

The Significance of “The New Russian Art Exhibition” in Japan, 1927: A Note for Reframing the Cultural Relationship of Art between Russia and Japan

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Keywords: Russian Avant-garde Art, Japanese Modern Art Movement of the Taisho Period, Cultural Relationship between Russia and Japan, Museology

1 Introduction

“The New Russian Art Exhibition” opened in 1927 in the new building of the Tokyo Asahi Newspaper Company, which had recently been rebuilt following its collapse during the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake. It was the first large-scale exhibition to be held since the founding of the USSR. It aimed to introduce the general trend of Russian-Soviet art to the Japanese people. It was said that the exhibition garnered favorable reviews from both Japanese artists and critics and attracted a large audience.

The prominent art scholar Nikolai Punin (1888–1953) from Leningrad was appointed the chief curator of the exhibition. He visited Japan with David Arkin (1899–1957), a Moscow-based art critic, and Yabe Tomoe (1892–1981), a Japanese artist who was staying in Russia at that time. Punin was famous for his monograph on Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953) and was recognized as a leftist art critic amongst Japanese artists and critics (fig.1). It was expected that he would display experimental works by Tatlin or Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935); however, most of the collection comprised moderate traditional paintings, sculptures, and peasant applied art. Some members of a Japanese art group, Zoukei「造型」(plastic or plasticity), of which Yabe was a member, sympathized with the Russian realist paintings that were displayed at the show; subsequently, these artists became the key players driving the Japanese proletarian art movement.

A previous study by a Japanese modern art historian explored the Japanese materials relevant to the exhibition and pointed out that this event was a symbolic factor at the end of the Japanese avant-garde art movement.¹ It was held during a transitional period in which Japanese modern art was shifting from the futuristic or avant-garde style to the realism-based “proletarian art.” Moreover, this show could be regarded as a presentation of soft power to express the interests of political and trade negotiations between both countries from the perspective of Russo-Japanese



Figure1: Nikolai Punin, *Monument III International*, St.Petersburg: N.K.P., 1920.

(Museum Tinguery, exhibition catalog, *Tatlin: New Art for a new form*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012, p.109)

1. Omuka Toshiharu, *Taisho-ki shinko bijyutsu undo no kenkyu*, Tokyo: Skydoor 1995. This research explores Japanese modern art under the era “Taisho-democracy.” Especially, Omuka demonstrated in detail the background of the planning of the New Russian Exhibition, based on material mainly written in Japanese. Chapter 13 is dedicated to the research of that show and its impact on Japanese avant-garde artists. However, references to Russian language materials are limited. cf. pp.761–814.

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cultural history.² Namely, the exhibition may be projected as a promotional event for mutual cultural understanding. In terms of contemporaneous cultural exchanges, other researchers referred to the importance of the Kabuki tour to the USSR in 1928 as well as this exhibition.³ Notably, the promoters of the Kabuki performance partially overlapped with the organizational members of the 1927 exhibition.

Furthermore, the exhibition “Russian People are Again in Fashion: Japan, 1927, New Russian Art,” opened in the Anna Akhmatova Literary and Memorial Museum (Музей Анны Ахматовой в Фонтанном доме) in 2018; it reconstituted the 1927 exhibition by displaying several materials from Punin’s family archives.⁴ This show, marking the centennial anniversary of the 1927 exhibition, facilitated a growing interest in Punin’s activities in Japan to urge the introduction of Russian contemporary art. Considering these previous studies, which have recently become accessible and have been published in fragments, it is imperative to reframe the importance of that exhibition pertaining to cultural exchange and circumstances where it could be realized in cooperation with many people of two countries.

Art historian Omuka Toshiharu conducted an exhaustive survey of the historical facts relating to this exhibition from the perspective of art history. However, in the context of the history of Russo-Japanese cultural exchanges, the show was only mentioned in a fragmentary manner from the cultural or political research field. In synthesizing these previous studies, it is necessary to reevaluate the significance of this exhibition not only as a result of cultural contact and the transmission of styles of expression, but also as a manifestation of cultural soft power.

This study aims to reconsider the significance of this exhibition in the context of art history and cultural exchange between Japan and Russia. Especially focusing on Punin’s memoirs and letters, this research explores his intentions for this show and its impact on the modern art tendency in Japan. The previous studies on this exhibition in the field of art history have not discussed much about the movements of art in the USSR at that time. In this research note, I would like to supplement this point by clarifying the activities and works of Punin, who was involved in this exhibition as an art critic and curator. Comprehending the conflict between artistic expression and politics in the USSR in the late 1920s would help in understanding a similar situation which existed in Japan. Thus, finally, this study seeks to lay the groundwork for recapturing the significance of this special exhibition in terms of cultural relationships in what was an era of growing political suppression in both countries.

2. The background of the New Russian Art Exhibition in Japan

“The New Russian Art Exhibition” opened on May 18, 1927, in Tokyo and travelled to Osaka and Nagoya (fig.2).⁵ It was sponsored by the USSR government, Narkompros (People’s Commissariat for Education), the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS), the Japanese government, and the Tokyo Asahi Newspaper Company. Additionally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, Nichi-ro Kyokai「日露協会」(the Russo-Japanese Association), and Nichi-ro Geijyutsu Kyokai「日露芸術協会」(the Russo-Japanese Art Association) supported it.⁶ Moreover, Zoukei played a significant role in realizing it. The Honor-

2. Tomita Takeshi, *Senkan-ki no nisso kankei 1917–1937*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 2010. In chapter 3, Tomita describes the cultural diplomacy in the 1920s, including this exhibition and the activities of Goto Shinpei, who supported cultural exchange between Russia and Japan.

