

Impressionism in the Land of the Bolsheviks: Questions of Art, Reality, and Ideology in the Interwar Soviet Union

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Between the First and Second World Wars, the historical and ideological significance of Impressionism in relation to contemporary art and the Soviet project was fiercely contested.¹ This article examines key philosophical and critical debates, while also noting frequent divergences in the attitudes of theorists, critics, artists, and curators about the merits of Impressionism. While not comprehensive, this article tracks the persistence of particular questions regarding Impressionism: as a contradictory form of realism, a problematic *Weltanschauung*, a potential source for a specifically Russian/Soviet art of the future, and a decisive turning point in the history of art. Following an introduction to the pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary status of Impressionism, the article explores the considerable impact of German thought on Russian interpretations in the 1920s, the heightening of ideological rhetoric in the mid-1930s, and the re-evaluation of Impressionism in an ambitious 1939 exhibition and a corresponding but never published anthology.

Impressionism in Russia Before and After the Revolution: Modernist Approaches

A brief consideration of the status of Impressionism in critical texts, collections, and artistic practices before 1917 and in the immediate post-Revolution period provides a framework for understanding its interwar reception.² As has been documented, several Russian realists including Ilia Repin were familiar with Impressionism as early as 1874.³ Emile Zola published his review of the second Impressionist exhibition in a Russian magazine in 1876.⁴ Following this early circulation of Zola's criticism and a number of texts by Russian critics, French Impressionist paintings were presented to Russian audiences in 1896, including Claude Monet's *A Grainstack on Sunlit* (1891, Kunsthau, Zurich) whose artistic merits provoked a debate in press but also spurred young Vasily Kandinsky's first ideas related to non-objective painting, later put forth in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.⁵ In 1898, French Impressionist works first entered the private collections of Piotr and Sergei Shchukin; the Morozov brothers followed in developing their collections with significant numbers of Impressionist paintings. With the almost total absence of Edouard Manet from collections in Russia, Monet exemplified the movement. Compared with his Impressionist *confères*, Monet was better represented, in both quality and quantity, in Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov's respective collections, where his development could be traced from his early *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* to his post-1900 views of London's River Thames and

1. For discussions of Impressionism in the 1930s, see: Nina Iavorskaia, 'Problema impressionizma v sovetskom iskusstoznanii i khudozhestvennoi kritike poslednikh desiatletii. Obzor publikatsii i konferentsii', in N.V. Iavorskaia, *Iz istorii sovetskogo iskusstoznaniia, O frantsuzskom iskusve XIX–XX vekov* (Moscow: Sovetskii Khudozhnik, 1987), pp. 65–76; Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 192–5; Mikhail Trenikhin, 'Impressionizm. Teoreticheskie spory i sovetskaiia zhivopis' 1930-kh godov', in I.E. Svetlov (ed.), *Iskusstvo XIX–XX vekov: Kontrasty i paralleli* (Moscow: MGAKh im. V.I. Surikova, 2014), pp. 309–16.

2. Dmitrii Sarab'ianov, K voprosu o spetsifike russkogo impressionizma // Dmitrii Sarab'ianov, *Russkaia zhivopis' XIX veka sredi evropeiskikh shkol* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1980), pp. 166–81; Alison Hilton, 'The Impressionist Vision in Russia and Eastern Europe', in Norma Broude (ed.), *World Impressionism: The International Movement, 1860–1920* (New York: N. Abrams, 1990), pp. 371–406; Viacheslav Filippov, *Impressionizm v russkoi zhivopisi* (Moscow: Belyi gorod, 2003); Il'ia Doronchenkov, "... Pochva ... dlia vechnogo dvizhenia vpered". Kak v Rossii ponimali i ne ponimali impressionizm', in *Impressionizm v avangarde* (Moscow: Museum of Russian Impressionism, 2018), pp. 9–41; Otrud Westheider, Mihael Philipp, and Henning Schaper (eds), *Impressionism in Russia: Dawn of the Avant-Grade* (Munich, London, and New York: Prestel, 2021).

3. David Jackson, 'Western Art and Russian Ethics: Repin in Paris, 1873–76', *Russian Review*, vol. 57, no. 3, July 1998, pp. 394–409; Rosalind P. Blakesley, *The Russian Canvas: Painting in Imperial Russia, 1757–1881* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 256–64.

4. Alison Hilton, 'Le messenger d'Europe: Zola's Art Criticism Beyond Paris', in Jean-Max Guieu and Alison Hilton (eds), *Emile Zola and the Arts: Centennial of the Publication of L'Oeuvre* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1988), pp. 61–72. Rosalind P. Blakesley, 'Emile Zola's Art Criticism in Russia', in Carol Adlam and Juliet Simpson (eds), *Critical Exchange: Art Criticism of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Russia and Western Europe* (Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 263–84.

5. Iliia Doronchenkov (ed.), *Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art: 1890s to Mid-1930s* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 34–5.

6. Meier-Graefe's book *Impressionisten* (Munich: Piper, 1907) was translated into Russian: *Impressionisty: Gis, Mane, Van Gog, Pissarro, Sezann* (Moscow: Problemy estetiki, 1913). See also the Russian translation of Richard Muther's *Geschichte Der Malerei Im XIX: Jahrhundert* (1893–4), Rikhard Muter, *Istoriia zhivopisi v XIX veke*. 3 vols (St. Petersburg: Tovarishestvo 'Znanie', 1899–1901); and Camille Mauclair's *L'Impressionisme: Son histoire, son esthétique, ses maîtres* (1904), Kamill Mokler, *Impressionizm, ego istoriia, ego estetika, ego mastera* (Moscow, 1909).

7. Iliia Doronchenkov, "'Storm Gathering over Russian Art': From the History of Polemics on Impressionism in Russian Criticism of the Early 1890s", in Ekaterina Bobrinskaiia and Anna Korndorf (eds), *Memory as the Subject and Instrument of Art Studies: Collected Works of the First International Sarabianov Congress of Art Historians* (Moscow: The State Institute of Art Studies, 2016), pp. 277–302.

8. The Museum owned two paintings by Manet, nineteen by Monet (including *Luncheon on the Grass* (1866) and *Boulevard des Capucines* (1873), both Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow), twelve by Degas and Renoir, five by Pissarro, six by Sisley, one by Cassatt, two by Guillaumin, four by Signac, and two by Henry-Edmond Cross. In 1930–1931 several Impressionist paintings were transferred to the Hermitage, and in 1933 two works were sold to Stephen C. Clark (Degas' *Singer in Green*, c. 1884, and Renoir's *A Waitress at Duval's Restaurant*, c. 1875, both in the Metropolitan Museum, New York).

9. Iakov Tugendhol'd, *Pervyi muzei novoi zapadnoi zhivopisi* (Moscow and Petrograd: Tvorchestvo, 1923).

Houses of Parliament. Monet's painting acted as a metonym for Impressionism, dictating the terms by which the movement would be interpreted in Russia.

Russian modernist critics of the 1900s–1910s praised Impressionism as great art and a firm basis for more contemporary painting. In explaining Impressionism to an educated public, these critics generally followed the strategy of such Western writers as Julius Meier-Graefe who had underscored the 'traditional' painterly values of Manet and his allies.⁶ At the same time, spurred by ideas more typically associated with Symbolism, they put forth notions that reverberated throughout art literature in the decades to come. Impressionism was sharply criticised as a projection of the Positivist *Weltanschauung* which deprived art of its spiritual values and reduced painting to being a superficial reflection of nature not controlled by an artist's creative mind. Nonetheless, in the 1890s, Impressionism influenced many Russian artists: Valentin Serov, Konstantin Korovin, and Igor' Grabar'. In the 1900s, members of the avant-garde similarly embraced the movement: Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, and Kazimir Malevich among others. But before the First World War, Impressionism also met with adverse reactions across the political and cultural spectrum, from the right-wing monarchist and future founder of *The Black Hundred* Vladimir Gringmut to the first Russian Marxist politician and philosopher Georgii Plekhanov.⁷

After 1917, the recently nationalised collections of Shchukin and Morozov, with their incredible collections of Impressionist paintings, were merged in the State Museum of Modern Western Art (SMMWA), which helped to create an understanding of Impressionism as a respected part of a newly established canon of Modern art (Figs 1 and 2).⁸ Coincidentally, moving Impressionist paintings to the museum effectively curtailed their influence, as this art came to be confined to an official art institution without clear connection to topical art issues for almost a decade. It is significant that early Soviet texts about these collections generally followed pre-revolutionary discourses on Western Modernism. For instance, Iakov Tugendhol'd, the most vocal champion of Impressionism in the 1910s, did not offer the new Soviet audience a new vision of this art. Instead, his 1923 guidebook of the former Shchukin collection repeats almost word by word his 1914 essay.⁹ Even as some prerevolutionary ideas about Impressionism continued to circulate after the Revolution, the style came to be eclipsed by the experiments of Cubism, Futurism, and Suprematism. In turn, these stylistic innovations acted as evidence that Impressionism was simply representational art.

Pre-War Philosophical Issues: Plekhanov, Lenin, and Empirio-criticism

Formulated before the Revolution, Georgii Plekhanov's ideas would become a cornerstone of Marxist aesthetics, cultural theory, and debates about Impressionism. As a leader of the *Menshevik* wing of the Russian Social-Democratic movement, he generally took an anti-Bolshevik position.¹⁰ The first to develop a Marxist analysis of culture, he devoted particular attention to its 'decline' under capitalism. On the one hand, he believed that 'decadence' was predetermined by the evolution of society:

I do not say that contemporary artists *must* seek inspiration in the emancipatory movement of the proletariat. Not at all. Just as apple-trees must bring forth apples and pear-trees pears, so must artists who share the bourgeois point of view struggle against this movement. The art of a decadent epoch *must* be decadent ...¹¹

Plekhanov combined this determinism, however, with the conviction that artists become decadents consciously and therefore bear responsibility for their



Fig. 1. Excursion to the State Museum of Modern Western Art. Impressionist Room, c. 1938, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

art's corruptive influence.¹² Plekhanov gave 'objective' analysis a moralising meaning, thus perpetuating the ethical view of art prevalent in nineteenth-century Russian thought such as Leo Tolstoy's 'What Is Art?'. Both aspects of Plekhanov's approach are evident in his writings dealing with contemporary Western art, especially Impressionism. Yet, as Matei Calinescu has observed, 'Plekhanov as a theorist of decadence unwittingly brings into Marxist criticism the longtime Russian ambivalence toward Western modernity and its artistic expressions'.¹³ His interpretation of Impressionism seems to be influenced by this 'ambivalence'.

