Dancing on the factory floor

An innovative story of dance, the body and Russian Modernism in a study of the Moscow Choreological Laboratory. By ***Matthew Drutt***

The Russian Art of Movement 1920-30
Nicoletta Misler
Umberto Allemandi, 472pp, €150 (hb)

Over several decades, Nicoletta Misler has firmly established herself as one of the most distinguished authorities on Russian Modernism among the second generation of Western scholars that lbegan researching the subject in the 1970s. Like many of her colleagues then, her interest originated in the study of Slavic languages and literature, and migrated into the visual and performing arts, which were all closely linked.

Based in Italy for most of her career, where she is professor emerita of Russian and East European art at the university of Naples, she has published widely, including monographs on the avant-garde's key artists, important translations of artists' and critics' texts, surveys of the period, and has organised important exhibitions around her key interests, which have focused on costume design and dance.

She is probably the best-known European scholar to English-speaking audiences, in no small part due to her collaborations with John Bowlt, her life-long partner, translator and the eminence grise of Western scholarship on Russian Modernism. He has served once again as translator for the current publication, and their close working relationship makes the book a pleasure to read. But it is much more than that.

When a new book about Russian Modernism appears on the market, I usually feel a slight wave of ennui, since most publications, whether they are exhibition catalogues, academic studies or books for the trade, fall into one of three categories. One rehashes the by now clichéd history of the Russian Avant-garde (slavishly influenced by French art before the 1917 Russian Revolution or radically abstract in the wake of the Revolution, only to be shut down by Socialist Realism in the early 1930s due to a backlash against of formalism and the triumph of the Academy under Stalin. These books republish the same 300 or so works). Another category is the turgidly written, poorly printed and obscure academic publications that offer horrible illustrations, if any at all. The third, and most injurious to the field, comprises those publications that offer either a blend or a complete compilation of works whose authenticity is very much in doubt. More than any other period of art, Russian Modernism has been plagued by forgeries, many of them authenticated by the very experts who established the foundation of the period's scholarship.

The complete contrast of Misler's book to these types of books makes it a welcome occasion. Lavishly illustrated, with many images appearing in the West for the first time, it is brilliantly researched and, as noted earlier, marvellously written. Moreover, its

Kasyan Yaroslavich Goleizovsky's avant-garde choreography of Prokofiev's Visions fugitives, Nos 10-11 (Ridicolosamente, Con vivacità) for his own company, the Moscow Chamber Ballet, in 1922. The configuration of the bodies is architectonic, like so much art of the time, and acrobatic. The avant-garde costume design was adapted to the new dispositions of the body

focus allows an in-depth reading into the study, language and representation of different interpretations of the movement of the body, focusing on a single post-Revolution decade, when the arts in Russia were evolving at lightning speed. It does so primarily through a history of a singular institution, the Choreological Laboratory at the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences in Moscow, which was a rich breeding ground for performing artists and critical thinkers in dance and body movement at a time when the avant-garde in the visual arts was splintering into competing factions.

The book is a revelation not only because it introduces so much critical history, some of which has been documented in fragmented ways over the years, but because it unifies it in a coherent narrative that moves through Russian history and its nuances with finesse and comprehensiveness. Misler openly acknowledges the importance of dance in Russia and its influence abroad, but makes clear that this book is focused on the more scientific study of the movement of the body and its implications for cultural evolution. She opens with a quotation by Lev Lukin, "In the beginning was the body…", which sets the tone for the shape of the book. The Choreological Laboratory was established in 1921 by Wassily Kandinsky (a well-established painter at that point) and several colleagues, and immediately delved into new creative and practical ways in which the body could be configured in a variety of contexts, whether artistic or in the growing interests in how to make labourers more efficient, She then takes us, chapter by chapter, through the various uses of these studies in performance, industry and their legacy beyond their time. Misler also skilfully demonstrates that this did not take place in a vacuum, but took advantage of Western thought and vice-versa. For example, we are treated to a fascinating study of the teachings of Isadora Duncan, whose ideas on choreography were full of grace and elegance. This is contrasted later by a look into Taylorism and its reification of the worker, looking to make shortcuts in how workers executed their tasks to increase production and profit. One of the more fascinating chapters deals with the contrast between the naked body and the clothed body, reminding us of the Zeitgeist of the 1920s in Europe that celebrated cult of nudism versus Mass Ornament and the resurgence of an interest in classicism.

Accompanied by a copious chronology, bibliography and illustrated biographies of all of the key figures of the period, this book is an essential addition to any amateur or professional library. Her conclusion cogently appraises the history of the Russian Avant-garde itself: "The rediscovery and reappraisal of the Russian Art of Movement demonstrate not only the survival and vitality of a precious cultural legacy, but also the fact that the Russian renaissance of the 1910s and 1920s was a truly synthetic phenomenon embracing not only painting, literature and music, but also the theatre of movement and even the recreation of the body itself."