3. Uchida Kensuke, “Nisso kokko kaifuku zengo no bunka-koryu to sono seijiteki igi” in *Kabuki to Kakumei roshiya*, pp. 65–90, Tokyo: Shinwasya 2017. This paper analyzes several Japanese cultural associations in the 1920s, including the promoters of the Kabuki tour in the USSR in 1928. For instance, *Nichi-ro Geijyutsu Kyokai* (Russo-Japanese Art Association), which is referred to in this article, also played an important role not only in that Kabuki tour but also for realizing the exhibition in 1927. pp. 76–78. Ota Jotaro, *‘Rossiya-modanizumu’ wo ikiru - nihon to roshiya, kotoba to hito no nettowaku*, Kanagawa: Seibun-sha 2014. Chapter 3 refers to the reputation of Kabuki performance in the USSR, cf. pp.176–231.

4. “Russian People are Again in Fashion: Japan, 1927, New Russian Art,” opened from June 15 to August 19. I translated the list of works and an essay by Nikolai Punin from Japanese to Russian for the preparation research for the 2018 exhibition.

5. The exhibition opened in Tokyo from May 18 until May 31 at the Tokyo Asahi News Paper Building, from 16 June until 29 June at Osaka Asahi Kaikan (assembly hall) in Osaka, and from July 3 until July 7 at the Nagoya exhibition hall in Nagoya. Omuka Toshiharu et al., ed., *Taisyo Shinko bijyutsu shiryō syusei*, Tokyo: Kokusyo Kanko kai, 2006, p.473–475. The reaction in Tokyo was so favorable and the venue was packed with so many visitors that the closing time was extended from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m. Николай Пунин, “Выставка картин советских художников в Японии”, in *Жизнь искусства*, №34, 1927, p.10.

6. Omuka Toshiharu, *Taisho-ki shinko bijyutsu undo no kenkyu*, p.784. *Nichi-ro Geijyutsu Kyokai* was established by Ose Keishi (1889–1952),

ary Presidents of the committee of the exhibition were the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Shidehara Kijyuro (1872–1951) and Georgii Chicherin (1872–1936), and Ministers of Education, Okada Ryohei (1864–1934) and Anatorii Lunacharskii (1875–1933), from both countries. The Honorary Chairmen were Goto Shinpei (1857–1929), ex-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Valerian Doygarevskii (1885–1934), ambassador in Tokyo, and Tanaka Tokichi (1877–1961), ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary in the USSR. The Chairwoman was Olga Kameneva (1883–1941) from VOKS. The directors were Kawakami Toshitsune (1862–1935), ex-diplomat in Poland, and Shimomura Toshihiko, CEO of the Asahi Newspaper Company.⁷

The May 1926 issue of the art magazine *Atelier* revealed that Lunacharskii and Tanaka had discussed an art-exhibition exchange between Russia and Japan; they decided that the Russian one would be held in 1927.⁸ Tanaka was the first diplomat who was sent to the USSR in 1926 after the conclusion of the Soviet-Japanese Basic Convention in 1925. It should be pointed out that, by then, Tanaka had already proposed the exhibition exchanges plan, which would take place in Japan and the USSR.⁹

Prior to the reporting the agreement between Lunacharskii and Tanaka, Ichijui Yoshinaga (1888–1952),¹⁰ an art critic, stopped in Moscow on his way to the Middle East on his research tour and visited several museums in early 1926.¹¹ He went to an exhibition of Konstantin Yuon (1875–1958) at Tretyakov Gallery, acquainted himself with the artist, and then decided to go to meet Kameneva, the head of VOKS, to discuss organizing an exhibition. His visit to Moscow was in fact an accident, the result of missing a ship along the way, so it is not clear in many respects how he was able to successfully set in motion preparations for the show. At any rate, it is said that soon after his meeting with Kameneva, Ichijui contacted the Russo-Japanese Art Association and Zokei, but prior research suggests that at this point the issue of funding was an obstacle to the feasibility of the exhibition.¹² Ichijui advocated for the Japanese avant-garde art movement, and he had a close friendship with the artist Yabe Tomoe. Ichijui returned to Japan on July 12, 1926; subsequently, Yabe departed for Moscow on July 13 or 28, 1926, to prepare for the exhibition as a representative for the Russo-Japanese Art Association.¹³

Yabe was one of the key contemporaneous figures in the Japanese modern art movement. He studied painting in France at L'Academie Ranson under Maurice Denis and Andre Lhote.¹⁴ Under the influence of French Modern Art,



Figure2: Okamoto Touki, *Poster of The New Russian Art Exhibition*, 1927.

(Exhibition catalog, *1920's Japan*, Tokyo: Asahi News Paper, 1988, p.276.)

while Kaneda Tsunesaburo (1890–1961), Shigemori Tadashi (1895–1973), and Sawa Seicyo (?) participated in the first stage of the committee. Kita Takaomi, "Taisyo kara Syowa Syoki ni okeru Rosiya bijyutsu no syokai to jyuyou" in *Aizu Yaichi Kinen hakubutsukan Kiyo*, no.10, 2008, p.21.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Omuka Toshiharu, *Taisho-ki shinko bijyutsu undo no kenkyu*, p. 777.