Plekhanov had limited knowledge of Impressionism. In a lengthy review of the 1905 Venice Biennale, he relied on Camille Mauclair's book, 'which demonstrates neither factual accuracy nor trenchant critique'.¹⁴ Even with the possibility of seeing Monet, Pissarro, Renoir, and Sisley at the exhibition, Plekhanov took works by the Dutch Jan Toorop, the Spanish Hermenegildo Anglada Camarasa, and the Swedish Carl Larsson to be Impressionist. In his eyes, Impressionism exemplified art's decline under capitalism in its avoidance of serious issues and its concentration on superficial visual and artistic effects:

... [Impressionism's] attentive treatment of light effects increases the pleasure nature affords man, and since in the 'society of the future' nature will probably become much more precious to man than now, we must acknowledge that Impressionism as well is working, albeit not always successfully, for *that* society. As Camille Mauclair, who is very

10. The long-lasting schism in the Russian Social-Democratic movement took place during the Second Party Congress (July 1903, Brussels and London) when the radical leftist group led by Lenin gained the majority (Russian *bol'shinstvo*) of votes during the elections of the Central Committee. Correspondingly, the moderate wing of the party who preferred legal political activity and less-rigid principles of the Party's structure was labelled *Men'sheviks* (that is, those who belong to the minority). These rather accidental names did not reflect the changing political balance in pre-1917 Social-Democracy when Lenin's faction was not always dominant, but contributed to its reputation as representing the majority of partisans of the workers' revolutionary movement.

11. George V. Plekhanov, *Art and Society*, Introduction by Granville Hicks (New York: Critics Group, 1937), pp. 92–3.

12. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism. Avant-Garde. Decadence. Kitsch. Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 201.



Fig. 2. Impressionist Hall at the State Museum of Modern Western Art, c. 1940, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

13. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 199.

14. Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 226. One may presume that Plekhanov read a French edition of Camille Mauclair, *L'Impressionisme: son histoire, son esthétique, ses maîtres* (Paris: Librairie d'art ancien et moderne, 1904). Plekhanov's later writings reveal his knowledge of the same author's book *Trois crises de l'art actuel* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1906).

15. Georgii Plekhanov, 'The Proletarian Movement and Bourgeois Art' (1905), in Doronchenkov (ed.), *Russian and Soviet Views*, p. 67.

16. Plekhanov, *Art and Society*, p. 84.

well disposed toward Impressionism, says, 'It has brought us the cares of life illuminated by the sun' ... But Mauclair also admits that in the works of the French Impressionists ... the ideas are less interesting than the *technique*. He considers this one of Impressionism's shortcomings. I think he has put it too mildly. Impressionism's lack of ideas constitutes the *original sin* that ... has rendered it completely incapable of bringing about a profound revolution in painting.¹⁵

In his 1912 article 'Art and Social Life', Plekhanov once more invoked Impressionism, even as he concentrated on Cubist art he had seen at the Salon d'Automne and about which he had read in *Du Cubisme* by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger (1912). He interpreted Cubism and its theory as a form of subjective idealism and solipsism. From this perspective, Impressionism was seen more favourably as a type of Realism, albeit defective. Contemporary artists, he wrote:

reared under its influence had to choose whether to continue exercising their ingenuity upon the surface of phenomena, inventing new and increasingly amazing and artificial light effects, or to attempt to penetrate the surface of phenomena, learning from the mistake of the Impressionists and realizing that the protagonist of a picture is not light, but man, with his highly complex inner life.¹⁶

Plekhanov's writings had a limited audience during his lifetime. From 1880 until the 1917 fall of Russian monarchy, he lived primarily in Switzerland, Italy, and France. He died in 1918. But his texts were published extensively in the 1920s, when he enjoyed a reputation as a major Marxist thinker. With what would become an official Marxist aesthetic still under construction,

his writings on art and literature became an important source for it as well as for the social history of art rapidly developing in Soviet Russia. As would be expected, Plekhanov's interpretation of Impressionism not only influenced the post-revolutionary attitude towards this style but became a template for Soviet critiques of 'decadent' bourgeois art in general.

Another pre-war development that would prove important for later interpretations of Impressionism were debates in the Russian Social-Democratic milieu concerning Empirio-criticism, a philosophical position strongly opposed by Plekhanov. Empirio-criticism was a strongly empiricist cognitive theory developed by Austrian physicist Ernst Mach and Swiss philosopher Richard Avenarius in the late nineteenth century. Relying on recent scientific discoveries, primarily in particle physics, Empirio-Critics challenged the idea of a material world as something solid and unchangeable and interpreted the process of cognition as a sequence of fleeting sensations which precluded any ability to grasp the essence of things. As a result, they also questioned another basic concept – a Cartesian Ego, an integral subject capable of active cognition of the external world, which was replaced in their view with the self as a combination of changing perceptions (as once stated by David Hume).

In the Social-Democratic debates in the second half of the 1900s, Aleksandr Bogdanov, a prominent Bolshevik functionary and intellectual leader, sought in Empirio-criticism flexible cognitive schema 'capable of embracing all the diversity of the infinite progress of life'.¹⁷ His own theory of Empiriomonism was designed as a worldview suitable for highly organised proletariat and as a basis for a rationally structured, future society. Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin and Plekhanov strongly opposed Empirio-criticism as solipsistic and agnostic, condemning it as Subjective Idealism – the worst philosophical sin for the partisans of Dialectical Materialism to which both subscribed.

Lenin developed his critique in *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, published in 1909 under the pen-name 'Vl. Il'in'. There he reasserted his orthodox materialism regarding what later became known in Soviet discourse as the 'basic question of philosophy': the primacy of matter over consciousness.

Their [Russian Empirio-critics or 'Machists'] denial of matter is the old answer to epistemological problems, which consists in denying the existence of an external, objective source of our sensations, of an objective reality corresponding to our sensations. On the other hand, the recognition of the philosophical line denied by the idealists and agnostics is expressed in the definitions: matter is that which, acting upon our sense-organs, produces sensation; matter is the objective reality given to us in sensation ...¹⁸

This conclusion confirmed not only the ability to know the objective world, but also – by extension – the ability of those who adopted revolutionary Marxism to re-construct the society following Marx's principle: 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it'.¹⁹

The book as well as the overall discussion mostly resonated at the time in Social-Democratic milieu, without ever addressing artistic issues. But because the close association of Impressionism and Machism became a commonplace in art historical literature – particularly in German texts – Lenin's book would later be a powerful weapon in discussions on Impressionism. After its inclusion in a 1923 collection of Lenin's works, it was reprinted many times. By the 1930s, it was a philosophical cornerstone of Leninism and would consequently put Impressionism in constant danger.

17. Aleksandr Bogdanov, *Empiriomonizm. Kniga I* (Moscow: S. Dorovatovskii and A. Charushnikov, 1904), p. 7.

18. <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/mec/three1.htm>> [accessed 6 May 2023]. Here Lenin argues with his opponents' statement 'matter had disappeared' which reflected a new vision of the integrity of matter after discovery of the electron as a subatomic particle.

19. Karl Marx, 'Theses on Feuerbach', <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>> [accessed 6 May 2023].

20. Iakov Tugendhol'd, *Sezon vystavok, Revolutsiia i kul'tura*, no. 3–4, 1928, p. 107.

21. The choice of texts for translation seems to have circumstantial, depending on the personal knowledge and cultural strategies of people involved. Oskar Val'zel', *Impressionizm i ekspressionizm v sovremennoi Germanii (1890–1920)*. Avtorizovannyi perevod s nemetskogo izdaniia 1920 g. O.M. Kotel'nikovoi pod red. Prof. V.M. Zhirmunskogo (Petersburg: Academia, 1922). Chapters from: Oscar Walzel, *Deutsche Dichtung seit Goethes Tod* (Berlin: Askanischer Verlag, 1920); G. Martsinskii, *Metod ekspressionizma v zhivopisi*. Perevod B.Kazanskogo pod redaktsiei i s predisloviem N.E.Radlova (Petersburg: Academia, 1923); and Georg Marzynski, *Die Methode des Expressionismus: Studien zu Seiner Psychologie* (Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1920).

22. See G. Marzynski, 'Die impressionistische Methode', *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft*, 14, 1920, pp. 90–4.

23. Martsinskii, *Metod ekspressionizma*, p. 18.

24. Wal'tsel', *Impressionizm i ekspressionizm*, p. 43.

25. Volker Munz, 'Reception of a Philosophical Text: A Case Study. Ernst Mach and Viennese Modernity', *Newsletter Moderne. Zeitschrift der Spezialforschungsbereichs Moderne – Wien und Zentraleuropa um 1900*, vol. 7, no. 2, September 2004, pp. 17–24.

Post-Revolution: The Impact of German Intellectual Thought

After the Revolution, the Bolsheviks soon permitted a certain pluralism when it came to acceptable artistic styles. But Impressionism did not influence Russian artists, who turned instead in the 1920s to figurative painting and looked to nineteenth-century Russian Realism or, casting their gazes abroad, to Paul Cézanne, Expressionism, or Neue Sachlichkeit. As Tugendhol'd, already a well-established Soviet critic, pointed out: 'Impressionism is productive as a school of painting and a method of study but it's obsolete as a current. Our time demands a less passive and unsteady treatment of the world ...'.²⁰

Nonetheless, Impressionism was significant for intellectual circles. But not on its own account. Whereas little information about current Western artistic developments was available between 1914 and 1920, when news of this art started to surface in 1921, German Expressionism, almost completely overlooked by pre-war Russian criticism, became a sensation. Visual information remained scant until the First German exhibition in Moscow (1924). However, literary sources abounded. Many German brochures and pamphlets presented Expressionism as a spiritual revival and liberation of human creativity after the previous half-century, dominated by the Positivist worldview. Accordingly, Impressionism was reduced to a mechanical record of the artist's fleeting sensations.

