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Madame, your imperial majesty gives me new life in killing the Turks.
Voltaire, in a 1769 letter to Catherine the Great.[1]

We are called barbarians, Asians. Yes, we are Asia and we are proud of this . . . a good half of our blood is Tatar.
Aleksandr Shevchenko, *Neoprimitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements*, 1913.[2]

Voltaire's correspondence with Catherine the Great is a chillingly curious episode in the history of the Enlightenment. In a letter of 1770 the poet chastised the Russian Tsarina that 'the race of the Turks are not yet chased

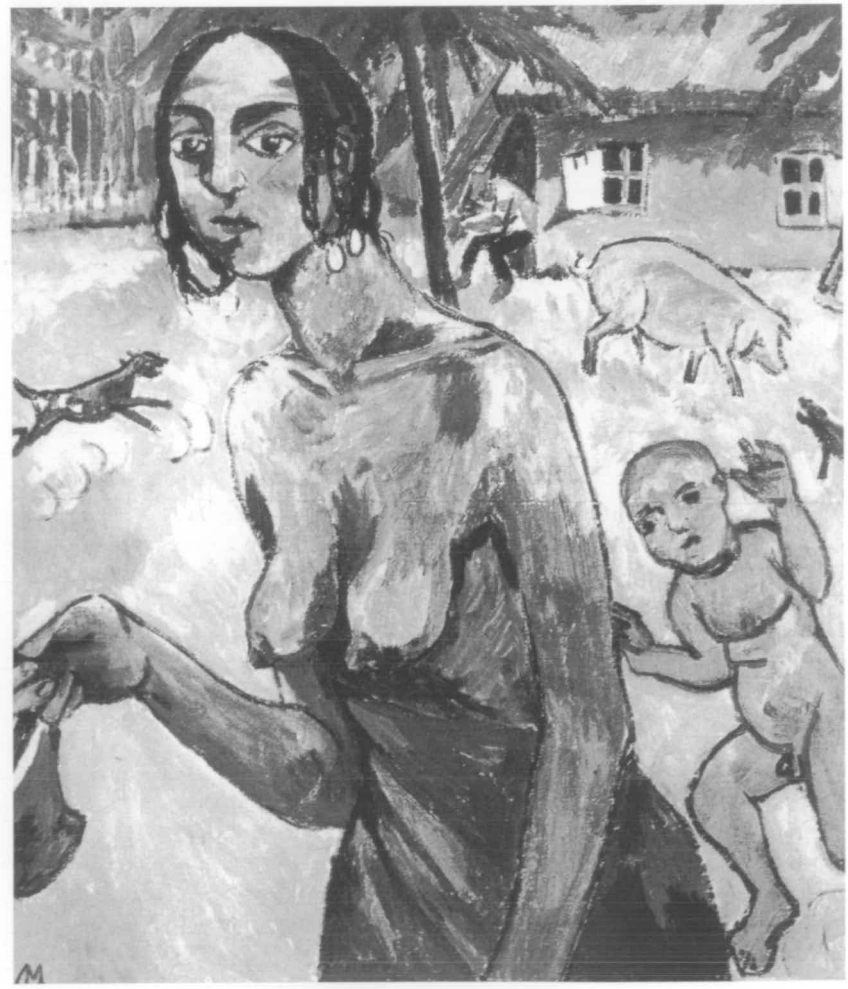

Fig. 1. Mikhail Larionov: *Gypsy of Tiraspol*, 1909. Copyright 1993 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. (© 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.)

1. Voltaire, as quoted in Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1994), p. 213.

2. Aleksandr Shevchenko, *Neo-Primitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements* (1913), in John Bowlt (trans. and ed.), *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934* (Thames and Hudson: New York, 1988), p. 49. Shevchenko's odd synthesis of futurist and primitivist rhetoric is symptomatic of the highly volatile atmosphere of the Russian avant-garde in 1913. While this period falls largely outside of the boundaries of this article, other parts of my dissertation treat Larionov's combination of futurist performance and primitivism during 1913–14.

from Europe'.[3] These exchanges between the Enlightenment philosopher and the Russian empress were occasioned by Catherine's conflict with the Ottoman Empire over the Balkan territories, in this case the small but pivotal region of Bessarabia. Indeed, the Russian and Ottoman empires battled over Bessarabia for a century, beginning with Peter the Great's failed invasion of 1711 and ending with the official annexation of Bessarabia by Russia in 1812.

For the present examination, however, Bessarabia is equally important as the birthplace of Russian painter Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964), whose early primitivist paintings thematise the Bessarabian cultural landscape. But the epigraphs do not point only to the painter's geographical origins. The positions of both Voltaire and Aleksandr Shevchenko (a painter, polemicist, and protégé of Larionov) offer insight into the conditions within which Larionov created his body of work. They also provide a framework for articulating the indecipherability of Larionov's primitivist painting within the dominant art historical accounts of primitivism.

Voltaire's call to violence, while in the service of an Enlightenment concept of Europe, also prefigures the irrationalism and purity-seeking nationalism found in the largely anti-Enlightenment discourse of primitivism. On the other hand, Shevchenko's glorification of an Asian Other ventriloquises some of the basic terms of European primitivism (authenticity, anti-cosmopolitanism) but also performs the unusual manoeuvre of identifying a European ethnic group (Russians) with an Asian one (Tatars, or Tartars—who were, in fact, the former oppressors of the Russians) in the name of nationalism. Both Shevchenko and Voltaire were attempting to negotiate a Russian national identity *vis-à-vis* Western Europe, but the twentieth-century Russian's 'Asianist' rhetoric is clearly opposed to the French philosopher's equation of Turkey with savagery. Larionov, as both a 'native' of Bessarabia and member of the European avant-garde, provides a point of departure for examining the crucial but unstable difference between the romantic violence desired on the part of the rationalist philosopher, and the embrace of that 'savage' non-European identity by a generation of the Russian avant-garde.

Shevchenko's manifesto, *Neoprimitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements* (1913), insisted that Russian avant-garde creativity was better served by its affinities to the East and the 'primitive' than to the West. The essay especially favoured the work of Larionov and the group of artists that surrounded him, of which Shevchenko was himself a member.[4] Summarising the relationship between Russian and Western modernism he writes: 'It becomes clear that there is no longer any point in using the products of the West, which has obtained them from the East. The more so since after their long, roundabout journey, they wind up pretty well deteriorated and rotted.'[5]

In many ways, Larionov's early paintings exemplify the tensions apparent within Shevchenko's hyperbole. Though Larionov is best known for his rayist, non-objective paintings (which fit nicely within dominant narratives of modernism and abstraction), his earlier primitivist paintings subvert or defy the more conventional interpretations of modernist primitivism. Thus, in a more general sense, this article is a preliminary attempt to rethink modernist primitivism through Larionov's work. Forcing the primitivist painting of Larionov and the Russian avant-garde to fit within the dominant art historical paradigms of primitivism silences the unique conflicts and resonances of the Russian milieu, in which such oppositions as East and West, nation and empire, Self and Other, do not enjoy even the contingent stability that they are sometimes attributed in the West. An examination of two paintings by Larionov, *Gypsy of Tiraspol* (1909) (Fig. 1) and *Katsap Venus* (1912) (Fig. 2),

3. Voltaire in Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 214

4. Larionov's group, unlike other Russian avant-garde associations such as Hylaea (David, Nikolai, and Vladimir Burliuk, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, and Benedikt Livshits) or the Jack of Diamonds (David Burliuk, Ilya Mashkov, Petr Konchalovsky, Aristarkh Lentulov, Robert Fal'k, Artur Fonvizen, and others), never had a fixed name or membership. Centring around Larionov and Natalya Goncharova, the loose association of painters and poets was most often referred to by one (or both) of the names of their two exhibitions, the Donkey's Tail (1912) and Target (1913). In addition to such core participants as Shevchenko, Ilya and Kirill Zdanevich, Mikhail Le-Dantyu, Sergei Bobrov, Sergei Romanovich, and Morgunov, other well-known Russian artists, such as Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, and Mark Chagall, also took part in the Donkey's Tail exhibition

5. Shevchenko, *Neoprimitivism*, in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, p. 49.

brings this tension into particularly striking relief. Although Larionov's paintings are based on already canonical examples of Western modernism, his formal borrowing from both Manet and Gauguin in fact serves to emphasise the differences that underline the conditions of Russian engagement with modernism and primitivism.