9. Анна Каминская и Николай Зыков, «Первая выставка русских художников в Японии в 1927 году: Токио, Осака, Нагойя», in *Санкт-Петербург-Япония: XVIII-XXI вв.*, СПб: Европейский Дом, 2012, p.150.

10. Ichijui was the editor in chief of the art journal *Chuou-bijyutu* and published a book named *Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism* in Japanese in 1924. Omuka Toshiharu, "Subete ga hikkurikaerituaru uzumaki no nakade - Ichijui Yoshinaga no keireki to shigoto", in *bijyutu hihyouka chosaku sennshu*, vol.1, Tokyo: Yumani Shobo, p. 414.

11. Omuka Toshiharu, *Taisho-ki shinko bijyutsu undo no kenkyu*, p.777–778.

12. *Ibid.*

13. According to the journal *Nichi-ro Geijyutdu* (Russo-Japanese Art Association 「日露芸術」) no. 11, the committee of organizers assembled to prepare for the exhibition consisted of members of the Russo-Japanese Art association and Zoukei. In addition, Ichijui joined the committee on November 1926. Subsequently, Asano Mofu (1900–1984), Okamoto Toki (1903–1986), Kanbara Tai (1898–1997), and Ichijui formally participated in *Nichiro Geijyutsu Kyokai* from April 1927. Kita Takaomi, "Taisyo kara Syowa Syoki ni okeru Rosiya bijyutsu no syokai to jyuyou", p.23.

14. Geniffer Wisenfeld, *Mavo: Japanese artists and the avant-garde, 1905–1931*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p.99.

he made Cubist-style paintings. He returned to Japan in 1922 and formed the art group Action in the same year.¹⁵ It was in 1925 when he established the new group Zoukei after a split in the Sanka (The third section「三科」) circle, which was founded by some members of Action (「アクション」).¹⁶ Zoukei was regarded as one of the most progressive and leading Japanese art groups at that time.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy to mention the Russo-Japanese Association, which supported the plan with other institutions. The Russo-Japanese Art Association was comprised of artists or critics who had sympathized with the socialism of the new USSR regime. In contrast, the Russo-Japanese Association, founded to promote Russian studies and strengthen cultural exchanges between both countries, consisted of high-profile nobles, politicians, and business leaders. The last group played a role as a liaison office to the USSR to meet the demands of the business community.¹⁷ It was established in 1907 and was active from 1922. The first president was a marshal-general (Gensui Rikugun-Taisho), Terauchi Masatake (1852–1919). Goto Shihei initially served as the vice-president; later, he became the second President after Terauchi.¹⁸ In particular, some previous studies mentioned that Goto played a legendary role in foreign affairs and contributed to deepening mutual understanding in cultural relationships; however, his decisions in foreign diplomacy for the Far East were sometimes controversial. He was involved in the decision concerning the Siberian intervention as a minister of foreign affairs and wanted to extend the colonies there.¹⁹ Nevertheless, it seemed that he felt the necessity to strengthen relationships, not only in trading, but also in cultural exchanges following the drastic political transformation in Russia in 1917. Thus, considering the character of Nichi-ro Kyokai as a semi-governmental organization, this exhibition might have been a significant tool to meet the expectations of the Japanese political and business worlds, which would manipulate Japanese public opinion. A positive first impression of the USSR in the cultural field would have possibly helped the Japanese government to negotiate favorable trade agreements. When Goto visited the USSR from the end of 1927 to the beginning of 1928, he emphasized during an evening meeting for Japanese culture, organized by VOKS, “The goodwill between countries cannot be nurtured only by the relationship in the field of diplomacy or trade and commerce. It is necessary to broaden more deeply the opportunities for cultural contact.”²⁰

Thus, the exhibition was jointly organized by the Russo-Japanese Art Association, a leftist art group sympathetic to the USSR, and the Russo-Japanese Association of politicians and businessmen. So why did these two seemingly politically and ideologically incompatible groups collaborate for this exhibition? A possible reason may have been a mutual interest between the need for funding on the part of the Russo-Japanese Art Association and the intention of the political and business community to manipulate public opinion by spreading a favorable impression of Russia through the hosting of a cultural event.

3. Russian artistic life and the activities of Nikolai Punin as a curator

Why was Punin appointed as the curator of the 1927 exhibition? Omuka indicated that Punin was referred to as an eminent member of the exhibition committee in an article in the *Tokyo Nichi Nichi newspaper* on February 27, 1927.²¹ Therefore, it is assumed that Punin was appointed the chief curator of this exhibition before the end of February, 1927. According to research by Kaminskaya and Zikov, Kameneva and Lunacharskii decided on Punin's

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.* I also noted the activities of Yabe in detail as follows: “1920 nenndai nihon kindai bijyutsu ni okeru roshiya bijyutsu no eikyo”, *Jinbun Kenkyu*, Osaka city U, no.73, 2023, pp.131-148.

17. Tomita Takeshi, *Senkan-ki no nisso kankei*, p.223. The Russo-Japanese Association established a branch of the Russo-Japanese Trade Research Center in 1915, the Trade Exhibition Center in Harbin in 1918, and the Russo-Japanese Association School for the Education of Russian Language and Studies in 1920. Tomita Takeshi, p. 218.

18. Tomita Takeshi, *Senkan-ki no nisso kankei*, p.224. Prince Kan'in Kotohito held the position of the governor of this association.