Two such texts promoting Expressionism, by Oscar Walzel and Georg Marzynski, were translated into Russian and widely circulated, responding to the high demand for Western literature on contemporary art (3,000 and 2,000 copies respectively).²¹ Walzel was a well-established literary studies professor and follower of Wilhelm Dilthey; Marzynski, now relatively obscure, worked at Berlin University's Psychological Institute.²² Both dealt primarily with Expressionism as a contemporary *Weltanschauung*, mostly in German-speaking countries, which radically broke with Positivist culture and pointed towards the 'spiritual' creativity of the future.

Walzel and Marzynski deployed the German-Austrian discourse which understood Impressionism to affect human psychology, impact all aspects of culture, and be an international phenomenon. Painting became the most perfect manifestation of this worldview, for its technique was most capable of reflecting the subtlest nuances of optical perception, never pretending to present phenomena beyond the visible: 'Impressionism is an utterly determinate way of looking at objects; an Impressionist has a completely specific technique of vision, and his painterly technique can be understood when one understands his optical technique'.²³ Marzynski's essay plainly formulated ideas elaborated in Walzel's book, where Impressionism was presented as an all-embracing phenomenon rooted in a Positivist worldview. Walzel focused on issues of cognition, taking pains to prove that Mach's Empirio-criticism was directly related to Impressionism in painting: 'the aesthetics of Impressionism definitely employs them [Mach's views] and makes them its logical ground'.²⁴ By this time, the connection between Mach's notions and Impressionist aesthetics had become a commonplace in the German-speaking world: already in 1904 Austrian critic Hermann Bahr, in his 'Dialogue of the Tragic', proclaimed Mach's teaching 'the philosophy of Impressionism'.²⁵

Another consequential development in these years was the circulation of Richard Hamann's ideas about Impressionism. In 1923 Hamann, a student of Dilthey and Heinrich Wölfflin and an early scholar to employ a social history of art, issued a second, slightly altered edition of his 1907 *Der Impressionism in Leben and Kunst*. Impressionism was stigmatised as manifesting a narrow, materialist, and sensualist worldview peculiar to the *fin de siècle*. More broadly, Hamann

identified Impressionism as a tendency that appeared in aged artists such as Rembrandt and Michelangelo as well as periods of decadence.²⁶ Hamann thought Impressionism penetrated literally every aspect of contemporary culture and provided dozens of examples in painting, literature, music, and philosophy, with Mach as the philosopher equivalent of the Impressionist artist.

Hamann's ideas were thoroughly discussed in the philosophical community. Recently published materials of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN; 1921–1931) reveal that a synopsis of Hamann's brochure 'Die Kunst und Kultur der Gegenwart' (1922) was delivered by Pavel Popov, a philosopher and brother of the Constructivist artist Liubov Popova, at a February 1925 meeting of the Commission for the History of Aesthetics.²⁷ A translation of the brochure was prepared but never published. Even so, Hamann's ideas gained currency in Soviet Russia not only in the milieu of 'old' academic philosophers but also among young Marxists who, under the spell of Plekhanov and others, were developing a new art history to firmly connect a society's class structure and its culture. In the second half of the 1920s, several attempts to conceptualise Modern art along these lines were made, according an important place to Impressionism. Despite the Marxist vocabulary and class schemata imposed on art's development, however, Impressionism was described and valued in line with Hamann's argument. It seems a standard shortcoming of this new art history that it had a more or less coherent set of ideas for class analysis of society and culture based on Marx's notions of basis and superstructure but did not have its own intellectual instruments for analysing artistic visual language. (Not incidentally, a hybrid term, 'the formalist-sociological method', was applied to some Soviet Marxist scholars of the late 1920s).

Two ambitious publications exemplify this development. In *Culture and Style: System and Principles of the Sociology of Art*, from 1927, Leningrad University professor Ieremia Ioffe outlined relations between social class and artistic style: 'Style is produced by all the economic activity of a specific social group. ... New style is a result of social shifts ... A struggle of styles is a struggle of social groups'.²⁸ Without mentioning Hamann – indeed, the 360-page book has no references – Ioffe closely follows Hamann's description of Impressionism's visual language and interprets it as a relativist worldview similar to Mach's Empirio-criticism. Condemning Impressionism as a style of decline, he finds it characteristic of a 'commodity-money bourgeoisie' and a 'democratic intelligentsia [that] got lost in industrial culture and frustrated by the immensity of the world cities, [industrial] enterprises and [human] masses ...'.²⁹

Another social analysis of Western art from the 'industrial capitalism' of the 1860s–1870s to the present appeared from Ivan Matsa (János Mácza), a Hungarian communist émigré, Moscow University professor, and *Oktiabr* group theoretician. His *Western Art of the Age of Mature Capitalism* (1929) demonstrated an extensive knowledge of modern literature, especially German, in its sociology of culture. Matsa claimed that 'every art – for it is a tool of class struggle – in its social importance either reflects a struggle for something or demonstrates the fact of coming into control by a new dominant class ...'.³⁰ For him, art reflected the 'socially determined psycho-ideology' of a class or a social group. Matsa also followed Hamann in understanding Impressionism as 'sensualistic phenomenalism', for it rejects knowledge accumulated through experience: 'For him [the Impressionist] an art object, a thing, a phenomenon is always equal to a subject's perception'.³¹ This is what makes Impressionism different from Realism; it replaces the 'intellectual empiricism' of the latter with a 'subjective sensationism': '... in search of the new style of consolidating bourgeois order, we have

26. After the Second World War, Hamann closely cooperated with East Germany and published there a three-volume *Deutsche Kunst und Kultur von der Gründerzeit bis zum Expressionismus* (1959–65, with Jost Hermand), with a second volume on Impressionism. But his early writings reveal not so much the influence of Marx as of German cultural historian Karl Lamprecht.

27. Yu. N. Iakimenko, 'Khronologiiia deiatel'nosti Filosofskogo otdeleniia GAKhN', in N. S. Plotnikov and N. P. Podzemskaia (eds), *Iskusstvo kak iazyk – iazyki iskusstva. Gosudarstvennaia akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk i esteticheskaiia teoriia 1920-kh godov*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2017), p. 368.

28. I. Ioffe, *Kultura i stil'. Sistema i printsipy sotsiologii iskusstva. Literatura, zhivopis', muzyka natural'nogo, tovarno-denezhnogo, industrial'nogo khoziaistva* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1927), pp. 52–3, 55.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 250–1.

30. Ivan Matsa, *Iskusstvo epokhi zrelogo kapitalizma na Zapade* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Kommunisticheskoi akademii, 1929), p. 26. Emphasis in original.

31. Matsa, *Iskusstvo*, p. 36.

32. Matsa, *Iskusstvo*, pp. 25–6.

33. Matsa, *Iskusstvo*, p. 26.

34. Matsa, *Iskusstvo*, p. 29.

35. See Frida Roginskaiia, 'Against the Cult of the French', *Iskusstvo v masy*, no. 4, 1930, 28–9; Doronchenkov, *Russian and Soviet Views*, pp. 288–90.

36. Nikolai Punin, *Noveishie techeniia v russkom iskusstve. II. Predmet i kul'tura* (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennyi Russkii Muzei, Khudozhestvennyi otdel, 1928), p. 3.

a shift of psychological interest in reality from the typical to the individual, from intellectual to sensual'.³²

But Matsa refused Hamann's interpretation of Impressionism as an aged or 'senile' style. In this he relied on the authority of Wilhelm Hausenstein, a much-respected, well-published German Social-Democrat journalist and writer who studied the relations between art and society in a Marxist way: 'It's not a decline but a completion of a style ... it still affirms reality, not rejects it'.³³ Matsa's reasoning was that the class associated with Impressionism, the industrial and trade-industrial bourgeoisie, had been dominant during the prosperous decades of the 1870s and 1880s. Indeed, he praised Impressionism, the climax of capitalist art, for its 'joyful self-affirmation'.³⁴

Although in the early 1930s books by Ioffe, Matsa, and such Marxist art historians as Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov would be stigmatised as 'vulgar[ly] sociological' and ideologically defective, directly linking a social group with its ideology and artistic phenomenon, common in their approach, would also be practised by orthodox Stalinist critics.

The Re-evaluation of Impressionism by Artists and Critics During the Great Break

Dramatic changes took place during the 'Great Break', as the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s are labelled in Soviet historiography. Coinciding with the Great Depression in the West, Stalin launched a five-year economic plan (1928–1932), put an end to the rudimentary market economy Lenin introduced in 1921, and launched Collectivisation or the forced accumulation of peasants into collective farms (*Kolkhoz*). Simultaneously he took full control, stripping from the Party governing body potential rivals like Nikolai Bukharin.

In the cultural field, the Great Break signified the end of the relative stylistic pluralism of the post-1917 years. During 1929–1931, several institutions controlled by young Stalin's proxies (the Russian Association of Proletarian Artists among them) conducted campaigns enflaming ideological hysteria. Some targeted artists and critics sympathetic to modern French painting – Impressionism, rarely mentioned, was not classified as a major enemy, but such attacks formed a climate generally unfriendly for Western modernist art in the Soviet Union.³⁵ In early 1932, the 'red guards' were removed and remaining artistic groups, already terrorised and disciplined, merged into the Union of the Soviet Artists. Socialist Realism was introduced in 1934 as a universal 'creative method' of Soviet literature and the arts.