***Matthew Drutt** is based in New York, where he works as an editor, writer and curator. He is the president of Drutt Creative Arts Management, which advises on publications and collections*

The 'gold standard' of Netherlandish art in Mitteleuropa

Complete catalogues of the art of the Low Countries in the Polish and Hungarian national museums. By ***Mark Evans***

Early Netherlandish, Dutch, Flemish and Belgian Paintings 1494-1983 in the Collections of the National Museum in Warsaw and the Palace at Nieborów: Complete Illustrated Summary Catalogue
Hanna Benesz and Maria Kluk, eds, with Piotr Borusowski
The National Museum in Warsaw, 2 vols, 1,101pp, zł450 (pb)

Early Netherlandish Paintings in Budapest
Susan Urbach with Ágota Varga and András Fáy
Harvey Miller, volumes I and II, €150 each (hb)

The opulent collections of Dutch and Flemish paintings at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin are justly celebrated. In comparison, those at the National Museum in Warsaw and Budapest's Museum of Fine Arts are more modest in quality, although each comprises over 900 pictures, many of considerable interest. Hanna Benesz and Maria Kluk's summary catalogue of the former and Susan Urbach's analytical study of the latter's early works are therefore especially welcome.

The ambition of Stanislaw II Augustus "to create anew the Polish world" was brutally thwarted in 1795 by the partition of his kingdom, and many pictures purchased for him by the dealer Noel Desenfans went instead to Dulwich Picture Gallery. Nevertheless, 79 Dutch and Flemish pictures from the king's collection are now in Warsaw's National Museum and his summer retreat, the nearby Lazienki Palace. His taste for portraits by Ferdinand Bol, genre scenes by Jan Steen and equestrian subjects by Philips Wouwerman was typical of the time. A fine pair of landscapes by Frederik de Moucheron passed to the Princes of Sapieha, who forfeited their collection for supporting the Polish uprising of 1830-31. The exiled Count Wladyslaw Broel-Plater founded at Rapperswil in Switzerland "a refuge for historic memorabilia dishonoured and plundered in the homeland", including Pieter Saenredam's Interior of Saint Bavo's Church in Haarlem (1635).

Under Russian suzerainty, three early 16th-century Flemish triptychs and other pictures by Jacob Jordaens and Nicholaes Maes were bought to found an art museum in Warsaw. Following the re-establishment of Polish independence by the Treaty of Versailles (1919), several historic collections were returned and a National Museum built, which opened in 1938. Soon after, its galleries were bombarded and their contents looted by the invading Nazis. Especially poignant was the fate of the portrait of Maerten Soolmans by Rembrandt and his workshop, formerly owned by Stanislaw II. Removed in 1895 to the Hermitage at St Petersburg, it was returned in 1921, only to be confiscated for Hans Frank, the Nazi governor-general of Poland.

After the war, this and many other paintings were recovered and the national collection augmented by works appropriated by the Communist regime. These included Renaissance altarpieces with sculptural centerpieces and painted wings made in Antwerp for churches in or near Gdańsk. This former Hanseatic port is still dominated by the immense brick Gothic Church of St Mary where Joos van Cleve's St Reinhold Triptych was consecrated in 1516. Around that time, the parishioners of nearby Pruszcz Gdański also commissioned a Passion altarpiece with wings painted by the Brussels master Colijn de Coter.

Although less traumatic, the history of Hungary's national collection was not uneventful. In 1848 the Hungarian uprising against Habsburg rule was proclaimed from the steps of the National Museum in Pest, which acquired from the imperial apartments at Buda Castle several early 16th-century Netherlandish panels of secular subjects. These joined Hans Memling's Crucifixion, bequeathed earlier by the Archbishop of Eger, János Laszlo Pyrker, and later reunited with its wings, formerly at the Imperial Treasury in Vienna.

To assuage Hungarian separatism, the Emperor Franz Joseph granted the kingdom considerable autonomy and developed its cultural institutions. Accordingly, the celebrated art collection of Prince Miklós II Esterházy was purchased in 1871 for the Hungarian state, which sought to rival the scale of Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum with Budapest's Museum of Fine Arts.

Its collections include a fascinating (but much damaged) early copy on canvas after Hieronymus Bosch's Garden of Earthly Delights, perhaps made for export to Venice, and a panel of Christ Carrying the Cross, datable around 1505-15, which closely records an influential lost composition by Jan van Eyck. However, the finest early Netherlandish pictures were mostly bequeathed by Count János Pálffy, the creator of the fantastic Neo-Gothic castle at Bojnice in Slovakia. He was an imperial privy councillor, and his exquisite cabinet paintings of the Virgin and Child by Petrus Christus, Joos van Cleve and Michael Sittow, and a fine copy on copper after Hugo van der Goes's Lamentation of Christ, are comparable in quality to works from the ancestral Habsburg collection.

At Budapest, the dynasty is personified by Barend van Orley's Portrait of Charles V and two paintings of the emperor's sister Mary of Hungary (1505-58), one allegedly given by the English press baron, Harold Harmsworth, First Viscount Rothermere, an interwar champion of Hungarian territorial claims. A more national narrative is expressed by the likeness of St Elizabeth of Hungary and a version of van Orley's portrait of Mary's husband, Louis II (1506-26), whose death in battle ended Hungarian independence for almost four centuries.

These publications are of a genre formerly a mainstay of curatorial activity, but nowadays disappointingly rare. Both works provide an immense reservoir of specialist information. They also invite the reader to reflect on how the art of the Low Countries exemplified an international "gold standard" of verisimilitude that remains a byword for cultural prestige throughout Central Europe.

***Mark Evans** is the Senior Curator of Paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and an authority on Renaissance paintings and miniatures*

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