19. Tomita Takeshi, “Goto Shinpei to Nichiro kyokai: 1920–29”, in *Kan*, vol. 13, 2007, p.326.

20. Tomita Takeshi, *Senkan-ki no nisso kankei*, p.255.

21. Omuka Toshiharu, *Taisho-ki shinko bijyutsu undo no kenkyu*, p.782–783.

appointment owing to the significance of the international cultural event.²² Considering his achievement in the scholarly field, Punin could be regarded as a witness to the artistic life and cultural memory of the city — Petersburg–Petrograd–Leningrad — at that time. Next, I will outline the circumstances of artistic tendencies in Russia in the context of Punin’s career.

While Punin completed his university education in 1914, he had already started work at the Department of “Ancient Russian Painting” (initially called the Archive of Russian Icons and Church Antiques) in the Russian Museum in 1913.²³ He worked in the Museum and other art institutions; simultaneously, he pursued a career as an art critic.²⁴ He wrote an article about Ukiyo-e, *Japanese Gravures*, in the journal *Apollon* in August and September, 1915.²⁵ Considering the European critique regarding the influences of Ukiyo-e on modern art, he tried to understand Ukiyo-e and Japanese culture in the context of the figurative depictions of European realism in the 18th century. “Japonism”, which Punin had described in his article, influenced modern Russian Art. For some Russian artists, Japanese art presented the opportunity to change their worldviews or self-recognitions.²⁶ Thus, several significant points should be observed in the background of the Russian new modern art movement: Russian traditional art, orientation to Asian artistic culture, and French Impressionism. Punin, as an art historian and critic, worked in these three research fields.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Russian artists and art critics discovered the French Impressionists and Post-Impressionists.²⁷ The famous Russian collector Sergey Shchukin (1854–1936) built an exceptional collection of works by Cezanne, Monet, Degas, Van Gogh, and Gauguin between 1904 and 1910.²⁸ In 1907, Shchukin opened his house for free visits.²⁹ Furthermore, Ivan Morozov (1871–1921), another Russian collector, began his collection by buying Cézanne’s paintings.³⁰ In 1912, the journal *Apollon*, in collaboration with the French Institute in St. Petersburg, opened a huge exhibition “A hundred Years of French paintings (1812–1912).”³¹ Murray explains: “This exhibition played a major role in the development of Russian Cézannism, and was an especially big influence on the artists of The Knave of Diamonds.”³²

This exhibition might have been the turning point for the art group The Union of Youth, which was founded in Petersburg in 1909.³³ The group members identified themselves as Futurists and were on the left wing of the art movement with the group Hylaea (Гилея) established by David Burliuk (1882–1967) and his brothers in 1910.³⁴ The Union of Youth organized seven exhibitions in total—five in Petersburg and one in Moscow and Luga each.³⁵ When Punin attended the exhibition of The Union of Youth in 1913, he felt that he no longer could continue to work in

22. Анна Каминская и Николай Зыков, «Первая выставка русских художников в Японии в 1927 году: Токио, Осака, Нагойя», in *Санкт-Петербург-Япония: XVIII-XXI вв.*, p.151.

23. Jennifer Cahn, *Nikolai Punin and Russian Avant-Garde Museology 1917–1932*, Ann Arbor: UMI, 1999, p.86.

24. Natalia Murray, *The unsung hero of the Russian-Avant Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolai Punin*, Liden: Brill, 2012, p.27.

25. Николай Пунин, «Японская Гравюра», in *Аполлон*, август и сентябрь, №6–7, 1915.

26. In a recent study, for instance, Anna Chernisyeva demonstrates the influence of Japonism on two artists Nikolai Nikolayevich Zedeler (1876–1937) and Anna Somova Zedeler (1879–?), whom previous studies have frequently mentioned. Anna Chernisyeva, “Kokuritsu A.S. Pushikin zoukei bijyutsukan (pushikin bijyutsukan) syozo no Nikolai Nikolaevich Zedeler to Anna Pavrovna Somova Zedeler no hanga nitsuite” in Chiba city Museum of Art, *Japonism — Sekai wo miryoushita Ukiyo-e*, Chiba: 2022. p.19–25.

27. Natalia Murray, *The unsung hero of the Russian-Avant Garde*, p.25.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

30. Natalia Murray, *The unsung hero of the Russian-Avant Garde*, p.32.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.* The Knave of Diamonds, Moscow-based art group, was founded by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova et al. They emigrated to France after the October Revolution in 1917.

33. Ирина Арская, “Союз молодежи-первое объединение художников авангарда”, Русский музей, *Общество художников Союз молодежи - К истории петербургского авангарда*, СПб: Palace Edition, 2019, p.6. The names of the members of the first committee were as below: Mikhail Matyushin (1861–1934), Elena Guro (1877–1913), Eduard Spandikov (1875–1929), Iosiv Shkolnik (1883–1926), Rostislav Voikov (?), Valentin Bistrenin (?), Aleksandre Gausch (1873–1947), Savelii Shreifer (1881–1949). p.6 This group continued until 1919. p.9.

34. The first response to Filippo Marinetti’s proclamation was published in the journal *Veher*, no. 269, March 8, 1909, Elena Sasner, “It is we who are blind; They see the new Sun” — Futurism and the Futurists in the mirror of the Russian Press of the 1910s, in the Russian Museum, *Russian Futurism*, SPb: Palace Edition. p.18. and cf. p.22.

35. Ирина Арская, «Союз молодежи-первое объединение художников авангарда», p.10.