Shortly before this change in intellectual atmosphere, Impressionism once more became important for contemporary Russian painting. By the end of the 1920s, many Soviet artists and critics recognised that Modern art required a critical re-evaluation of its fifty years' development, with Impressionism as its cornerstone. As art critic Nikolai Punin, the most active champion of the avant-garde for the past decade, pointed out in 1928: '[It was] in this [Impressionist] period – not in the Cubist one – that the revolutionary break happened which allows us to juxtapose contemporary art and "objective" art of classical era of European culture'.³⁶ Punin claimed that art of the past concentrated on the depiction of physical objects as separate 'entities/bodies' – not on relations between them – and in this sense Impressionism with its preoccupation with atmosphere and a general, optical image of reality indeed became the point of departure for future Modernist development.

Kazimir Malevich's changing attitude to Impressionism is telling of this moment and the changing status of Impressionism in developmental histories

of modern art. Despite adopting a neo-Impressionist style in his early years, he never discussed Impressionism at length in theoretical writings and even suggested excluding it from the Museum of Artistic Culture in 1918.³⁷ But, by the mid-1920s, in the GINKhUK, his students were required to scrutinise the main pictorial systems of modern art beginning with Impressionism. Classes with the 'Circle for the study of modern Western painting', a group of young disciples run by Malevich in 1929, started with Impressionism.³⁸ Most revealing was his retrospective revision of his own trajectory. In preparing his one-man exhibition in the Tretyakov Gallery, planned for 1929 but never opened, Malevich produced paintings in the manner he considered Impressionist with reference to motives and pictorial devices of the 1860–1870s, thus affirming these decades as the style's exemplary period. As Elena Basner has shown, in falsely dating these paintings to 1903–1904, Malevich linearised his development as if to follow a contemporary artist's normative model, with 'canonical' Impressionism the departure point.³⁹

In ways comparable to Malevich, Mikhail Larionov, another avant-garde leader, had the history of his past work revised to better align with changing attitudes towards Impressionism. Though 1928 was already the wrong time for an émigré like the Paris-based Larionov to have a large-scale exhibition in a Soviet public space, Punin worked nonetheless on a monographic exhibition for Leningrad's Russian Museum. The project ultimately failed, but attempting to justify and promote it, Punin elaborated a strategy to rehabilitate Impressionism. Concentrating in his essay on the artist's brief Impressionist period in the 1900s, he radically saw it not to be a transition but to reveal Larionov's inborn realism.⁴⁰ Moreover, this innate disposition reaffirmed his Russianness: '... his Impressionism is especially dear to us – it links the past of Russian painting with the latest trends. This inherited realistic tradition runs from Vasil'ev and Surikov through Larionov'.⁴¹ Professional communities proceeded to successfully employ his example over the next decade.

Punin's turn to national painterly heritage corresponds to another attempt to connect Impressionism to Russia. A group of young Marxists attempted to use 'Impressionism' as an umbrella label for Russian art at the turn of the century. Despite their not doing more to identify the specific qualities of 'Russian' Impressionism and Fedorov-Davydov practically ignoring this term in his groundbreaking *Russian Art of Industrial Capitalism* (1929), they nonetheless stripped Impressionism of its 'ethnic' or 'national' French qualities, cherished by the previous generation of Russian modernist critics, and positioned it as a phase necessary for any national school.⁴²

From 1928 to the early 1930s, Impressionism sporadically came to be seen as an historical origin point for modern art, with attempts made to connect it with the Russian realist tradition. It further inspired some contemporary Russian painters who searched for new opportunities overlooked by the previous generation. In this regard, Impressionism could be understood as a 'post-conceptual' art which, after Cubism and Abstraction, turned a painter into an observer of reality again.

Impressionism as a Model of Optimism

Despite sporadic re-evaluations of Impressionism as a realist practice and tradition by artists and critics, by the end of the 1920s it generally had a reputation for being a rather obsolete visual language with limited possibilities, a view supported by such influential writers with pre-revolutionary backgrounds as Tugendhol'd. It could give a feeling of immediacy and evoke an impression of

37. Elena Basner, 'Impressionizm v tvorcheskoi i pedagogicheskoi deiatel'nosti K.S.Malevicha', in Irina Karasik (ed.), *Russkii avangard: Lichnost' i shkola* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2003), p. 70.

38. Elena Basner, *Malevich's Painting in the Collection of the Russian Museum (The Matter of the Artist's Creative Evolution) – Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum* (St. Petersburg: Palace Edition, 2000), p. 25.

39. Basner, *Malevich's Painting*, p. 25.

40. Nikolai Punin, 'Mikhail Larionov's Impressionist Period' (1928), in Dorontchenkov (ed.), *Russian and Soviet Views*, p. 301.

41. Punin, 'Mikhail Larionov's Impressionist Period'.

42. In those years this approach was not developed, but Russian scholars returned to it in the 1980–2000s.

43. Amshei Niurenberg, 'The Pissarro Exhibition: Letter from Paris' (1929), in Dorontchenkov (ed.), *Russian and Soviet Views*, p. 302.

44. Dorontchenkov, *Russian and Soviet Views*, p. 302.

45. Aleksandr Severdenko, 'Response to an Impressionist' (1929), in Dorontchenkov (ed.), *Russian and Soviet Views*, p. 303. Emphasis in original.

46. A. Krol', *Renuar. Zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: AKhR, 1929).

47. Krol', *Renuar. Zhizn'*, p. 6.

a light-filled atmosphere but was incapable of producing deep, dramatic images appealing to the masses. Its sketchiness prevented a solution to the problem articulated at this time as central for Soviet art by such groups as the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) that sought to resurrect the nineteenth-century Realist visual idiom and the Society of Easel Painting (OST) whose artists, by comparison, embraced Expressionism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and contemporary photography and cinema. Despite different stylistic benchmarks, the champions of new Realism insisted on creating a narrative painting that would express the optimistic spirit of dynamic society constructed under Socialism.

These were the issues at stake in a heated exchange of critical essays in the main Soviet art magazine *Iskusstvo v massy*, published by the Association of Artists of the Revolution (AKhR), the successor of the AKhRR, the largest artists' organisation and the champion of a Communist agenda – 'realist' styles and 'revolutionary' subjects. In 1929, Amshei Niurenberg, a painter influenced by the Fauves and Post-Impressionists and author of a book on Cézanne (1924), reviewed an exhibition of Camille Pissarro he had attended at Durand-Ruel's Paris gallery in March 1928. During his relatively long travel to France supported by Anatolii Lunacharskii, the People's Commissar for Enlightenment, Niurenberg had familiarised himself with contemporary French art and participated in the 1927 Salon d'Automne, a rather rare experience for a Soviet painter of that time. In his Pissarro review, Niurenberg overtly polemicised the now-standard view of Impressionism as the 'dead legacy of alien, bourgeois culture', held by AKhR members and Marxist intellectuals.⁴³ As a socially engaged painter of peasants, Pissarro was instrumental in Niurenberg's argument against those who rejected Impressionism on the pretext of alleged social indifference and lack of ideological commitment. Insisting that Monet or Pissarro should not be slavishly imitated, the critic openly declared the viability and usefulness of Impressionism for Soviet art.⁴⁴

The fiery response to Niurenberg's essay was typical of the Great Break in argument and tone. Aleksandr Severdenko, a painter and activist in the radical OMAKhR (Organisation of Youth of the Association of Artists of Revolution), which tried to introduce monumental painting as a tool of Communist propaganda and, for some time, was an important instrument of the Party control over Soviet art, directly equated visual language ('form') with ideology:

*... we must categorically reject the attitude toward the viability of bourgeois ideology proposed by Comrade Niurenberg ... no one will ever agree to insist on the 'viability' of that which is historically destined to die away, and no one will ever agree to channel our development toward a resurrection of Impressionism ...*⁴⁵

Despite Severdenko's attack, the publishing house of the AKhR issued 3,000 copies in 1929 and the next year reprinted 5,000 copies of a brochure by young art historian Alexandra Krol' on Renoir.⁴⁶ This brochure amounted to a compendium of writings by François Fosca, Meier-Graefe, and Mauclair. With Soviet artists interested in Renoir, the book was promoted as showcasing an artist important to world painting.⁴⁷ Such promotion presumed that a bourgeois artist's 'technical achievements' could be adopted without infection from his ideology – an idea already risky in those years when artistic 'form' was seen as a direct projection of ideology by critics like Severdenko.

An authoritative opinion on these issues came from Anatolii Lunacharskii (in 1917–1929 the People's Commissar for the Enlightenment), well situated to informally intervene due to his past studies, travels, and engagement. In the 1890s, he had studied with Richard Avenarius, a co-founder along with Mach of

Empirio-criticism. In the 1900s and 1910s, as a member of the Social Democratic movement and a political émigré, he had spent much time in France, Switzerland, and Italy, writing extensive criticism on contemporary art from Symbolism to Futurism for the Russian press. In 1907–1909, during the major philosophical debate among the Bolsheviks, Lunacharskii had defended Empirio-criticism against Lenin's ardent objections. Visiting France and Germany in 1925, he had seen in Berlin the Secession, with its selection of contemporary French art, and the studio of Lovis Corinth, whom he took to be an example of a modern Impressionist. Lunacharskii espoused a 'sensualist' interpretation of Impressionism that emphasised the subjective character of Impressionist vision: 'Realism when it turns to sensualism, into pure empiricism, discovers that *immediate experience is subjective by its nature* and to a large extent is created by the individual'.⁴⁸

On 2 October 1933, less than three months before his death, Lunacharskii published a survey of the Renoir exhibition at the Musée d'Orangerie entitled 'The Painter of Happiness'. A sort of aesthetic testament, Lunacharskii speculated on Realism's dual nature. Though a clear departure from his support of Empirio-criticism, he did not directly indict this approach. In his opinion, the claim that 'reality is the result of my observation' was not Materialist but Positivist and could be attributed to scientific influences on the arts common-place throughout the nineteenth century. After paying tribute to philosophical orthodoxy, he discussed Renoir's worldview and style, ending with rhapsodic lines:

No, Renoir is not a bourgeois artist. But he is also not a revolutionary. He is a man who hungers for happiness and has found a great deal of it. ... There is beautiful earth beneath the heavens' smile. Many thanks to him for this. We must not forget how much good fate has granted us, or at least how happy we could be. Ask this of Renoir and he will give it to you. Ask great mastery and he will give it. Ask for the spiritual lucidity of an almost saintly man and he will give it. Isn't that enough?⁴⁹

By defending 'optimistic' Impressionism as a model for Soviet artists, Lunacharskii was in effect also advancing a model of stylistic pluralism of Soviet art of the 1930s.

