published in *Mir s konstsa,* Moscow: Ts. Miunster, 1912.

[16] Larionov specifically mentions Rovinsky in his "Foreword" commenting on how useless a book such as his is in terms of understanding the *lubok*. Dmitry Rovinsky was the author of what became, and still is, one of the key reference works on the *lubok*. See: D. Rovinsky (1881), *Russkiia narodniia kartinki*. St. Petersburg.

[17] See: Markov, *Faktura*, *op. cit.* [10], 46.

[18] Ibid., 60.

[19] Ibid.

[20] M. Larionov, "Les Icônes", c. 1920s, in Mikhail Larionv, *Une Avant-Garde Explosive*. Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1978, 132-3.

[21] For an informative discussion of the "rediscovery" of the Russian icon and of its impact upon Russian artists in the 19th and 20th centuries see A. Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition*, Aldershot, UK: Lund Humphries, 2008.

[22] See: Iu. Rusakov (1975), "Matisse in Russia in the Autumn of 1911" , in *Burlington Magazine*, May 1975, Vol. CXVII, No. 886, 284-291.

[23] Icons were traditionally hung in the "Red Corner" of a Russian home. For further discussion of Malevich's *Black Square* in this respect see S. Simmons, *Kazimir Malevich's "Black Square" and the Genesis of Suprematism*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1981. See also A. Spira, *op cit.* [21].

[24] Tatlin, quoted by B. Lubetkin in his lecture, "The Origins of Constructivism" (1969), quoted in C. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, 12.

[25] For example, see: J. Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde*. New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 1983.

[26] Duble-ve (1914), "Futurizm i koshchunstvo", *Peterburgsky listok*, 16 March 1914: 73,9. For a full discussion of the scandal surrounding the display of Goncharova's religious works at the exhibition see: A. Parton, *Goncharova: The Art and Design of Natalia Goncharova*, Woodbridge, UK: Antique Collectors' Club, 2010.

[27] N. P. Likhachev, *Tsarsky izograf Iosif i ego ikony.* St. Petersburg, 1897, and *Stroganovsky iconopisny litseevo podlinnik, konstsa xvi i nachala xvii stoletti*. Moscow, 1969. Larionov's copies are located in the National Art Library, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

[28] Larionov, "Les Icônes", *loc. cit*. [20].

[29] Ibid.

[30] M. Larionov, "Le Rayonnisme pictural", *Montjoie!* (Paris), April/May/June 1914, Nos. 4/5/6, 15.

[31] M. Larionov (1913), *Luchizm*, Moscow: Ts. Miunster.

[32] Markov, *op. cit*. [10], 31. The "assist" was created by the icon artist applying onion juice to the surface of the painting with a very thin brush. Gold leaf was then applied over the surface and adhered to the onion juice, creating shimmering lines of light across the image.

[33] Larionov, *Luchizm*, *op. cit*. [31], 20.

[34] Markov, *op. cit*.[10], 56.

[35] Larionov, "Les Icônes", *loc. cit*. [20].