Apollon.³⁶ He was so moved by this show that he decided to research and advocate for this new form of art expression. Notably, the main goal of The Union of Youth was to establish a museum and art library of contemporary art,³⁷ even though they could not realize this dream at that time. It is noteworthy that this art group in Petrograd aimed to organize exhibitions at home and abroad as a venue for the presentation of their works, and to provide a library as a permanent place for research on contemporary art. However, the activities of the Union of Youth, which represented the early days of Russian Futurism, came to an end with the outbreak of World War I in 1914.

After the 1917 revolutions, there was a difference in the degree of enthusiasm of those involved in the art field toward the new Bolshevik regime. Although not an avid supporter of the regime, Punin also tried to actively contribute to the cultural policies of the new government from the standpoint of a practitioner. Thus, when Punin and his friend, the futurist composer Arthur Lourie, visited Commissar Lunacharskii in his small office in the Winter Palace one cold morning in December 1917, their conversation moved quickly—asking for his permission to use the Hermitage Theatre for the production of *Death by Mistake* (written by Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922) and staged by Vladimir Tatlin).³⁸ After this meeting, in January 1918, the Department of Visual Arts (IZO) was formed under Narkompros. Punin first joined the collegiate of IZO. David Shterenberg (1881–1948), an artist, moved to Moscow to be appointed head of the Moscow branch of IZO in place of Tatlin. Punin headed the Petrograd branch of IZO until its closure in 1921.³⁹ Additionally, Punin participated on the board of the journal *Art of the Commune* and worked together with figures such as Osip Brik (1888–1945), one of the famous critics of Russian Formalism, Natan Alitman (1889–1970), a Cubist artist, and more. Although the journal was short-lived, published from December 1918 to April 1919, and the opinions were seen as a clear statement of support for the new political system from the younger generation of artists, the political orientation of its participants was by no means monolithic. It is noteworthy that this was a cross-disciplinary, multi-themed journal that transcended multiple artistic genres.

Thereafter, Punin was appointed the Commissar of the Hermitage Museum in July 1918, by Lunacharskii.⁴⁰ Subsequently, he claimed that the management of the Hermitage must be reorganized, and more rooms be opened for the public.⁴¹ Additionally, an exhibition planned by Punin opened on April 13, 1919, which has been described as a “free exhibition.”⁴² He managed to exhibit 1,826 works of art from 359 contributors, from icon painting to Suprematism.⁴³ Thus, Punin assumed an important role as a cultural administrator in Petrograd.

Punin not only wrote articles and taught art history at State Leningrad University (The National St-Petersburg University) and the Academy of Art, but also endorsed the younger generations of the Futurist movement, and mediated between the contemporaneous administrative officers and artists. Moreover, he first established the contemporary art section, “Section of the Newest Trend of Art,” in the Russian Museum; he became the head of this section, which is still operational. He was not an artist but a curator. He tried to crystallize the dreams of artists in The Union of Youth, which would have established a museum specializing in contemporary art. In this sense, the 1927 exhibition in Japan was significant for Punin’s life and his career as an art critic and advocate of leftist art.

4. Impact of the exhibition on modern Japanese art

Svetlana Grushevskaya of the Anna Akhmatova Museum and a curator of the 2018 exhibition “Russian People

36. Ирина Карасик, «Содружество квартиры №5», Русский музей, *Квартира №5 - К истории петроградского авангарда 1915–1925*, СПб: Palace Edition, 2016, p.9.

37. Ирина Карасик, «Содружество квартиры №5», p.7.

38. Natalia Murray, *The unsung hero of the Russian-Avant Garde*, p.76.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Natalia Murray, *The unsung hero of the Russian-Avant Garde*, p.96.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Natalia Murray, *The unsung hero of the Russian-Avant Garde*, p.100. Murray added that there was no entrance fee for, and no judgement to, display works in this exhibition. p.101.

43. *Ibid.* Murray writes that “Punin’s exhibition had been attended by nearly 40,000 visitors, and had a mainly positive response in media”, p. 101.

are Again in Fashion: Japan, 1927, New Russian Art,” wrote the following in the exhibition catalog:

The latest, radical, contemporary artworks were not exhibited. The works of Malevich, Tatlin, and Filonov were not displayed. The young artists in Japan were disappointed, who were eager to watch Russian Cubism, Futurism, and Suprematism, which were actually the latest works in Russia at that time.⁴⁴

As Grushevskaya mentioned, almost all the works included in the 1927 exhibition were in the style of realism and were traditional Russian folk handicrafts. According to Omuka’s research, 403 works were exhibited; there were six handicrafts and four children’s books.⁴⁵ Even before this exhibition, it is believed that expectations were high among Japanese artists for a firsthand look at the latest Russian avant-garde works of art. Despite their disappointment, the content of the exhibition was well received by Japanese critics, artists, and audiences. Regarding how the exhibition was reported by the media at the time, according to Omuka, most of the reviews were delivered by the artists and critics involved in Zokei and the Russo-Japanese Art Association and they were almost all positive.⁴⁶

Lunacharskii, the head of Narkompros, possibly played an important role in choosing the artworks for the exhibition, but Punin wrote that he had negotiated with Lunacharskii regarding the artwork selection. In a letter to Anna Akhmatova on February 9, 1927, he stated, “I was successful in making an agreement with Lunacharskii—the head of the jury. 110 works of the Association of Artists Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) were selected. I shipped the works for the exhibition.”⁴⁷

Punin’s official power as the curator was possibly limited with regard to selecting works. It is difficult to conceive that Punin selected the paintings of the members of AKhRR of his own will because he remained supportive of contemporaneous leftist art. In addition, he published a brochure named “The Latest Trends in Russian Art” in the fall of 1927, in which he explained the origins of contemporaneous Russian art, especially the evolutionary process of Cubo-Futurism.⁴⁸ As we saw in the previous chapter, Punin had close friendships with the Petersburg Futurists and Cézannists, and continued to support the avant-garde art of the time, even in the political situation of the late 1920s. Even at this point, it is unlikely that he would have openly supported a realist style such as that of AKhRR.