The 'happiness' and 'joy of life' repeatedly evoked by Lunacharskii would probably have been taken at face value by readers in 1933, both to benefit Renoir's worldview and to correspond with the notions of joyfulness that propaganda of the time ascribed the Soviet people. But, for those few who remembered, these passages would have reverberated with Lunacharskii's 1903 pamphlet 'Foundations of Positive Aesthetics' (reprinted, 1923) – a risky move from an orthodox Marxist-Leninist point of view. There Lunacharskii offered an eclectic theory of art reflecting the combined influences of the German materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, the promoter of nineteenth-century critical realism Nikolai Chernyshevskii, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Avenarius, with his theories of 'vitality' and 'affection'. He outlined an optimistic 'idealistic realism' which might be taken as an early prefiguration of Socialist Realism. More important, though, in the context of Lunacharskii's later reading of Renoir, would have been his claim that aesthetic pleasure is rooted in human biology:

This sort of evaluation of the world is grounded in the love for life, for nature and the pursuit of infinitely growing happiness ... Beauty is only another term for the ability of a certain entity to give us the joy of life.⁵⁰

It's hard to say now how much Lunacharskii's article on Renoir resonated when published. The next year, it was reprinted as an introduction to Ambrose

48. Anatolii Lunacharskii, 'Parizhskie pis'ma. Impressionizm' (1913), in Anatolii Lunacharskii, *Ob iskusstve*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1982), p. 213. Emphasis in original.

49. Anatolii Lunacharskii, 'The Painter of Happiness: On Viewing Renoirs Canvases' (1933), in Dorontchenkov (ed.), *Russian and Soviet Views*, pp. 303–4. Emphasis in original.

50. A. Lunacharskii, *Etudy kriticheskie i polemicheskie* (Moscow: Pravda, 1905), p. 405.

51. This book was part of a series of translations issued by the same publishing house. It also included books by Emile Zola on Manet, Ambroise Vollard on Cézanne, and Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub on Gustave Dore.

52. *Ot redaktsii – Ambruz Vollar. Renuar* (Leningrad: LOSSKh, 1934), pp. VII–VIII.

53. B. Nikolaev, *Ot realizma k mistike i abstraktsii – Mastera iskusstva ob iskusstve*, V. 3 (Moscow: OGIZ-IZOGIZ, 1934), pp. 24, 27.

54. Iavorskaia, 'Problema impresionizma', p. 70. She also states that Ternovets signed the article with a pseudonym as a result of a 'compromise with the editor'. Cf. B. N. Ternovets (ed.), *Mastera iskusstva ob iskusstve*, 3 vols (Moscow and Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1939), V. 3, pp. 111–18.

55. On the Soviet idea of happiness and joy of life, see: Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko (eds), *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style* (London, New York and Delhi: Anthem Press, 2009).

56. Osip Mandelstam, 'A Journey to Armenia: The French' (1933), in Doronchenkov (ed.), *Russian and Soviet Views*, p. 295.

Vollard's memoirs on Renoir translated by Nikolai Tyrsa, a painter and draughtsman much indebted to the French Impressionists and Albert Marquet, and published by the Leningrad Branch of the Union of the Soviet Artists.⁵¹ Accompanying Lunacharskii's text was a telling commentary 'from the editorial board':

... his worldview closely ties him to bourgeoisie ... Neither our awareness of the huge role played by Renoir in painting, nor the emotional intensity of his works ... must force us to number him among the artists somehow close to the proletarian ones.⁵²

A telling example of such a dual attitude to Impressionism is the third volume of the anthology of artists' writings *Mastera iskusstva ob iskusstve* (*The Masters of Art on Art*, 1934) edited by the director of SMMWA Boris Ternovets and David Arkin, an art historian who wrote extensively on sculpture and architecture. It included texts by Manet, Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, Renoir, and Signac among others. Though the introductory essay, with its epigraph by Lenin, was packed with ideological clichés and speculations on capitalism's decline and on bourgeois art, other passages eulogised Manet and the Impressionists. The author boldly stated that 'Impressionism was born inside Realism', but on the very next page contradicted that position by saying that Impressionism produces 'the tendency to deception, the dissolution of reality in subjective sensations ...'.⁵³ Most likely, the text was the result of two people with divergent views. It was signed 'B. Nikolaev', a pseudonym Ternovets used when forced to employ ideological discourse from which he wished to distance himself. His co-author was likely Arkin, the volume's second editor. Combining texts from multiple authors was a frequent practice at this time. According to her later recollections, SMMWA curator Nina Iavorskaia refused to amend her introductory note to Monet's writings at the request of editor Vladimir Grib, a philologist with a Young Communist League (Komsomol) background. He then added his own text to follow hers with a 'politically correct' characterisation of Impressionism as a 'hedonistic', superficial, decadent phenomenon fully corresponding to Empirio-criticism.⁵⁴ What is surprising is that Iavorskaia was even named as the author of her text – a sign of the possibility of successful professionals' resistance to dogmatic control.

A defence of Impressionism as a model for an optimistic Soviet art, similar to Lunacharskii's, came from others who thought Impressionist bright colours and sunlit effects important for more than producing a realistic image and providing a feeling of immediacy. These effects could signify the optimistic worldview of the 'Soviet people', then gradually becoming one of the central features of Stalinist art.⁵⁵ References to its 'optimistic' nature would become common for writers incorporating Impressionism into the Soviet visual canon.

The most significant departure from these interpretations was in the poetry and prose of Osip Mandel'shtam, where the immediacy of Impressionism took on a shocking emotional intensity. After permanently settling in Moscow in 1928, Mandel'shtam frequented the SMMWA and wrote his poem 'Impressionism' (1932) and several fragments of his long prose piece 'A Journey to Armenia' (1933) in response to a museum visit. Randomly moving through its rooms, the narrator records his impressions and provides a description of Pissarro's Paris: '... raspberry gray boulevards, flowing like the wheels of an immense lottery with their little boxes of hansom cabs, their fishing-pole whips pitched on their shoulders, and the shreds of splashed brain on the kiosks and chestnut trees'.⁵⁶ And in the 1932 poem, standing before Monet's idyllic summer landscape, *Lilac on Sunlit* (1872–1873, Pushkin Museum), the poet expresses anxiety, even claustrophobia:

Here the artist drew for us
 The dead swoon of a lilac bush,
 Spread paint's plangent layers
 Like scab on canvas.
 He understood the density of oil -
 His clotted summer,
 Broiled by a violet brain,
 Diffuses into sultriness.⁵⁷

This dramatic *Lebensgefühl* may result from the poet trying to come to terms with a new social and cultural reality while simultaneously resisting it. More importantly, this reckoning, stimulated by a French Impressionist painting, led Mandel'shtam to re-evaluate vision as a reliable means of cognition on a physiological, almost metabolic level:

With extremely subtle acidic reactions, the eye, an organ possessed of hearing, which intensifies the value of the image ... raises the picture to its own level; for painting is much more a matter of internal secretion than of apperception, that is, of external perceiving. The material of painting is organised in such a way that it stands to lose nothing and that is its distinction from nature.⁵⁸

In painting, which restores order to a collapsing world but complicates it, he found an antidote to verbal language which, under the pressure of Soviet discourse, was becoming shallow and deceitful, no longer to be trusted. Complicating his sight, Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings forced the poet to re-evaluate the role of visual perception in his literary description. These poem's uncertain images were disorientating and meant to expand and, indeed, activate readers' imaginations.⁵⁹

Mid-1930s Ideological Attacks on Impressionism as Formalist

In 1935, a Russian translation of the second edition of Hamann's *Der Impressionismus in Leben und Kunst* (1923) was issued by the major Moscow art publisher OGIZ-IZOGIZ. This initiative may well have originated in GAKhN, where the translator, Iakov Zundelovich, used to work. The book was heavily edited. Several chapters were dropped completely, including the introduction on the 'essence of the style', and the chapter on Romanticism and Impressionism. The sequence of what remained was changed, the text radically shortened, and the whole conclusion eliminated, for a book in this Marxist country could not end with 'Mehr Hegel!'. Least altered was the 'Philosophy of Impressionism' chapter, which was combined with one on Impressionist ethics and lifestyle. What had originally been the fifth chapter became the first chapter in the Soviet edition. Following a lengthy discussion of Mach, Hamann wrote: 'It's clear to us now why Impressionism could be called also *subjective* or *utmost individualism*'.⁶⁰ He labelled Impressionism 'apolitical', 'anarchist', and 'egoistic' in an ethical sense and concluded that it was the style of senility, both biological and socio-cultural.

Hamann's critique played a part in the devastating campaign 'against formalism and naturalism', launched in *Pravda*, the main organ of the Communist party, in spring 1936. Propaganda of the time ritually used these two words together, but 'formalism' remained the real target, signifying phenomena socially alien and resulting from Western influence. The campaign, starting as an attack against Dmitrii Shostakovich, soon extended to all fields of Soviet culture. Although *Pravda* editorials never mentioned Impressionism, it was one of main targets. Party Central Committee functionary Polikarp Lebedev, in an article published in the Communist theoretical journal *Pod znamenem marksizma* (*Under the Banner of*

57. <<http://max.mmlc.northwestern.edu/mdenner/Demo/texts/impressionism.html>> [accessed 2 August 2022], trans. Andrew Wachtel and Gwenan Wilbar. Cf. Thomas Langerak, 'Mandel'shtam's "Impressionism"', in *Voz'mi na radost: To Honor Jeanne Van der Eng-Liedmeier* (Amsterdam: Adviescommissie voor de Leerplanontwikkeling Russisch, 1980), pp. 139–48.