Larionov in Art History

Despite Shevchenko's attempts to position Larionov and his colleagues' art as a heroically and uniquely authentic negotiation of the 'primitive', the Russian avant-garde has remained largely absent from the art historical literature on European modernist primitivism. This lack of attention has caused the Russian artists and their work to be shoehorned into the already existing Western categories of modernist primitivism, or else relegated to the status of a footnote. At best, Russian primitivism is categorised as a secondary or minor episode in the widespread modernist celebration of the rural peasant, presumably because of the striking formal affinities of Russian avant-garde art with German expressionism and fauvism, and its debts to the work of Gauguin.[6]

The formal similarities between Russian and European primitivist painting

6. Although evidence for artistic exchange between the early Russian avant-garde and the Bridge group is lacking, Larionov's and David Burliuk's loose brushwork is strikingly analogous to paintings by Erich Heckel and Ernst Kirchner. In another example, Natalya Goncharova's depictions of the Russian countryside are indebted in both their palette and technique to the work of Henri Matisse, Andre Derain, and Paul Gauguin, all of whom were represented in the Moscow collection of Sergei Shchukin, who will be discussed later in the essay.

Fig. 2. Mikhail Larionov: *Katsap Venus*, 1912, oil on canvas, 99.5 × 129.5 cm. Nizhny Novgorod State Museum of Art. (© 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.)

initially appear to support this impulse toward historical equivalence. But addressing Russian and European primitivism in the same historical terms obscures the unique discourses and resonances of Russian art in its native context.[7] Historians of Russian modernism, for their own part, have been quite successful in both identifying sources for avant-garde primitivism and resurrecting the avant-garde in historical consciousness.[8] On the other hand, there have also been few attempts to contextualise the work of Larionov or his colleagues with respect to the larger debates about European modernist primitivism as a whole. Just as recent explorations of Gauguin and German expressionism are highly attentive to the specific historical conditions in which artists produced meanings, and how those meanings were received, the pre-Revolutionary Russian avant-garde also merits a rigorous understanding of its conditions of production and reception. While the demands of such a large-scale project could not be fulfilled within the space of an article, this brief case-study will demonstrate that Larionov's primitivist painting, and the rhetoric that surrounded it, put pressure on the dominant account of modernist primitivism that is based on such movements as French Realism, Symbolism, and German Expressionism.

The two paintings in question, *Gypsy of Tiraspol* (1909) (Fig. 1) and *Katsap Venus* (1912) (Fig. 2), make insistent formal and iconographic references to well-known paintings by Gauguin and Manet but subtly alter and complicate the markers of identity embedded within the French modernists' iconic representations of the Other.[9] Understanding these two paintings by Larionov as part of a series of artistic and cultural dialogues reveals the sharp dissonance between Western modernist primitivism and Larionov's challenge to the primitivist discourses of his French and German models. Larionov's activities as an organiser, designer, and painter provide a lens that reveals the connections between primitivist aesthetics, futurist rhetorical practices, and the highly-charged political and intellectual atmosphere of Russia between the 1905 Revolution and the First World War. A more thorough exploration of these focal issues of Russian avant-garde primitivism, I argue, is essential for a rigorous understanding of primitivism in modernity.

Pigeon-holed into already existing categories of European modernist primitivism on the one hand, and celebrated in an often heroicising process of historical salvage on the other, the primitivism of the Russian avant-garde has only just begun to be interpreted within the history of modernism. While Western art history has ignored the singularity of Russian art and culture, historians of the Russian avant-garde often take this specificity for granted, rendering it invisible to those looking in from the outside. What is missing from the debate is an account of Russian primitivism that acknowledges the complex relationship between Russian artists and their Western counterparts, or, even more broadly stated, Russian national identity and the Enlightenment concept of European civilisation. Scholarship such as Susan Layton's *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (1994) and Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994) addresses a deeply ambivalent attitude toward the West and towards the notion of Russia as part of Europe.[10] According to Layton and Wolff, Russian artists and writers often recognised themselves both as civilised European subjects and as 'savage' or 'exotic' objects of inquiry. This double valence requires a rethinking of current understandings of nationalism and primitivism within art history.[11]

In Gill Perry's formulation of modernist primitivism, based primarily on the models of Gauguin and the Worpswede group, a static and singular 'civilised'

7. An insufficient treatment of the Russian avant-garde is found in some of the most fundamental texts in the field of modernist primitivism. For example, in his otherwise commendable 1994 survey *Primitivism and Modern Art*, Colin Rhodes situates Larionov, Natalya Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich, and David Burliuk within the rural primitivist tradition of Gauguin and the Pont-Aven group, the German Worpswede artists' colony, Matisse and fauvism, and the expressionist Bridge and Blue Rider groups. While presenting the Russian artists on an equal standing with their Western European counterparts, Rhodes inadvertently veils the significance of their work. The author devotes attention to identifying the historical particularities of Brittany in the 1880s or late Wilhelmine Germany; in contrast, he presents the Russian art without any historical specificity. Just as an historical account of the Worpswede colony necessitates an understanding of German industrialisation and emerging public discourses about the countryside, accounts of Russian primitivism should be attentive to the larger cultural conditions in which the artists were operating. By including historical material for the German and French artists but not the Russians, Rhodes presents Russian primitivist art as if it circulated within the same cultural and political discourses as those operative in Germany or France. Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (Thames & Hudson: New York, 1994), pp. 46–50. Rhodes' book, of course, is a survey for a less specialised reader, and therefore necessarily lacking a fully historicised account of any particular artistic milieu. It is nevertheless noteworthy that his analysis of the Russian avant-garde does not equal his discussions of French and German primitivism in terms of detail, specificity, or sensitivity.

8. Scholarship specifically on Russian modernism—including studies of literature and, in art history, the work of John Bowlt in English and Soviet and Russian scholars—has already produced a great deal of valuable material about the Russian avant-garde and its use of primitivist imagery and ideas. In this case I am thinking primarily of the work of Bowlt, Anthony Parton, Dmitri Sarabianov, and Gleb Pospelov. Parton's 1993 monograph *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1993), compiles and regularises a vast amount of previously scattered and unreliable information and scholarship on Larionov. Parton's most crucial contribution to the field of Larionov scholarship lies in his consistent and rigorous dating of the artist's work. Parton's book also includes a great deal of information on the sources of Larionov's primitivism. Sarabianov wrote some of the first scholarly literature on Larionov in the Soviet period, with his 1971 book *Russkaya zhivopis' kontsa 1900-x – nachala 1910-x godov. ocherki.* (Russian painting from the end of the 1900s to the beginning of the 1910s. Outlines) (Iskusstvo: Moscow, 1971), which included the

subject undergoes a shift in sympathy or identification toward the 'primitive'. Framed according to a postcolonial worldview, Perry's paradigm makes a great deal of sense as a historically based account of European encounters with internal and external 'primitives' and Others. But for Russian artists and writers, the path to primitivism was not only an encounter with the Other, even an Other whose primary function was the definition of the Self. Within the European idea of civilisation, Eastern Europe, and especially Russia, played an intermediate role between civilisation and savagery. This enabled Russian intellectuals to identify themselves as both European subjects, able to engage in classically modern scientific inquiry, and as a primitive Other, somehow not European (i.e. Shevchenko's 'barbarian'). In this dual role they could see themselves as both the subject and object of, for example, an ethnographic discourse.