The Japanese artists and critics might have acknowledged their contemporaries’ perspectives regarding Russian realism artworks at this exhibition. When comparing French art with Russian art, they could have regarded Russian Realism as an alternative creative approach with sympathies for the socialism of the USSR. It is possible that as a result of their political disposition for socialism, Japanese avant-garde artists not only supported the realism of AKhRR’s style, which depicted people’s daily lives and work, but they also already had the grounding to accept such realism as a form of expression.

In September 1925, the second exhibition held by Sanka failed due to disagreements among the participants. This resulted in Sanka, one of the most radical groups of new art tendencies in the Taisho era, going bankrupt. Therefore, its main members formed Zoukei in November

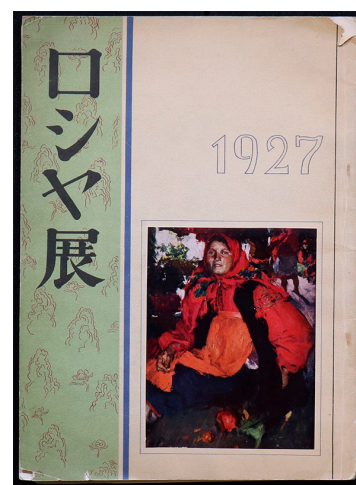


Figure3: *Catalog of the exhibition, 1927.* Anna Akhmatova Literary and Memorial Museum

44. Светлана Грушевская, “Небесный подарок в руках”, in Каталог выставки “Русские Опять Моде”, СПб: Музей Анны Ахматовой в Фонтанном Доме, 2018, p. 11.

45. It is said that two versions of the list of exhibition works exist. One is the exhibition catalog (fig.3), and the other is the list of the sale of the artworks. Omuka Toshiharu, *Taisho-ki shinko bijyutsu undo no kenkyu*, p. 793.

46. *Ibid.* p.799.

47. Николай Пунин, ред. Л. А. Зыков, *Мир Светил любовью: Дневник и Письма*, М: Артист, 2000, p. 270.

48. Николай Пунин, *Новейшие течения в русском искусстве*, Л: Издание государственного русского музея, 1927. Cubo-Futurism is the Cubism style in Russia.

1925.⁴⁹ Artist Yabe was a key member of Zoukei, and Ichiuji was the ideological supporter of this group.⁵⁰

The formation of Zoukei might indicate a break from the impasse in their strategies, which was to create ultimately new art forms and bizarre manifestations which had Sanka created. The members of Sanka produced Cubist paintings, collages and installations, as well as performances, which were similar to the Dadaist movement. Sanka's provocative attitude negated traditional art genres, causing fierce controversy.⁵¹ As Sanka failed to manage the exhibition "Indépendant", caused by ideological conflict among artists, the members began to reconsider the meaning of plasticity, which was the essential and fundamental act of making art. The contemporaneous members of Zoukei denied the concept of "Art" and emphasized the importance of "Zoukei," which is the Japanese word for plastics or plasticity. In this context, the exhibition took place in a timely transitional period—when Japanese modern art was shifting from seeking new forms to going back to inquiring about the *raison d'être* of art. In other words, the interest of artists around modeling shifted from the creation of aesthetic value in traditional art genres to the modeling and composition of objects. After the deadlock of such experimental creations as destruction and creation, chaotic happenings and performances during the era of Sanka, the realism by AkhRR in the form of idealistic figures must have seemed very fresh for Japanese leftist artists. Thus, they were unintentionally impressed by the realist paintings exhibited at this exhibition and actively embraced them. Almost all of the artists who received the exhibition favorably subsequently turned to the proletarian realist style. It should also be remembered that this resulted in the risk of uncritical acceptance of Soviet ideological propaganda.

5. Nikolai Punin's gaze at Japanese art and culture

On April 8, 1927, Punin, Arkin, and Yabe arrived in Suruga in Japan from Vladivostok via the Siberian Railway, bringing artworks.⁵² As mentioned above, Punin had published "Japanese Gravure," an article about Japanese Ukiyo-e, in the journal *Apollon* in 1915, which demonstrated his admiration for the works by Japanese masters of the Edo period. It has been regarded as one of the most significant research papers in Russia that aesthetically considered the works of Japanese traditional art.

Punin described his impression of the landscape along the shore at Suruga: "I recognized Japan. A mountain range rose over the spreading milky-white fog. A wavy contour such as this is seen only in Japan. I understood it through the gravure made by Torii Kiyonaga (1752–1815)."⁵³ Punin's first visit to Japan was not only an official trip as a curator, but was also a personal journey from which he would ascertain the reality of Japanese life and culture that he had long imagined through the works of Ukiyo-e.