58. Mandelstam, 'Journey to Armenia', p. 296.

59. This issue also informs Mandel'shtam's praise for Signac's *D'Eugène Delacroix au neo-impressionisme* as 'the code of visual education necessary for any intelligent European', a formulation that implies independent thought achieved through the poet's sight and cultivated and refined through dialogue with the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. See Jane Gary Harris, 'Mandelstam and Signac', in Robin Aizelvud and Diana Maiers (eds), *Stoletie Mandel'shtama. Materialy simpoziuma* (London: Ermitazh, 1994), pp. 72–85.

60. Rikhard Gaman, *Impressionizm v iskusstve i zhizni* (Moscow: OGIZ-IZOGIZ, 1935), p. 27. Emphasis in original.

61. Polikarp Lebedev, 'Against Formalism in Soviet Art' (1936), in Doronchenkov (ed.), *Russian and Soviet Views*, p. 306.
62. Osip Beskin, *Formalizm v zhivopisi* (Moscow: Vsekhudozhnik, 1933), pp. 17–18 ff.
63. See: [Editorial] Referat diskussii o zhivopisnosti, *Iskusstvo*, no. 4, 1940, pp. 97, 101.
64. A. Fedorov-Davydov, 'Problema peizazha v tvorchestve Levitana', *Iskusstvo*, no. 4, 1938, p. 90.
65. Fedorov-Davydov, 'Problema peizazha', p. 93.
66. *Bezydeinost'* – pejorative for lack of clear-cut social message. Fedorov-Davydov, 'Problema peizazha', p. 105. In Russian, the difference between straightforward but eloquent passages in the main body of the article and the last slogan-like sentences is evident. One may suspect that it was added by an editor, a standard practice in the 1930s Soviet press.
67. Leonid Maksimenkov, *Sumbur vmesto muzyki: Stalinskaia kul'turnaia revoliutsia 1936–1938* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaja kniga, 1997).

Marxism), fully deployed Hamann's critique. Strongly condemning Impressionism as the beginning of 'capitalist decay', he compared it to subjective idealism, the worst philosophical sin from a Leninist point of view: '... for the impressionist, as for Machists, the real world becomes a "set of sensations" ... expressed in accordance with the artist's emotional state ...'.⁶¹ Referencing Mach was the heaviest ideological artillery available; by then, Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* with its critique of Mach was mandatory reading for Soviet intellectuals. Thus, at this moment, Hamann's views took on renewed strength as a critique of Impressionism. If such an identification in an art-historical anthology in 1934 was potentially dangerous, on the pages of one of the main theoretical magazines of the Communist Party, that same identification became absolutely devastating for the reputation of Impressionism in the Soviet Union with its growing Leninist dogmatism.

One could expect that after such an attack Impressionism would be totally stigmatised. Indeed, critics grouped around a leading literary magazine, *Novyi mir*, continued the earlier attacks. But professional magazines, for instance *Iskusstvo* and *Tvorchestvo*, necessarily following the anti-formalist campaign, avoided direct condemnation of Impressionism. These magazines simply usually refrained from using the term 'Impressionism' in their columns and when they did so, it was neutrally or positively. This avoidance surely reflected the attitude of a significant part of the artistic community but would have been impossible without the personal commitments of Osip Beskin, editor-in-chief of both magazines and openly sympathetic to Impressionism. Beskin had participated in one of the first anti-formalist crusades in 1932–1933 and launched then a philippic against Soviet artists labelled 'formalist', from Cézanne's follower Alexander Shevchenko to Malevich.⁶² What made Beskin's argument, which referred to Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, different was his careful avoidance of Impressionism. Beskin's editorial policies in the mid- and late 1930s reflected his thinking that, while Impressionism had soon achieved its limits in France, it had crossbred in Russia with the Realist tradition to thereby be 'rehabilitated', improved, and successfully used for the purposes of Socialist Realism.⁶³

Gradually, Russian critics' inimicality towards Impressionism subsided. In 1938, Fedorov-Davydov, once a member of the violently criticised *Oktiabr'* and a former curator of the Tretiakov Gallery, published a long essay in *Iskusstvo* in occasion of the extensive retrospective exhibition in the Tretiakov gallery of widely celebrated landscape painter Isaak Levitan, who applied a plein air technique to realist subjects which, in the eyes of Russian critics, was close to Impressionism. Fedorov-Davydov's rhetoric was typical of Soviet critical discourse in emphasising the difference between 'suspicious' French decadents (Impressionists in particular) and 'reliable' national Realists. In a Hamann-style attack, he said that the individual was fully victorious over the universal in Impressionist painting, and the spontaneity of perception degenerated into thoughtless pure sensation.⁶⁴ But Levitan, claimed Fedorov-Davydov, had cleverly employed particular Impressionist devices, 'making sensual qualities more subtle and strong', and was unaffected by Impressionism's dangerous influence.⁶⁵ Still, in one of the final passages, on Impressionist formalism and a lack of ideological commitment (*Bezydeinost'*), Fedorov-Davydov returned to 1936 campaign rhetoric.⁶⁶

The supposed initiator of the 1936 campaign, according to recent research, was Platon Kerzhentsev, Chair of the Committee for Artistic Affairs, who was stripped of his position in 1938.⁶⁷ One may presume that his dismissal opened a window of opportunity for those not willing to condemn Impressionism as formalist. As Matthew Cullerne Bown rightly points out, '... support for Impressionism was almost universal among painters, with the exception of a



Fig. 3. Sergei Gerasimov, *A Holiday in the Kolkhoz*, 1937, oil on canvas, 234.5 x 372 cm. The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. © Artist's successors.

few mavericks; the opposition to Impressionism was essentially critic-led'.⁶⁸ One should add that the museum community and many art historians demonstrated an unusual consensus in their attempt to keep Impressionism on the list of potentially productive sources for new Soviet art.

Impressionism as Heritage in 1939

In 1939–1940, art historians and artists won a temporary victory against critics and officials who dismissed Impressionism as an ideologically alien phenomenon. First, several important paintings by both well-established and young Soviet artists, highlighted in major official exhibitions, showed the strong influence of Impressionism: Iurii Pimenov's *New Moscow* (1937), Sergei Gerasimov's *A Holiday in the Kolkhoz* (1937, both State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) (Fig. 3), and Arkadii Plastov's *Bathing of Horses* (1938, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg).⁶⁹ Exemplifying how Impressionism could be a source for an optimistic realism, these paintings presented contemporary Soviet life as joyful and sunny, and included scenes of nature with horses and young male peasants and of modern urbanism, one showing a young woman driving her automobile through Moscow then undergoing Stalin's Haussmannisation. Second, new publications took a mostly positive view of Impressionism, though still with necessary reservations: Soviet 'dialectical' discourse demanded that no phenomenon of past culture could be accepted fully, but its weaknesses, first of all ideological, had to be outlined.⁷⁰ Translated writings by Impressionists, their critics, and their supporters were published in these years.⁷¹ Finally, events organised by professional communities showed a commitment to legitimising Impressionism

68. Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 194.

69. The adoption of Impressionism for the purposes of Socialist Realism has been studied by Alison Hilton and Vern Swanson. See Swanson, *Soviet Impressionist Painting* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 2001) and Hilton, 'Holiday on the Kolkhoz: Socialist Realism's Dialogue with Impressionism', in R. Blakesley and S. Reid (eds), *Russian Art and the West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture, and the Decorative Arts* (Northern Illinois University Press: De Kalb, 2006), pp. 195–216. See also: T. Yu. Plastova, 'Impressionisticheskie poiski i otkrytiia v tvorchestve A. Plastova 1930-kh godov', *Vestnik RGKhPU*, no. 1, 2017, pp. 170–81.

70. K. Sitnik, 'Impressionizm vo Frantsii', *Iunyi khudozhnik*, no. 8, 1939, pp. 11–13; N. Zharova, *Klod Mone. 1840–1926. Sto let so dnia rozhdeniia* (Moscow and Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1940); A. Altukhova, *Ogiust Renuar. 1841–1919. Sto let so dnia rozhdeniia* (Moscow and Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1941).

71. N. Iavorskaia and B. Ternovets (eds), *Khudozhestvennaia zhizn' Frantsii vtoroi poloviny XIX veka* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1938). This anthology included texts by Claude Monet, Emile Zola, Louis Leroy, Edmond Duranty, Theodor Duret, Camille Maclair, and Paul Signac among others. See also Ternovets, *Mastera iskusstva ob iskusstve* Vol. III. (Moscow and Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1939). This collection of artists' writing included passages from Manet, Boudin, Degas, Monet, Pissarro, Sisley, Renoir, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Liebermann, Megnier, Rodin, and Signac. The introductory essay in the volume is signed with Ternovets's pseudonym 'B. Nikolaev'. Oddly, though, the essay contains no references to Machism or Lenin's critique of it.

72. *Zhivopisnost'* is close in its meaning to Wölfflin's *malerisch*. Bown suggests 'painterly culture' (Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, p. 194).

73. A. Rzheznikov, 1) 'O zhivopisnykh traditsiakh frantsuzskogo peizazha', *Tvorchestvo*, no. 7, 1939, pp. 3–4 sides of cover; 2) 'Pol' Sezann', *Iskusstvo*, no. 2, 1940, pp. 127–37; 3) 'Chto takoe zhivopisnost'', *Iskusstvo*, no. 4, 1940, pp. 69–78.

74. [Editorial] 'Referat diskussii o zhivopisnosti', *Iskusstvo*, no. 4, 1940, pp. 92–103.

75. *Vystavka 'Frantsuzskii peizazh XIX–XX vv.'* Katalog. [Moscow] 1939 / Komitet po delam iskusstv pri SNK SSSR, Gosudarstvennyi Muzei Novogo Zapadnogo Iskusstva'. On the exhibition, see: Nina Iavorskaia, *Istoriia Gosudarstvennogo muzeia novogo zapadnogo iskusstva (Moskva). 1918–1948* (Moscow: GMI im. A.S. Pushkina, 2012), pp. 336, 338.

76. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts. Manuscript department. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 527, pp. 69–70.