Interpreting Russian primitivism within the category of European modernist primitivism is further complicated by the Russian perception of the West as a colonising and aggressive force, even as manifested by native imperial rule. Peter the Great's eighteenth-century reforms were a monumental effort to modernise (that is, of course, to Europeanise) Russia. But the consequence of the Petrine reforms, as articulated by Dragan Kujundzic in '"After": Russian Postcolonial Identity', has been a Russian national identity that continually oscillates between a masochistic identification with the West and a messianic rejection of Western colonialism. Furthermore, this messianic rejection is just as ardent, if not more so, in relation to Westernising (Petrine) elements from within elite Russian society.[12] As Slavophile writer Konstantin Sergeevich Aksakov (1817–60, the owner of the Abramtsevo estate artists' colony before Savva Mamontov) argued: 'The Russian land became, as it were, conquered territory and the state was the conqueror.'[13] Primitivism, as a phenomenon widespread in Europe, then, was a more problematic position for Russians, who (in the case of the avant-garde) identified with the 'primitive' as an anti-Enlightenment (and anti-Western) reverse discourse, and at the same time recognised it as a product of the West and modernity. An analysis of Larionov's work in relation to its Western models demonstrates that the dissonance between the Russian and Western discourses is too strong to be submerged within a universal construction of primitivism.

Colonialism and Desire: Larionov and Gauguin

In his early primitivist paintings of 1906–10, Larionov draws elements from a formal language provided by Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Matisse, whose works he saw in the Moscow collections of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov. The apparent similarity between Larionov's primitivism and his Western sources only serves to amplify the aesthetic and ideological disparities that emerge when subjected to a sustained analysis. Most importantly, Larionov's paintings render visible the relations, desires, and identities that Western European primitivisms omit in the creation of a mythic language. Larionov's difference is brought into greatest relief in a comparison with Gauguin, which reveals how Larionov's painting resists categorisation within the oppositions endemic to current understandings of modernist primitivism. The juxtaposition of Larionov's Russian art practice with an already canonical European modernism provides an opportunity to see how Larionov's work departs from his models. It is this departure that threatens the established perimeters of primitivism and reveals the necessity for a broader theoretical reassessment of primitivism in modernity.

article 'Primitivicheskii period v tvorchestve Mikhaila Larionova', (The Primitivist period in the work of Mikhail Larionov), pp. 98–116 Pospelov's 1990 book on the Jack of Diamonds group is particularly complex in its elaboration of the notion of 'urban folklore' and the unique qualities of Moscow artistic life. See Pospelov, *Bubnoryi valet: Primitiv i gorodskoi fol'klor v Moskovskoi zhivopisi*, (The Jack of Diamonds: The Primitive and Urban Folklore in Moscow Painting) (Sovetskii khudozhnik: Moscow, 1990). This body of scholarship serves as the foundation for work such as my own; work that constitutes what I consider a necessary next step—attempting to view Russian avant-garde primitivism in terms of the larger phenomenon of European primitivism as a whole, an international artistic culture in which the Russian painters certainly wished to participate.

9. Larionov's style also bears close comparison with such contemporary exponents of German expressionism as Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein, who even more than Gauguin identified style and the creative process as a means of identity formation. The cultural politics of nationalism and race associated with (though not necessarily promoted by) German expressionism also bear examination in relation to *Gypsy of Tiraspol* and *Katsap Venus*. However, the values and oppositions of German Kulturkritik, though certainly relevant to Larionov's representation of explicitly ethnic types, collapse under the weight of distinctly Russian imperial discourses of nationality.

10. Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 1994)

11. In this essay I use the terms 'primitivism' and 'nationalism' as they are defined within such central art historical and historical texts as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso: New York, 1991), Gill Perry's, 'Primitivism and the "Modern"', in Charles Harrison and Frances Frascina (eds), *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction. The Early Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993); and Colin Rhodes', *Primitivism and Modern Art*.

12. Dragan Kujundzic, '"After": Russian Post-Colonial Identity', *MLN*, vol. 115, no 5, 2000, pp. 891–908. A larger and more thorough examination of the particular meanings of primitivism within Russian culture would have to include a substantial discussion of Russian populism, or *narodnichestvo*, which, though addressed in the larger work of the dissertation, I am omitting here in the service of brevity. Some useful historical texts are James Billington, *Mikhailovsky and Russian Populism* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1958); Richard Wortman, *The Crisis of Russian Populism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1967); and Reginal Zelnick (ed.), *Workers and Intelligentsia in Late Imperial Russia. Realities, Representations, Reflections* (University of California: Berkeley, 1999).

In 'Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Modernist Primitivism' (1989), Abigail Solomon-Godeau describes modernist primitivism through the lens of Roland Barthes' notion of 'mythic speech'; a form of speech that is both depoliticising and 'constitutive of social reality'. Solomon-Godeau's formula enables her to situate herself as a 'demythologiser' of Gauguin's representations of Tahiti, unmasking the brutal social relations of French colonialism that are rendered invisible through Gauguin's insistence on the primitive as existing outside European social relations.[14] Although her criticism is exceptionally pointed, Solomon-Godeau's reframing of primitivism as itself an object of discursive study is emblematic of the larger body of scholarship on French and German modernism that has responded to the varied calls of Marxist and post-colonial theory and linked ethnography, volkish mysticism, and artistic primitivism to larger social and political forces, such as industrialism, imperialism, and fascism.

Larionov's *Gypsy of Tiraspol* (1909) (Fig. 1) exemplifies the way his primitivism engages with, but does not succumb to, the version of Gauguin's primitivist mythology posited by Solomon-Godeau. Larionov clearly modelled *Gypsy of Tiraspol* on several works by Gauguin that he saw in the homes of Russian collectors. As noted by John Bowlt and other Larionov specialists, there is a compelling similarity between the compositions and central female figures in *Gypsy of Tiraspol* and in Gauguin's 1893 *Where Are You Going?* (Fig. 3) then in the Moscow collection of Ivan Morozov.[15] Both Larionov's Gypsy and the woman in *Where Are You Going?* are represented as standing at a 45-degree angle in relation to the viewer, holding an object at chest level, and they are dressed in a cloth wrap that exposes their torsos. Similar figures are found in at least two other paintings by Gauguin then in Sergei Shchukin's collection: *The Month of Mary* (1893) and *Maternity: Women By the Sea* (1899).[16] The striking similarity of Larionov's Gypsy to Gauguin's repeated figure, however, gives rise to an equally forceful dissonance between the paintings. Larionov's appropriation of Gauguin's oft-repeated cipher of serenity, beauty, and plenitude does not realise the promise of its prototype, for Larionov's figure denies the pleasurable fantasy evoked in Gauguin's work.