On April 13, 1927, Punin sent a letter to Anna Arens-Punina, his wife, as follows:

Only the friends of Yabe—a group similar to our leftist association—are interested in us. But it does not seem to me that they are seriously interested in me, because they are confused about everything. Mayakovskii, revolution, America, proletarian culture, AKhRR, Chekhov, Dostoevskii, Pilinyak, Verbitskaya—all of those names are mixed up and merged into one thing, so all of those names are interesting for them. (...) They do not know Khlebnikov. It is difficult to explain to them that Mayakovskii is a pupil, an imitator of Khlebnikov, and vice versa.⁵⁴

49. Omuka, p.765.

50. In July 1925, Ichiuji published an essay titled *A consideration of new plasticity*. For more details, see the author's article below. Emura Kimi, "1920 nendai nihonn bijyutsu ni okeru rosiya bijyutsu no eikyō - gurupu Sannka no zenei geijyutu to riarizumu heno kannshinn wo megutte", *Jinbun Kenkyū*, Osaka: Osaka city U., no. 73, March 2022, pp.140-141.

51. The split in Sanka is illustrated in detail as follows: Takizawa Kyōji, "Bunnka kara syuueenn he - Sanka kaisann go no Taisyōki shinngo bijyutsu unndo ni tsuite", in Omuka Toshiharu et al., ed., *Taisyō Shinko bijyutsu shiryō syūsei*, Tokyo: Kokusyo Kankō kai, 2006, p.510–511.

52. Asano Mofu and Okamoto Toki went to meet them in Suruga. Okamoto Toki and Matsuyama Fumio, *Nihon proletaria bijyutu shi*, Tokyo: Zokeisha, 1967, p.14.

53. Анна Каминская и Николай Зыков, «Первая выставка русских художников в Японии в 1927 году: Токио, Осака, Нагойя», in *Санкт-Петербург-Япония: XVIII-XXI вв.*, p.155.

54. Николай Пунин, ред. Л. А. Зыков, *Мир Светил любовью: Дневник и Письма*, p. 276. Vladimir Mayakovskii (1893–1930) was a poet. AkhRR (Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia) was an association founded in 1922 by artists who endorsed the realistic style of

In addition, Punin's letter to Peter Neradovskii (1875–1962), his superior at the Russian Museum, suggests the significance of his activities there. Punin wrote to Neradovskii about his experience in Japan on May 5, 1927, as follows:

You may not be satisfied to know that I can't do anything. We will not open the show on 15 May because of general technical reasons and we will remain here as tourists. In any case, the exhibition is already an enormous success. There is not a day that the newspapers do not refer to us and Russian art. I will watch without selfish interest how we brought about the struggle between two oppositional art factions: one is the people who endorse the old world and are 'against civilization,' and another is those who are penetrated by Parisian ideals and hate to hear about Kakemono.⁵⁵

This letter seems to offer a glimpse of Punin's own views on how to evaluate Japanese modern art. Here the Japanese artists are divided into two categories, but note the expression "those who are penetrated by Parisian ideals and hate to hear about Kakemono". It seems likely that Punin was describing the Japanese avant-garde artists of the time, who adhered to French Impressionism and Cubism, but did not respect the traditional Japanese art style.

Furthermore, during his stay in Japan, Punin sent a letter to Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), a painter living in Paris. In the letter, he asked where the portrait of Nikolai Gumilyov (1886–1921), painted by Goncharova, was located. Punin wrote:

Please tell me about him. I am very eager for your answer. When you write his name, please just write N.S. (namely, Nikolai Stepanovich), not his surname. Anna Akhmatova and a young biographer are interested in him. To write a letter from Russia is difficult, so I am using this occasion of my stay in Japan to write to you about this.⁵⁶

He went on to say that he wanted to plan an exhibition of works by Mikhail Larionov⁵⁷: "Art has stagnated in Russia. There is hardly any new energy; old art is despised. It has not happened just for art, but also generally."⁵⁸ Additionally, Punin wrote:

I am obliged to curate an exhibition of Russian artists in Japan. It is on a moderate scale but will be significant for Japan. Japanese artists are under the influence of the Parisian style: Matisse, Marquet, Utrillo, Impressionism. But they are naïve, superficial, just simple imitators. Russian art seems powerful and creative in their eyes.⁵⁹

It is noteworthy that Punin asked Goncharova not to write Gumilev's surname and lamented about the situation of contemporaneous Russian art. This short letter may prove that liberty of communication was limited by censorship and that Punin's ground as an advocate of avant-garde art would have been unstable. It is likely that realist art, similar to the works including AKhRR, was already regarded as official art in the USSR at this point in 1927. Japanese artists probably did not understand what it meant to appreciate and support the realist paintings in the show. It implies that they did not understand the tension between politics and freedom of artistic expression in light of the exclusion of avant-garde art that had already occurred in the USSR in the 1920s. Hence, it may have brought about

paintings. Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), Fyodor Dostoevskii (1821–1881), and Anastasiya Verbitskaya (1861–1928) were authors.

55. Николай Пунин, ред. Л. А. Зыков, *Мир Светил любовью: Дневник и Письма*, p.282. "Kakemono" literally means "a hanging thing" in Japanese, which was a traditional art form used to display paintings or calligraphy on a wall.

56. Николай Пунин, ред. Л. А. Зыков, *Мир Светил любовью: Дневник и Письма*, p.293. Nikolai Stepanovich Gumilyov was a poet who was arrested and executed by the Cheka in 1921. He was married to Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), a famous poet. After his death, Akhmatova and Punin were in a romantic relationship, so she and her son Lev lived together with Punin's family in the same apartment. Punin wrote several letters to Akhmatova from Japan during his stay.