77. Clara Zetkin, 'Reminiscences of Lenin' (1924), in Doronchenkov (ed.), *Russian and Soviet Views*, p. 190.

78. 'XVIII s'ezd Vsesoiuznoi Kommunisticheskoi partii (bol'shevikov). 10–21 marta 1939 g. Stenograficheskii otchet' (Moscow: OGIZ, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1939), p. 314.

on a scholarly level and adapting existing ideological discourse for this purpose. For instance, on 31 March, 9 April, and 16 April 1940, *Iskusstvo* magazine and the Section of Critics of the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists held a forum on 'painterly values' (*zhivopisnost'*).⁷² A paper by a young artist, Aron Rzheznikov, an enthusiast of the French modernist tradition, Impressionism, and Cézanne, launched the discussion.⁷³ The published record of these debates demonstrates that positive attitudes towards Impressionism prevailed, along with a readiness to utilise it for the sake of Soviet art.⁷⁴

On 28 April 1939, the exhibition *French Landscape of the 19th–20th Centuries* opened in SMMWA.⁷⁵ With more than 150 paintings and graphic works loaned from several Soviet museums, the exhibition presented landscapes from Georges Michel to André Derain. The curator was Nina Iavorskaia, a nineteenth-century art specialist and author of books on Pablo Picasso (1933) and Cézanne (1935), who would be one of the first practitioners of social art history in Soviet Russia. She decided to emphasise the Barbizon school, well represented in pre-revolutionary Russian collections. Works by the group and Camille Corot comprised almost a third of the exhibition, thus paying historical tribute to artists aligned with the official Soviet tendency to proclaim past Realist art the most valuable for universality. *French Landscape*, however, departed from official dictates in its representation of Impressionism: twenty-four paintings of five artists, featuring ten canvases by Monet. All developments after Impressionism were extremely compressed: only a few paintings by Matisse, Marquet, Picasso, and Cézanne (Figs. 4 and 5). Iavorskaia's choices clearly demonstrated her (and the Museum's) message: Impressionism was the beginning of Modernism but at the same time the logical, legitimate continuation of Realist art. In this formulation, Impressionism amounted to another version of Realism, though not without some 'defects'.

Alexei Leonov, the newly appointed director of the Museum who had replaced Boris Ternovets, spoke at the opening:

The exhibition gives an opportunity to correctly evaluate the artistic heritage of the French school of painting so dear to Russian artists and in particular to understand the virtues and shortcomings of Impressionism ... The exhibition ... expands our cultural heritage ... It presents one of the most advanced arts of European countries ... At the same time the exhibition will help to explain better the peculiarities and merits of Russian school as the most realistic and democratic among others.⁷⁶

The keyword here is 'heritage'. A clearly marked term in 1930s Soviet cultural discourse, it proclaimed Socialist culture as the true successor of all periods when art flourished, as in the Italian Renaissance or seventeenth-century Holland. The art of these periods had to be adopted and 'continued' by Soviet artists. Socialist Realism, in particular, was to be based on resurrecting the classical tradition combined with nineteenth-century Russian Realism. This idea of cultural heritage was continually preached by the Party authorities with clear reference to Lenin's conversation with his friend Clara Zetkin, a German Communist and advocate of women's rights, which became a part of 'the holy tradition' of Leninism in the 1920–1930s: 'We must retain the beautiful, take it as an example, hold on to it, even though it is "old"'.⁷⁷ A month before the vernissage, this rhetoric sounded from the highest rostrum. In his speech at the 18th Congress of the Communist Party, Stalin's ally, Viacheslav Molotov, intoned that:

Communism grows from what was created by capitalism, from its best and multiple achievements in economy, material life and culture. Communism transforms these values and achievements in its own way ... One should take pains to study cultural heritage. One should study it seriously and in depth.⁷⁸



Fig. 4. Exhibition of the French Landscape of the 19th Century, Impressionists' Room, 1939, the State Museum of Modern Art, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.



Fig. 5. Exhibition of the French Landscape of the 19th Century, Neo-Impressionists' Room, 1939, the State Museum of Modern Art, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

79. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, pp. 22–3.

80. There were four sessions: 5 May, 11 May, 29 May and 2 June 1939. The records of three (with the exception of 29 May) are preserved in the Manuscript Department of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528). See also: Iavorskaia, *Istoriia Gosudarstvennogo*, pp. 338–47.

81. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, p. 13.

82. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, p. 69.

83. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, p. 56 reverse.

84. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, pp. 12, 20.

85. <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/mec/one1.htm>> [accessed 2 August 2022]. Same passage already quoted in: Nikolaev, *Ot realizma*, p. 27.

86. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, p. 21.

87. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, p. 64.

Not surprisingly, direct reference to this passage was made by Konstantin Sitnik, a curator at SMMWA, in discussing Impressionism.⁷⁹ The word ‘heritage’ constantly appeared in many articles and public speeches of these years. To incorporate Impressionism into ‘heritage’, a very extensible notion, was to secure its place in the canon, legitimate its influence on Soviet artists, and benefit the museum and its collections.

The exhibition enjoyed substantial success, with good coverage in the press. A subsequent series of symposia organised by SMMWA in partnership with the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists would be equally important to this revised reception of Impressionism. Almost all influential Moscow-based art historians and a number of well-regarded artists spoke at these symposia,⁸⁰ which provoked professional questions: Should Manet and Degas be counted as Impressionists? Was pointillism a legitimate conclusion to Impressionism? Why did Impressionism last for only two decades? The issue at stake, however, remained what ideological attitude to take towards Impressionism.

Mikhail Alpatov, an internationally reputed specialist in early modern European art, claimed that after the exhibition:

the Barbizon school and Impressionists will not be seen in opposition anymore ... I was sorry to recall that not long ago we could be convinced by shallow wordplay, and we were ready to see in the Impressionist refraction of color a reliable sign of the decay of art.⁸¹

This view was supported by Viktor Lazarev, a leading specialist in Byzantine and Russian Medieval art, who equated enemies of Impressionism with critics of the Russian Association of Proletariat Artists, a short-lived, officially condemned radical group, and rejected assessments of Impressionism as ‘a deeply decadent art of decaying capitalism’, claiming instead: ‘It’s a joyous and heartwarming art’.⁸² For his part, Fedorov-Davydov strongly advised relying on the Russian critical tradition, especially Ivan Kramskoi, a painter and ideological leader of the Society of Travelling Art Exhibitions, the main late nineteenth-century organisation of Russian realists, and on Plekhanov, whose attitude Fedorov-Davydov characterised as critical but at the same time attentive, respectful, and ‘understanding [of] the best achievements of Impressionism – mastering the depiction of light and air, immediacy of perception of the world’.⁸³

Arkin’s would be the most critical voice in these discussions. He admitted that ‘our understanding of the problem of heritage includes everything high, everything significant created by the art of the past’.⁸⁴ But he later quoted Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, using the same passage found in the introduction to the 1934 anthology of the Impressionists’ writings: ‘The sophism of idealist philosophy consists in the fact that it regards sensation as being not the connection between consciousness and the external world, but a fence, a wall, separating consciousness from the external world ...’.⁸⁵ Arkin surprisingly concluded: ‘... but anyway, from a historical point of view, Impressionism belongs to the range of great artistic phenomena’.⁸⁶

Several artists now expressed open admiration for Impressionism. As Konstantin Iuon, a landscape painter who started his career long before the Revolution, put it: ‘Whether intentionally or not, we all are Impressionists. We are all children of Impressionism’.⁸⁷ Alexander Gerasimov, the Chair of the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists who secured his position by painting the ‘masterpiece’ of Socialist Realism, *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin* (1938, State Tretiakov Gallery), joined defenders of Impressionism, though distancing himself from its ‘ideology’: ‘... Impressionism is the greatest contribution to the treasury of the world art ... I accept Impressionism as a manner of painting but not as a

worldview, for it doesn't fit ours ...'.⁸⁸ Sergei Gerasimov, the author of *A Holiday in the Kolkhoz*, started with objections to Arkin's negative views and ended with a slogan in a manner of party meetings: 'We must force artists to use the Impressionists. It will enrich our art and make its understanding of pictorial form stronger'.⁸⁹

A semi-official status was accorded these statements when Lazar Rosental', a curator at SMMWA, summarised the major speaker's talks for *Iskusstvo*.⁹⁰ He had good reason to conclude: 'Even in the fall of 1938 Impressionism was approached negatively ... And now after four [symposium] sessions Impressionism is exculpated completely'.⁹¹

The Impressionist Anthology

Simultaneously with the landscape exhibition, SMMWA curators and research fellows worked on a collection of articles on Impressionism. The compendium was to include a never completed conceptual introduction by Fedorov-Davydov, an essay on French art between Realism and Impressionism by Iavorskaia, and a survey of Impressionism and its roots by Ternovets. There were also monographic essays on French Impressionists (including Berthe Morisot and Armand Guillaumin) and chapters on Impressionism in other countries (including Russia and the USA), making this publication an important precursor to Norma Broude's *World Impressionism* and Alexis Clark and Frances Fowle's *Globalizing Impressionism: Reception, Translation, and Transnationalism*. The collection was thoroughly discussed in numerous meetings held in 1939 and 1940 and some in 1941.

Besides establishing historical details and the essays' structure and style, the contributors seemingly had the goal of overturning notions of Impressionism as a first step towards decadence. Discussing the introductory essay on 1 October 1939, Ervin Shaffner, then a keeper of the photo collection of SMMWA, remarked that it was important for the book to evaluate Impressionism positively.⁹² This view was supported by Leonov, the director, who noted that Impressionism 'belongs to our time, and that is why the evaluation of Impressionism for us is of crucial importance'.⁹³ Several contributors insisted on revising the theoretical background of the anti-Impressionist critique. Urging defence of Impressionism against accusations of being reactionary, Ternovets stressed: 'it would be wrong to base our speculations not on concrete facts but on a philosophical notion [Machism or subjective idealism] ... Impressionism was beneficial for the art of all countries'.⁹⁴ Alexei Sidorov, who wrote a survey of historiography of Impressionism, objected: 'The question of the connection between Impressionism and Machism is important because all Western European critics are talking about it'.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, Iavorskaia, in her discussion with Fedorov-Davydov, expressed continued disagreement with Hamann and his idea of 'subjective sensations' as a central feature of Impressionism.⁹⁶ Rosental suggested ignoring the interpretation of Plekhanov, who had partly lost his position as Marxist philosophical leader with the construction of a Leninist philosophy in the 1930s.