This denial of the idealised and seamless fantasy is first of all evident in the execution of the painting. Instead of Gauguin's sensuous colours, soothing flat planes, and harmonious composition, Larionov's choppy brush strokes create a nervous textural rhythm. His expressionist painterly logic interferes with the kind of sensual pleasure that Gauguin encouraged a European viewer to experience from his smooth-skinned, placid-faced, and firm-breasted Tahitian beauties. Larionov's composition is a crowded and swirling spiral, as opposed to the rhythmic symmetry of *Where Are You Going?* The Gypsy occupies the central space in the canvas and our gaze travels down her torso and up her right arm toward the ambiguous animal on her right, running toward the centre of the space. Typical of Larionov, this animal's identity remains unresolved. Perhaps a dog, perhaps a goat, the movement of the unidentified animal draws our attention to the small figure sitting in the background. The spiral continues down the right side of the painting, from the seated male figure to the pig (another character often repeated in Larionov's work) down to the howling dog at the right edge, and, finally to the naked child apparently running after the Gypsy woman.

In addition to its nervous composition and painterly technique, the content of the painting also interrupts Gauguin's fantasy. *Gypsy of Tiraspol* suggests the squalor and hardship of Russian provincial life, as opposed to Gauguin's idealised Tahitian world of sun, greenery, and plenty. Although flattened and

13. In his 'Memorandum to Aleksander II on the Internal State of Russia' (1855), Aksakov refers to Peter the Great's reforms as 'a dangerous and deep-rooted ulcer in the body of our Russia'. Describing the process of Westernisation Peter imposed on the population, Aksakov argues 'Thus was accomplished the rift between the tsar and his people; thus was destroyed the ancient bond between the land and the state; and thus there arose in the place of the previous bond the yoke of the state over the land The Russian land became, as it were, conquered territory and the state was the conqueror. This was how the Russian monarch was transformed into a despot and a willingly submissive people into slaves held captive on their own land!' Translated and reprinted in W. J. Leatherbarrow and D. C. Offord (trans. and ed.), *A Documentary History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Ardis: Ann Arbor, 1987), pp. 102–3

14. Abigail Solomon-Godeau, 'Going Native Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism', *Art in America*, vol. 77, no 7, July 1989, pp 119–20.

15. Bowlt, 'Neo-primitivism and Russian Painting', *Burlington Magazine*, no. 852, March 1974, p. 137. For lists of works owned by Morozov see Beverly Whitney Kean, *French Painters, Russian Collectors: Shchukin, Morozov and Modern French Art 1890-1914* (Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1994), p 289.

16. Whitney Kean, *French Painters, Russian Collectors*, pp 272–3.

pushed toward the picture plane in typical post-impressionist style, the space behind Larionov's central figure is comprehensible as a large open area, probably a yard. A small building on the left and a larger wall on the right define the limits of the mostly empty space. Most importantly, there are no markers of an idyllic rural space; no fields, flowers, or even greenery. This emptiness is complemented by the light yellow colour of the ground, which suggests dry dusty earth, a sharp contrast to the lush and exotic vegetation presented in *Where Are You Going?*

The difference between the abilities of these two paintings to produce visual pleasure is, however, most evident in the central figures. While Gauguin's Tahitian woman coquettishly handles an exotic fruit or gourd, Larionov's gypsy is saddled with an inelegant, heavy object, possibly a water jug, or even a beggar's cup. This is clearly not the material of Gauguin's primitivist pleasure fantasy. The disparity between the two works is deepened by the physical appearance of Larionov's gypsy. Unlike the Tahitian woman's firm and smooth, honey-coloured skin, the gypsy's flesh is drawn and her

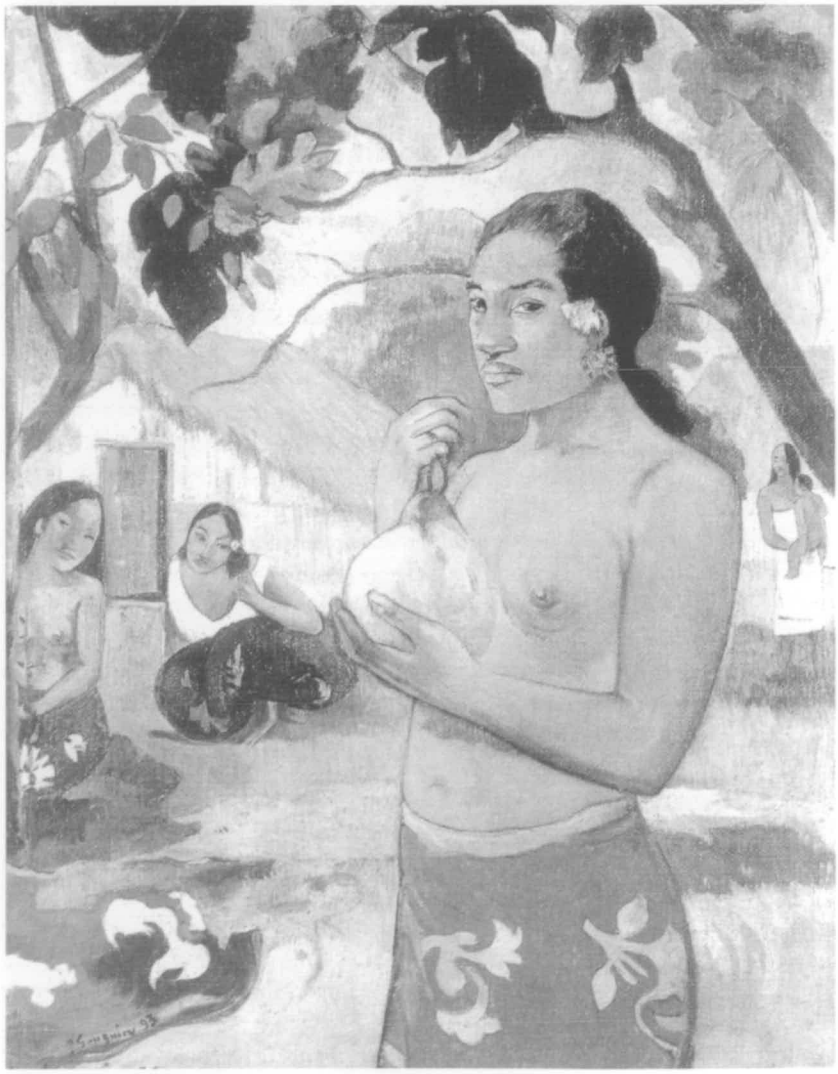

Fig. 3. Paul Gauguin: *Where Are You Going?*, 1893, oil on canvas, 91 × 72 cm. The Hermitage State Museum, Saint Petersburg.

protruding ribs are highlighted by thin strokes of greyish blue paint on her side. Most importantly, the overwhelming indicators of the gypsy's status as a sexual subject—her bared breasts—are skinny, sagging, and far removed from the ideals of sexual attractiveness celebrated by Gauguin.

But Larionov's denial of a seamless erotic fantasy is in no way a removal of sexuality from the scene. Although his exaggerated realism interferes with more conventional models of the European viewer taking pleasure in the sensuality of the exotic, the painter does not remove the gypsy from the field of sexual desire. Larionov's female figure, though bedraggled and haggard, has thick and gently curved brows, almond-shaped eyes, and a pursed mouth that bear a remarkable resemblance to Natalya Goncharova.[17] Although she was the likely model, Goncharova was not a gypsy. Of aristocratic Russian descent, Goncharova was Larionov's creative 'soul mate' and long-time lover.[18] The inclusion of Goncharova's face makes the picture even more difficult to resolve. Why would the painter depict his young and attractive companion (with whom he was still very much in love) as an unidealised, perhaps even ugly woman shown in a moment of rejection of her maternal nurturing role, her breasts obviously those of a breastfeeding mother, but conspicuously denying her child's demands?