57. In fact, the exhibition was not held, but a group exhibition including works of Larionov and Goncharova was opened in the State Russian Museum on November 11 in 1927. *Natalia Goncharova, Michel Larionov*, Paris: Edition du Centre Pompidou, 1995, p. 238. *Natalia Goncharova*, London: Tate publishing, 2019, p.190.

58. Николай Пунин, ред. Л. А. Зыков, *Мир Светил любовью: Дневник и Письма*, p.282.

59. *Ibid.*

the observation by Punin that Japanese artists were “naïve”.

6. Conclusion

The art historian Omuka emphasized that the planning of the exhibition began with some individuals enthusing about a collaboration between Russia and Japan.⁶⁰ In other words, some of the people who were involved in the planning of this exhibition were motivated by their own individual interests in the culture of Soviet Russia and Russian art. However, this exhibition was ultimately an arena for political and ideological intentions, as evidenced by the fact that some big-name politicians from both countries held positions on the exhibition committee. It can be pointed out that the exhibition was ostensibly intended not only to promote mutual cultural understanding between the two countries, but also to induce a thawing of public opinion toward the Soviet Union in order to facilitate negotiations over colonial policies and maintenance of interests in the Far East. With regard to the co-sponsoring of the exhibition mainly by two ideologically different organizations, it might be said that the political side used this exhibition as a means of soft power, utilizing leftist artists and critics. Further consideration of the connections between Goto and the surrounding politicians and administrators with leftist cultural figures would shed more light on the political background of this exhibition. This is an issue to be addressed in the future.

Punin's journey to Japan meant that he had to confront his own image of the country, which had existed as beautiful dreams influenced by the works of Ukiyo-e. After reading his diary or letters, we cannot necessarily say that his impression of Japanese modern art was always positive. Punin continued to admire Japanese Ukiyo-e, but he didn't seem to value modern Japanese artwork. Such an evaluation of Japanese modern art seems to be sarcastically implied in the letter quoted above. Moreover, in an article in *Artistic Life* written after his return to Russia, he points out that Japanese artistic academism is strongly influenced by Europe and is open to the latest art, but that Japanese modern art does not understand its own classical art.⁶¹ Additionally Punin noted that Japanese art was more influenced by Expressionism than by the rigor of Cubism, but he himself did not appreciate Expressionism at all.⁶²

In terms of the acceptance of Japanese art by Russian modern artists, it has been pointed out that the Russian intellectuals had a contradictory point of view on Japan: On the one hand, they admired Japanese art and culture through “Japonism” via European cultural events; on the other hand, they held the Japanese in contempt because of the “yellow peril” diffused by winning the Russo-Japanese War.⁶³ Certainly the defeat of the Baltic Fleet at the Battle of Tsushima in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War had a great impact on the Russian intellectuals of Punin's generation.⁶⁴ However, these might be insufficient to fully explain the reason why Punin didn't favor Japanese modern art.

Not only Yabe but also other Japanese artists began to work in the realist style and with social subjects after the exhibition. They participated in the establishment of the Japanese Proletarian Artist Association in 1929. The exhibition was supposed to give momentum to Japanese avant-garde artists, that is, the young generation of Japanese modern artists who broke with the influence of Western/European art styles. Additionally, they shifted their attention to the significance of the subject matter in artworks through Russian realism. In this sense, this exhibition in 1927 was a turning point in the precarious period of Japanese modern art at the beginning of the Showa period (1926–1989).

The Japanese leftist artists might have accepted too optimistically the Russian realist paintings displayed and were unable to predict that a diversity of art styles would disappear in the USSR. The censorship and surveillance problems of the time may have been frustrating for Punin as he was unable to communicate openly with Japanese artists about the retreat of avant-garde art and the unification of expression that was occurring in Russia. In addition,

60. Omuka, *Taisho-ki shinko bijyutsu undo no kenkyu*, pp. 782-783.

61. Николай Пунин, “Живопись современной Японии”, in *Жизнь искусства*, №36, 1927, pp.6-7.

62. Николай Пунин, *В борьбе за новейшее искусство (искусство и революция)*, М.: Глобал Эксперт энд Сервис Тим, pp.83-84.

63. Fukuma Kayo, «20 seiki syoto no rossiya ni okeru nihon bijyutsu no jyuyou - Japonism no imi», in *Kenkyu houkokusyu: Slav-Eurasia gaku no kochiku*, no. 21, 2007, p.73-75.

64. Анна Каминская и Николай Зыков, «Первая выставка русских художников в Японии в 1927 году: Токио, Осака, Нагойя», p.150.

Punin superimposed the harsh situation of Russian leftist artists on Japanese artistic life, perhaps because he was concerned about the naiveté of Japanese modern artists. His ambivalent attitude toward Japanese art may have been a psychological projection caused by his feelings of crisis for Russian leftist art in the USSR, as expressed in his letter to Goncharova. Thus, focusing on the importance of cultural soft power, aesthetically disguised political propaganda, admiration for past Japanese art and disillusionment with reality - the life of the intellectual who is tossed about in great political currents will not only reframe the cultural history of Japan and Russia, but will also provide a basis for understanding anew the issue of political repression and artistic expression.

Acknowledgement

This article was rewritten based on a presentation paper in the 10th East Asian conference on Slavic Eurasian Studies at the University of Tokyo, Hongo campus, June 30, 2019. I appreciate the kind help of Anna Kaminskaya, Janna Televitskaya, and the Anna Akhmatova Literary and Memorial Museum for this research. This is dedicated to the memory of Anna Kaminskaya, granddaughter of Nikolai Punin, and the family. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 19K00159.