During the discussion on 26 November 1939, Leonov drew an important (and risky) conclusion: '... we agreed that Impressionism is not formalism'.⁹⁷ Such a bold statement hardly could be found in the press. Normally, any positive quality attributed to Impressionism was followed by remarks about its weaknesses, but this moment clearly signified that the museum community had become independent enough to strongly disagree with propagandist messages based on ideological arguments.

88. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, p. 73.

89. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, p. 118.

90. L. Rosental', 'Realizm i impressionizm vo frantsuzskom peizazhe', *Iskusstvo*, no. 5, 1939, pp. 163–7.

91. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 528, p. 43.

92. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 512, p. 3 reverse.

93. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 512, p. 4.

94. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 512, p. 10.

95. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 512, p. 22.

96. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 512, p. 3 reverse.

97. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 512, p. 8.

98. Iavorskaia, *Istoriia Gosudarstvennogo*, pp. 353–6, 388–9.

99. B. Ternovets, 'Dega i impresionizm', *Iskusstvo*, no. 5, 1940, pp. 47–72.

100. The article was discussed at the meeting of SMMWA research fellows on 8 May 1940. Unfortunately, handwritten minutes, possibly stenographic, are practically illegible (Collection 13. Description 2. Item 50, pp. 35–8).

101. Collection 13. Description 2. Item 50, p. 15.

Though eventually approved and ready for publication by 1941, the collection was never printed *en toto* due to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.⁹⁸ Ternovets's essay on Degas intended for the collection was published in 1940.⁹⁹ Otherwise, several article manuscripts are preserved in the Manuscript Department of the Pushkin Museum. Had they been published, of special importance would have been the article by Faina Mal'tseva, a curator at the Tretiakov gallery and a future leading specialist in nineteenth-century Russian landscape painting: 'Impressionism as Heritage in Soviet Art'.¹⁰⁰ Similar to other essays intended for this collection, Mal'tseva's was loaded with the Soviet newspeak vocabulary. Impressionism was proclaimed a necessary turning point for both 'formalists' and 'naturalists' (not named) on their way to genuine realism. Individual visual experience and constant dialogue with nature *en plein air* were crucial for 'enriching visual language'.¹⁰¹ Mal'tseva singled out Vladimir Lebedev as a negative example of an artist who utilised the Impressionist idiom, an artist from Leningrad whose portraits showed him to be a follower of Renoir. Positive examples ranged from Pimenov's *New Moscow* (with some reservations) to depictions of peasants' holidays by Gerasimov and Plastov; these celebrations under bright sunlight at tables with Lucullian still lifes looked like illustrations of Stalin's slogan (physically present as a banner in Plastov's painting *A Holiday in the Kolkhoz* (author's title *A Harvest Festival*): 'Living has become better, living has become merrier' (Fig. 6). Participants in the discussions at SMMWA had repeatedly stated that the 'optimism' of Impressionists perfectly matched Soviet worldview. This article, despite following standard Soviet rhetoric on Western Modernism and acknowledging the contradictions of Impressionism, cemented that view.



Fig. 6. Arkadii Plastov, *A Holiday in the Kolkhoz*, 1937, oil on canvas, 188 × 307 cm. The State Russian Museum. © Artist's successors.

It is known from Nina Iavorskaia's recollection that the final version of the anthology was approved by ideological authorities and was ready for printing before the German invasion.¹⁰² Had it been published, the Russian cultural community would have had a comprehensive, well-balanced analysis of Impressionism and its influence on Russian and Soviet art, and what is no less important, an authoritative resource for its ideological defence.

Despite the views represented in the anthology, all was not resolved in the ongoing SMMWA meetings on Impressionism. On 28 April 1941, the penultimate meeting as it turned out, an alarm bell was sounded. First among participants was Andrei Lebedev, deputy head of the Department of Visual Arts of the Committee for Artistic Affairs at the People's Commissars Council (Soviet government), not previously in attendance at such meetings. Responding to a paper by Iavorskaia, he reverted to Polikarp Lebedev's 1936 argument:

We must return down to earth, down to the society to understand ... the reactionary tendency in Impressionism ... [In Impressionism one has] to escape from reality, from demands, thoughts and aspirations of that time's [common] people ... one couldn't deny the subjective-idealist background of the thinking [and] philosophy of Impressionists ...¹⁰³

According to Marina Orlova, an SMMWA curator present at the meeting, this speech sounded like a 'drastic demand' 'unexpected' by those in attendance.¹⁰⁴ The stakes were raised by Shaffner, next to take to the floor. He chastised Iavorskaia for not mentioning Lenin's equation of Positivism and Machism and, adding insult to injury, claimed that 'comrade Iavorskaia approaches the bourgeoisie similarly to how the people's enemy Bukharin approached peasantry'.¹⁰⁵ In 1920s discussions, Nikolai Bukharin had supported integrating wealthy peasants (*kulaks*) into the socialist system, thus preserving the peasant as an independent economic agent, an alternative strategy to Stalin's Collectivisation. Bukharin fell victim to the 1938 Moscow Trials. It goes without saying that any comparison to him was extremely dangerous, particularly for Iavorskaia, whose brother was imprisoned (later to perish in the Gulag) and who expected

102. Iavorskaia, *Istoriia Gosudarstvennogo*, p. 358.

103. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 564, p. 7 reverse.

104. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 564, p. 34.

105. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 564, p. 13. Shaffner's speech radically contradicts with what he was saying half of a year before, demonstrating his ability to conform to the current political agenda. He was born Erwin Schaffner, a Swiss Communist and a graduate of the University of Bern, who moved to the Soviet Russia in 1922, worked as the party functionary and in 1936 joined SMMWA. There is some evidence that in 1941 he moved to Glavlit, the Soviet censorship board.



Fig. 7. Poster for the Meeting on the Centenary of Auguste Rodin and Claude Monet, 1940, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

herself, in 1939, to be deported from Moscow as a relative of this ‘people’s enemy’.¹⁰⁶ Director Leonov wisely ended the discussion and rescheduled it for 7 May.

106. Iavorskaia, *Istoriia Gosudarstvennogo*, p. 337.

107. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 564, p. 34.

While Lebedev was not present that day, his speech was not forgotten. Even speakers loyal to Iavorskaia and to her view of the close relationship between Realism and Impressionism expressed reservations regarding Impressionism’s historical position on the threshold of bourgeois decadence. Marina Orlova started with support for Iavorskaia’s view but finally claimed that Impressionism was ‘possibly, on the edge of formalism, but it’s not formalism yet’.¹⁰⁷ Natalia Kovalenskaia, a specialist in museology and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian art, suggested a more attentive reading of Lenin, noting the difference he stressed between Mach’s ‘complexes of sensations’ as indicators of subjective idealism and solipsism, and ‘good’ sensations as a means of the cognition of objective reality. The latter, in her opinion, characterised Impressionism in its ‘progressive’ phase in the 1860–1870s while Monet’s paintings of 1890s (such as the Rouen Cathedral paintings) signified his inclination towards pure sensation, putting his worldview close to that of Mach.

Iavorskaia’s final speech at the 7 May meeting showed that no consensus had been reached regarding art-historical or ideological questions. She continued



Fig. 8. Poster for the Meeting on the Centenary of Auguste Renoir, 1941, the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

to argue against the ‘Hamannian’ view of Impressionism as a specific period of decline in every culture (‘it’s a closed chapter in art history, one should pass it by’) and overtly refused to identify Impressionism as subjective idealism (i.e. Machism).¹⁰⁸ Finally, she admitted: ‘I am absolutely positive regarding Impressionism as artistic heritage but ... our [Museum’s] collective is divided’ (Figs 7 and 8).¹⁰⁹

The beginning of the war with Germany left the situation at this impasse. On a theoretical level Impressionism remained vulnerable, but on the level of artistic practice and museum representation it was a respectable phenomenon important for Soviet art. From 1946 on, after the beginning of the isolationist and xenophobic campaigns of Stalin’s late years, Impressionism would be finally unequivocally condemned as a formalist, decadent art.¹¹⁰ SMMWA was abolished in March 1948. Its Impressionist holdings, as well as the rest of the collection, were split between the Pushkin Museum and the Hermitage. The rehabilitation of Impressionism and art after Impressionism only began in the mid-1950s when the Pushkin Museum and the Hermitage started to include Impressionist paintings in permanent displays and when the importation of books like Lionello Venturi’s *From Manet to Lautrec* and John Rewald’s *The History of Impressionism* (Russian translations in 1958 and 1959) helped distance Soviet art-historical discourse from ideological dogmas.¹¹¹

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108. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 564, p. 73.

109. Collection 13. Description 1. Item 564, p. 67.

110. See for instance: P. Sysoev, ‘Bor’ba za sotsialisticheskii realizm v sovetskom izobrazitel’nom iskusstve’, *Iskusstvo*, no. 1, 1949, p. 9; A. Zotov, ‘Impressionizm kak reaktsionnoe napravlenie v burzhuaznom iskusstve’, *Iskusstvo*, no. 1, 1949, pp. 86–91.

111. To be incorporated into post-Stalinist art historical discourse, still ideologically charged, such texts had to be decontextualised. For instance, Venturi’s essays on Impressionist artists (as well as the artists of the first half of the nineteenth century in his earlier book) for a Soviet reader looked like a distant echo of the Romantic celebration of individual creative geniuses. It seems that almost nobody deciding to present Venturi to Soviet readers considered that he had been heavily influenced by Benedetto Croce with his neo-Kantian insistence on the total autonomy of art — an idea absolutely alien to Soviet art history and aesthetics.