That Larionov's depiction is disturbing is not, of course, what makes it a challenge to Gauguin's primitivism. Gauguin's young adolescent mistresses, as Solomon-Godeau points out, were not easy to incorporate into the artist's heroic mythology. Gauguin's later defenders turned to racial theories about the physical characteristics of Maori women to justify what could otherwise be understood as criminally perverse sexual behaviour.[19] Typical of both orientalism and primitivism, the ethnographic accuracy of Gauguin's representation fed into racial narratives that justified much of the violence or inequity the painter—in this case, unwittingly—revealed. By using a Russian model to depict a Gypsy, Larionov interferes with any possible recourse to the racial or ethnographic narratives often associated with primitivism. *Gypsy of Tiraspol* thus poses a challenge to romantic fantasies of the savage and exotic as well as hinting at an intriguingly intimate subversion of the sanctities of romantic love.

Larionov's and Gauguin's paintings share the element of racially marked and sexualised female figures in explicitly exotic locales. But this initial similarity is misleading. Gauguin's move to Tahiti is exemplary of what Gill Perry calls 'the going away'. In her essay 'Primitivism and the "Modern"', Perry describes how the artist's journey away from civilisation was considered both a liberation of a true, formerly repressed identity, and the spur to increased artistic production. While the avant-garde artistic identity required that 'the primitive' already existed within the artist's personality or spirit (and later, unconscious), an artist's departure from the home (that is, middle-class European) environment was nevertheless seen as a necessary step toward the achievement of artistic freedom. The primitive or 'savage' environment for which the artist departed was then conflated with a primitive aspect in the artist's creative production. Thus, as Perry argues, the fact that Gauguin's paintings were executed in Brittany, a place he and his Pont-Aven colleagues considered untainted by modern European urbanism, or in Tahiti, then a remote French colony, is equal in importance to any specific primitive subjects or style that the paintings might represent.[20]

Perry's notion of the 'going away' is not limited to individual artists, but also includes arts colonies such as Germany's Worpswede group and the Russian Abramtsevo artistic circle, as well as less formal examples of group

17 Pospelov, *Bubnoryi valet*, p 42.

18. Goncharova was from the same family as the wife of the poet Aleksandr Pushkin, also named Natalya Goncharova.

19. Solomon-Godeau, 'Going Native', pp. 126–7.

20. Perry, 'Primitivism and the "Modern"', pp 8–10

retreats to the countryside, such as The Bridge and Blue Rider groups in Germany. But this international formulation submerges the particularities and instabilities of Russian forays into the countryside. Although Perry identifies examples in many major European centres, her otherwise convincing paradigm does not allow for the fundamentally different significance this 'going away' would have for Russian culture.

Larionov's version of the 'going away' reverses the Western paradigm. In 1908, the year he painted *Gypsy of Tiraspol*, he was a student at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. He maintained a modest residence in the city (an apartment in Natalya Goncharova's family home), but his own home, and the place to which he returned during summers, holidays, illnesses, and expulsions, was his grandmother's house in the distant and small provincial town of Tiraspol. His visits to Tiraspol coincided with some of the most productive episodes of his early career. Like Gauguin and the Worpswede group, Larionov left the city in order to find an appropriately primitive place to work. But Larionov's journey is best characterised as a 'return home' rather than a 'going away'. The painter was born and raised at this family home in Tiraspol, located near the border of the Russian empire in the southern region of Bessarabia. Provincial origins are, in fact, a common thread among the Russian avant-garde, many of whose major figures came from rural, undeveloped, and 'primitive' corners of the Russian empire: The Burliuks (David, Vladimir, and Nikolai) were from rural Ukraine; Velimir (Viktor) Khlebnikov from the Caspian Sea port of Astrakhan; Natalya Goncharova from Tula province (South of Moscow province);[21] Kazimir Malevich from the rural Ukraine; Vassily Kamensky from Perm (in the Ural foothills); and Aleksandr Shevchenko was from Kharkov (Ukraine).

That Larionov found his 'exotica' in Tiraspol, his hometown, is a key point in articulating the differences between European and Russian primitivism. Gauguin was a Parisian who travelled to a remote colonial outpost, which was then undergoing the political and cultural trauma of colonial exploitation. But Larionov and his Gypsy were from the same place, Tiraspol, the very edge of the empire. Identifying this borderland as both homeland and exotica, Larionov eliminates the distance necessary for an ethnographic approach to the 'primitive'. In addition, Tiraspol, located in the multinational, recently annexed territory of Bessarabia, was a particularly apt location for negotiating the problems of ethnic minorities within the Russian empire.

The multivalent identifications possible within the Bessarabian milieu are uniquely demonstrable with the alternately mythical and real-life figure of the Gypsy. Bessarabia was subject not only to a highly diverse ethnic population, but also to the widely divergent traditional Romanian and Russian attitudes towards Gypsies. Romanian and Moldavian perceptions of local Romany (Gypsies) were almost universally negative, tempered only by an acknowledgement of their usefulness as skilled artisans. While Russian authorities also certainly denied the Romany many rights based on their ethnicity, Russian popular and literary culture developed an imaginary archetypal Gypsy who embodied all the most romantic and ecstatic tendencies within Russian artistic culture. The Gypsy Choir—a tradition begun by Count Aleksei Orlov under Catherine the Great—by the nineteenth century became a common symbol of the excess and dissipation endemic to Russian (not Gypsy) national character.[22] In literature, Aleksandr Pushkin forwarded the romantic figure of the noble and mysterious Gypsy in his famous lyric poem *The Gypsies* (1826). The Russians' romantic Gypsy forms an unmistakable contrast to the Moldavian (Bessarabian) relegation of

21. Tula province is located south of Moscow province; its centre is the city of Tula, 193 kilometres South of Moscow. Tula is famous throughout Russia for such crafts traditions as lacquer, bronze, and baking moulds It was also celebrated as the home of Leo Tolstoy's estate, Yasnaya Polyana. See A. M. Prokhorov (ed), *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, vol. 26 (Macmillan· New York, 1981), p. 414.

22 Literary uses of the Gypsy Choir to represent the ecstatic dissipation fundamental to the 'Russian soul' are found prominently in both Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) and Chekhov's *The Shooting Party* (1884)

the Romany population to (at best) indentured servitude, and, more commonly, complete slavery.[23]

Drawing attention to the distinction between Perry's Western paradigm and the Russian inversion of the 'going away' is not an attempt to paint the Russian avant-garde as more authentically primitive, or even to absolve Russian artists of the imperialist discourses Perry identifies as inherent within the 'going away'. It is important, however, to understand that these discourses took on different resonances within the Russian imperial imagination. Such fundamental differences are also reflected, as a matter of course, in the various forms of resistance to Russian imperial culture.[24] The Russian avant-garde's attitudes toward 'the primitive' were in no way identical, but were formed in relation to the dominant imperial mythologies of ethnicity, race, and culture. Therefore, though Russian avant-garde theory and practice was highly influenced by French modernism, the scholarly narratives of Western European primitivism do not provide an adequate explanation of Russian avant-garde primitivism.

Larionov's Response to Manet's 'Monument of Modernism'

A second example of Larionov's primitivism further demonstrates his negotiation of imperial and national positions on ethnicity and culture. In a 1912 painting called *Katsap Venus* (Fig. 2), Larionov distinguishes his subject from more familiar models of primitivist and modernist representations by giving the figure both unique physical characteristics and a troubling title that implies an ambiguous, if not problematic, ethnic identity. The *Katsap Venus* was part of a larger series of ethnic Venuses that the painter publicly announced in a newspaper article of 29 October 1912. Larionov told the Moscow newspaper, *Stolichnaya molva* (Capital-city rumours), that he had already finished canvasses of Gypsy, Jewish, and Katsap (a Ukrainian term for Russians that will be discussed further below) Venuses as well as sketches for Moldavian, Turkish, Greek, Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Black, Ukrainian, and French Venuses. Larionov's *Venus* series (1912) presents a complex example of how the artist's homegrown exoticism does not conform to, but rather creates a dialogue with, primitivism and other aspects of European modernism.[25] *Stolichnaya molva* reported that: 'In these works the artist plans to note those characteristic features with which every people endows their own ideal of beauty'.[26] In his 1913 double monograph, *Natalya Goncharova. Mikhail Larionov*, Ilya Zdanevich (a poet and close friend of the couple) explained Larionov's *Venuses* as a 'celebration' rather than just a description of ethnically specific standards of beauty.[27] Although Larionov probably abandoned this project almost immediately after the item appeared in the newspaper (only the *Jewish*, *Gypsy*, and *Katsap Venuses* were actually painted, and the single sketch executed from this group depicted a *Moldavian Venus*) the Venus archetype remained an important and emblematic figure in his work.[28] The public first viewed works from the Venus series in March 1913 at the 'Target', a controversial group show organised by Larionov.[29]

Despite the fact that most of the 'national' Venuses were never executed, the diversity of the initial list might seem to support Zdanevich's and Evgeny Kovtun's assertion that the works are Larionov's attempt to represent ethnically specific standards of beauty, and celebrate ethnic diversity.[30] In light of such evidence as the newspaper item quoted above, it would be difficult to argue against such an observation. But the question of Larionov's purpose remains unanswered, for the glorification of diverse ethnic standards of beauty

23. The Bessarabian and Moldavian Gypsies were traditionally relegated to literal (that is, both legal and practical) slavery. This practice was discouraged and repressed by the invading Russians, but it had developed as a central aspect of social structure during the middle ages and was not officially abolished in the Romanian state until the 1850s (1846 in Russian-ruled Bessarabia). For more information on the history of gypsies in Romania and Moldavia see David Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies of Eastern Europe and Russia* (Saint Martin's Press· New York, 1994), pp. 107–37, 161.

24. See note 11 above. Both pan-Slavism and Russian populism negotiated complex relationships vis-à-vis the Tsarist regime, functioning mainly as critique and resistance, but also sometimes providing ideological justification for official imperial policies. Some useful general works on this topic are Leatherbarrow and Offord, *A Documentary History of Russian Thought*, and Raymond Pearson's 'Privileges, Rights, and Russification', in Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson (eds), *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia* (Clarendon Press. Oxford, 1989), pp. 85–102.

25. There are only three presently extant canvases identifiably from the series: the *Katsap Venus*, *Jewish Venus*, and *Yellow Venus* (or *Venus and Mikhail*), the last one is identified as the *Gypsy Venus* by Anthony Parton. See Parton, *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde*, pp 50–2. There is another 1912 *Venus* by Larionov in the Russian Museum but it does not correspond to any of the examples cited in the newspaper article below

26. 'Khudozhestvennaya zhizn': ''Venery'' M Larionova', *Stolichnaya molva*, no. 272, 29 October 1912, p. 5. 'V etikh proizvedeniyakh khudozhnik nameren otmetit' te kharakternye cherty, kotorymi kazhdyi narod nadelyaet svoi ideal krasoty' A slightly shorter version of this article appeared four days later as 'Among painters: A future target for criticism', in *Obozrenie teatrov* (Review of the theatres), no. 1898, 2 November 1912, pp. 15–16.

27. Eli Eganburi [Ilya Zdanevich], *Natalya Goncharova Mikhail Larionov* (Myunster: Moscow, 1913), p. 30.

28. In his monograph Zdanevich claims that the 1912 *Venus* series was originally to have included a *Spanish Venus*, as well as those in the newspaper list. Zdanevich, *Natalya Goncharova. Mikhail Larionov*

29. The exhibition catalogue for 'Target' lists only the *Jewish Venus* and a sketch for a *Moldavian Venus* as exhibited works. This does not necessarily mean that the *Katsap Venus* was not exhibited, as the catalogues from this period are often inaccurate; however, I have found no mention of the work in any journalistic coverage of the exhibition. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that Larionov would fail to exhibit a work as ambitious as *Katsap Venus*, unless he

was hardly a culturally and politically neutral position in the early twentieth century.

The two most recent monographs on Larionov present divergent views on the significance of the ethnic aspects of the Venuses, but both approach the Venus series through the importance of antiquity within Larionov's work. In *Mikhail Larionov* (1998), Kovtun observes that the glorification of ethnic difference is necessarily part of a broader anti-classical agenda.[31] While Kovtun expands this motivation to an anti-classical stance within Russian modernism (directed specifically against Aleksandr Benois and the World of Art group), Anthony Parton, in his *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde* (1993) sees the Venuses as part of Larionov's grand attempt to reappropriate antiquity and the classical tradition into the language of primitivism.[32] Parton argues that the complicated sexual and class dynamics of the *Venuses* render the 'ethnic celebration' motivation inadequate. Expanding on this argument, I hope to demonstrate that a reappropriation of antiquity also necessarily involves a modernist challenge to classicism within the *Venus* paintings.

Larionov's *Venuses* are a complex manipulation of the mythologies of ethnicity, sexuality, history, and representation. And although the painter's use of antiquity is significant, in this case it is clearly an antiquity mediated by modernism. In both the *Jewish* and the *Katsap Venus* (Fig. 2) (as well as in the 1912 *Soldier's Venus* [Fig. 4] a lithograph version of the *Katsap Venus*) a contemporary, non-allegorised woman, painted in a modern style, reclines in the pose of a renaissance Venus.[33] The Katsap's pose, though reversed, is almost identical to that of Manet's *Olympia* (1863) (Fig. 5). In addition to her pose, the *Katsap Venus* contains other insistent references to what T. J. Clark calls 'the founding monument of modern art'. *Olympia's* cat has become a tapestry on the *Katsap Venus'* wall, the African-Caribbean servant in Manet's painting is reduced to the Venus' earring and head scarf, and the flower tucked behind *Olympia's* ear is held in the Katsap's hand.

The obvious similarities between Larionov's *Venuses* and the *Olympia* were first noted in 1923 in the Berlin publication *Zhar-Ptitsa* (Fire-Bird). In an article on Larionov, the critic G. I. Isarlov claimed that the *Soldier's Venus* (in this case another title for the *Katsap Venus*) trumps Manet's in terms of its modernism. According to Isarlov, next to Larionov's painting, Manet's *Olympia* 'looks as classical as a Giorgione, Rubens, or Ingres'.[34] In establishing the relationship between Larionov's and Manet's work, Isarlov implicitly refers to how both artists use classical models to amplify the modernity of their gestures; that is, Manet's paintings were anti-classical precisely because of their references to Titian and Giorgione. In this light, Isarlov presents Larionov's Venuses as a continuation of the radical de-glamourisation of women in impressionist painting:

> Renoir and Degas, of course, performed a great service by showing us a woman who was not smiling and drenched with perfume, but rather calmly bathing, or matter-of-factly searching for a flea on her stomach. But Larionov is also great in that, having discarded the women-Venuses of an elite few, he created the true people's goddess of love.[35]

Isarlov praises Larionov for exactly those characteristics against which Manet's critics so viciously argued. Ironically, his positive characterisation of the *Soldier's Venus* is reminiscent of the critical attacks against Manet's 1865 entry into the Salon. As described by Clark, *Olympia* was identified not as the allegorised and mythically classless courtesan, but as the denizen of one of the working-class brothels on the Rue de Bréda and Rue Mouffetard.[36] One of Manet's 1865 critics remarked that the bouquet was 'bought at the florist's on the corner', apparently indicating that *Olympia* did not require the kind of

feared a reaction that exceeded even his own developed taste for scandal. See reproduction of exhibition catalogues in Pospelov, *Bubnovyi valet*, pp. 248–51

30. Kovtun, *Mikhail Larionov*, pp. 98–9.

31. Kovtun, *Mikhail Larionov*, pp. 98–9.

32. Parton, *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde*, p. 109.

33. Contemporary observers use the titles 'Katsap Venus' and 'Soldier's Venus' more or less interchangeably for both the oil painting and the corresponding lithograph line drawing. In his 1913 monograph Ilya Zdanevich lists the drawing as 'Katsap Venus', although the same drawing is captioned in the Italian futurist journal *Lacerba* as 'Soldier's Venus'. In the article 'Oslinyi khvost i Mishen'', (The Donkey's Tail and Target) from the publication of the same title (accompanying the 1913 Target exhibition), Varsanofii Parkin refers to the oil painting as 'Soldier's girl (Venus)' See Eganbyuri [Zdanevich], *Goncharova. Larionov*, unpaginated, *Lacerba*, vol 3, no. 16, 17 April 1915, p. 125; Parkin, 'Oslinyi khvost i Mishen'', in *Oslinyi khvost i Mishen'* (Myunster: Moscow, 1913), p. 62

34. G. I. Isarlov, 'M. F. Larionov', *Zhar-Ptitsa* (Fire-bird), no 12, 1923, pp. 28–9 Isarlov probably chooses the title 'Soldier's Venus' over 'Katsap Venus' because the significant French and German readership of *Zhar-Ptitsa* would have no reference for the colloquial Ukrainian word. Moreover, the line drawing had already been presented as 'Soldier's Venus' to Western followers of the avant-garde in *Lacerba*. See note 33, above

35. 'Velika, konechno, zasluga Renuara i Dega, kotorye vpervie pokazali nam zhenshchinu ne razdushennuyu i ulybayushchuyusya, no spokoino podmyvayushchuyusya ili delovito ishchushchuyu na zhivote blokhu. No velik i Larionov tem, chto, otbrosiv zhenshchin-Vener nebol'shoi kuchki lyudei, on sozdal deistvitel'no narodnuyu boginyu lyubvi ' Isarlov, 'M. F. Larionov', p 28

36. T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1984), pp 86–8.

foresight and devotion of a courtesan, whose function was not just sex, but also the arousal of desire. Similarly, one French critic claimed that *Olympia* was a corpse that had 'already arrived at an advanced state of decomposition'.[37] Jean Ravenel, twice quoted by Clark as a kind of punctuation to his argument, provides a synthesis of the various French anxieties *Olympia* provoked:

> Armed insurrection in the camp of the bourgeois: it is a glass of iced water which each visitor gets full in the face when he sees the beautiful *courtisane* in full bloom.
>
> Painting of the school of Baudelaire, freely executed by a pupil of Goya; the vicious strangeness of the little *faubourienne*, a woman of the night from Paul Niquet's, from the mysteries of Paris and the nightmares of Edgar Poe. Her look has the soumess of someone prematurely aged, her face the disturbing perfume of a *fleur du mal*; her body fatigued, corrupted . . .[38]

According to Ravenel, the Parisian public rejected the working-class deviance they found lurking in the figure of Olympia, but Isarlov's description also emphasises the Venus' lower-class status and how her body deviated from unspoken standards of desirability:

> Lanonov's *Venus* is from a brothel, a voluptuous, fat, and sweaty trollop, with crudely painted cheeks and a straggly, coming-apart braid. She lies relaxed, propping her elbows on a pyramid of feather pillows, on a nice, soft bed, befitting this goddess of the popular imagination [39]

37. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 97

38. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, pp. 139–40.

39. 'Larionovskaya "Venera" iz publichnogo doma, polnotelaya, zhirnaya, i potnaya devka, s grubo nasur'mlennymi shchekami i zhiden'koyu raspushchennoyu kosoi. Lezhit otdykhayuchi, oblokotivshis' na piramidu pukhovykh podushek, na khoroshei, myagkoi krovati, kakuyu podobaet imet' bogine narodnogo voobrazheniya.' Isarlov, 'M F. Larionov', p. 29.

Fig. 4. Mikhail Larionov: *Soldier's Venus*, 1912, lithograph, 13.5 × 18.4 cm. *Lacerba*, vol. 3, no. 16, 17 April 1915, p. 125. (© 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.)

Although their comments contrast in tone, the French critics and Isarlov share certain distinctive terms of analysis. Most importantly, both emphasise how the subjects' bodies deviate from unstated rules of desirability. *Olympia* (a corpse in 'an advanced state of decomposition'), is putrid, thus embodying all the fears about the lower-class female body as projected onto the prostitute in Second Empire Paris. Larionov's *Venus* is also distinguished by her faults; the *Soldier's Venus* is big and fat, not delicate and shapely as ladies were supposed to be. What is most striking, however, is how the critics project imaginary characteristics on to their subjects, characteristics which are not visible to the viewer. Where, for example, is the *Soldier's Venus'* sweat? And *Olympia*, in turn, is clearly not a decaying corpse. Both Isarlov, in his evaluation of Larionov's work, and Manet's critics, distinguished their subjects from an imagined, more desirable variant, but also extrapolated from these original, concrete visual differences more phantasmatic ones. In these fantasies the critics revealed contemporary anxieties about sexuality in public life.[40]

Of course, this does not amount to a comparison of critical reception of the two works: Manet's work, exhibited to the public in 1865, was the focus of a real public and critical outcry, one which Clark documents and analyses thoroughly. The *Katsap Venus*, on the other hand, was not exhibited until recently, and therefore received critical attention only by those in Larionov's intimate circle. What Isarlov's comments demonstrate, however, is that a different kind of judgement was possible for Larionov's work. That Isarlov's terms of analysis were taken from Manet's critics bring the differences of tone

40. For a discussion of sexual politics and public attitudes towards prostitution in Russia see Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters: Prostitutes and Their Regulation in Imperial Russia* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995).

Fig. 5. Edouard Manet: *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 131 x 191 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Cnac – Mnam / Dist RMN.

into sharper relief, revealing a more fundamental disparity between these two different moments in the time and space of modernity. Manet's refusal to adopt euphemistic tropes, such as orientalism, that would disarm the sexual content of his images was largely responsible for the outcry against his works.[41] As one contemporary French critic noted: 'Manet cannot be accused of idealizing the foolish virgins'.[42] *Olympia's* lack of idealisation is one of the problematic markers that make her naked rather than nude.[43] A lower-class girl rather than a goddess, a prostitute rather than a courtesan, *Olympia's* status was uncompromisingly degenerate, albeit heroically rehabilitated through modernism. Whereas nineteenth-century critics might have endorsed Manet despite the ugliness in his images, for Isarlov Larionov's deviation from 'elite' standards of beauty was itself a heroic gesture. The *Katsap Venus* was noble in her simplicity, corpulence, and sweat. If *Olympia* sweated, it was the sign of fever, colic, and decay, but Larionov's *Venus* perspired a sweeter fluid. Her filth, ironically, signalled her purity. Like *Olympia*, the *Katsap Venus* was a simple prostitute, and therefore, presumably, in the same degenerate class as Manet's 'woman of the night'. Why then is *Olympia* characterised as a diseased blight and Larionov's *Venus* celebrated as an authentic Goddess of Love?

In lauding Larionov's *Venus* the Russian critic Isarlov characterises her as '*deistvitel'no narodnaya*', a phrase which may be translated variously as 'truly national', 'truly of the folk', 'truly of the people', or simply, 'truly popular'.[44] For Larionov's critic, the *Venus'* deviance is precisely what makes her 'truly of the folk'. For Ravenel and the French critics, however, Manet's mutation of a Venetian Venus was easily identified as a *faubourienne*, a nameless individual from a contemporary lower-class neighbourhood. Already in 1865 this was a crucial part of what marked her figure as degenerate, 'a base model picked up I know not where'.[45] The term *faubourienne*, like Isarlov's *narodnaya*, distinguishes its subject from elite and high culture, but without the Russian word's heroicising gloss of authenticity.

Manet's modernist intervention was radical enough to identify a neighbourhood prostitute as 'of the people', but she could still not be 'of the folk'. Larionov, on the other hand, was able to give his Venus this rarefied status. His *Katsap Venus* has a hefty frame, with enormous hands and feet, which are, moreover, much darker than the rest of her body. Considering the uniform whiteness of Renaissance Venuses, Larionov's *Jewish Venus*, and *Olympia*, the *Katsap Venus'* disruption of the pattern is certainly not without meaning. The *Katsap Venus* is not only a prostitute, but also a sturdy peasant with the natural 'farmer's tan' that comes from work in the fields. Larionov's decision to make his Venus an agricultural worker collapses two identities, the urban degenerate and the rural peasant figure, which held oppositional and value-laden positions in European social discourses.

This sharp ideological separation of the city and the countryside was already developed during Manet's time, and found full expression in Post-Impressionist painting. But by the early twentieth century an even clearer dichotomy of value had emerged between the rural and the urban, which was most visible in German volkish thought and Kulturkritik. Even in a more general European context, however, the rural peasant came to represent both racial and spiritual purity, the repository of authentic culture, in direct opposition to the cosmopolitan urbanite. Gauguin's depictions of Breton peasants are emblematic of this rhetorical use of the peasant figure, and had a great impact on the following generation of modernists.[46] Among Larionov's European contemporaries, Emil Nolde most stridently forwarded the value-laden opposition of urban and rural cultures and bodies. In Nolde's painting

41. Linda Nochlin attributes the public and critical aversion to Manet's work to the artist's refusal to wield the strategy of the picturesque. In asking 'How does a work avoid the picturesque?' Nochlin proposes both Courbet's and Manet's realism as a challenge to the ideologies of otherness that masked nineteenth-century French social inequalities. Linda Nochlin, 'The Imaginary Orient', in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (Harper and Row: New York, 1989), p. 51.

42. Jules Clarétie, as quoted in George Heard Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1954), p. 73.

43. Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, p 67–8.

44 *The Oxford Russian-English Dictionary* cites three definitions for the adjective *narodnyi* '1. national 2. folk . . . 3. of the people, popular' (Oxford University Press: New York, 1992), p 378

45 Clarétie, as quoted in Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, p 73

46. Gill Perry notes that there was a discourse of racial purity entangled in the multitude of images of Breton peasants in the 1880s Perry, 'Primitivism and the "Modern"', pp 12–14

there is a clear contrast between the displaced urban absinthe sippers of his cautionary *Slovenes* (1911), and the heroically Christian peasants of *Pentecost* (1910). Describing the denizens of Berlin cabarets as 'pale, powdered, and smelling of corpses', Nolde sustained the strict opposition between the superior primordial values of the primitive countryside and the degenerate and poisonous attributes of cosmopolitan life.[47] In Isarlov's reading, the *Katsap Venus* is able to exploit the values of both sides of the opposition; Larionov's figure, as a prostitute, is both a low participant in the decadent urban scene and a member of the hallowed peasant class, her purity ensured by the fact that she works the land.

Larionov's depiction of the *Katsap Venus* as the authentic and pure peasant, as well as the morally and socially compromised urbanite exposes a fundamental difference between his approach to representing difference and identity and that of other contemporary primitivist painters. But the prostitute and peasant are not the only seemingly opposed identities Larionov unites in his work. Another dimension of collapsed identities emerges in examining the *Katsap Venus'* dependence on Manet's scandalous model. Apart from *Olympia's* confrontational gaze and defensive hand, the racial contrast between the glaringly white naked woman and her African servant is still one of the most striking aspects of this work. The *Katsap Venus* is a European peasant. That is, she is easily appropriated into nineteenth-century narratives of racial purity (at least Slavic ones). But Larionov does not preserve the rhetorical purity of this identity. The Katsap's rounded face and shoulders, head scarf, and dangling earring all identify her as much with the African servant, as with the willowy *Olympia*.

It is hardly original to claim that the 'otherness' of the racial or ethnic Other was a cultural mythology that the European avant-garde still validated, albeit often with a significant value-reversal. But while the exotic savage and the European peasant could both be forwarded heroically in a primitivist discourse, the terms of their representation were vastly different. Sexuality was the most obvious realm of distinction. Gauguin may have found 'savagery' in the Breton countryside, but the Breton peasant was savage in her primitive piety and Christianity.[48] The frank sexuality of Gauguin's Tahitians (who were, after all, also Christians) would not have been possible in his representations of women in traditional Breton costume. This contrast is repeated in Nolde's sympathetic, but nevertheless highly sexual, images of Polynesians, whereas his German or Russian peasants are primitive in their access to a purer and less complicated Christian spirituality. Larionov's prostitute/peasant manages to be both pure and sexual, folk and exotic at the same time. Although Larionov is certainly unusual in his particular painterly articulation, this strange mixture is actually made possible by specifically Russian instabilities in the discourses of empire and ethnicity.

One may argue that, despite these unusual characteristics, Larionov's focus on ethnicity may still be understood as simply another example of the larger European fascination with and romanticisation of the peasant. But while German or French manifestations of this preoccupation most often served the construction of stable, homogeneous national identities, Russians understood the peasant and the 'folk' as a potentially destabilising force. Unlike the West European empires, Russia did not travel across the seas to find its colonies. Russian imperial conquest was a process of incremental accretion along already existing borders. This pattern of expansion, combined with a vast territory, led to the notion of Russia as 'a nation that is constantly colonizing itself'.[49] As Carol McKay outlines in her investigation into Kandinsky's ethnographic

47. Emil Nolde, quoted in William Bradley, *Emil Nolde and German Expressionism: A Prophet in His Own Land* (UMI Research Press: Ann Arbor, 1986), p. 62.

48. Solomon-Godeau, 'Going Native', pp. 121–2.

49. The historian Vasilii Khuchevskii, as quoted in Thomas Sanders (ed.), *Historiography of Imperial Russia: The Profession and Writing of History in a Multinational State* (Sharpe: Armonk, NY, 1999), p. 8.

studies, 'Modernist Primitivism? The Case of Kandinsky', by the late nineteenth century the Russian liberal intelligentsia had accepted popular, as opposed to political, history as a way of exerting intellectual freedom in the autocratic Tsarist regime.[50] These ethnically based histories were often part of a larger agenda of political and cultural autonomy that opposed the official imperial policy of assimilation or 'Russification' of ethnic minorities.[51] In imperial Russia, where more than half of the 1897 population were not ethnic Russians, histories of the folk or *narod* (a word we have already seen applied to Larionov's *Venuses*) necessarily involved the exposure and multiplication of difference itself.[52]

Larionov, in fact, invokes imperial ethnic politics in the title of his painting. Who, after all, is the *Katsap Venus*? The 1912 newspaper article, 'Larionov's Venuses', forwards a list of titles consisting entirely of ethnic designations.[53] While the vast majority of these ethnicities are immediately translatable into English (i.e. Jewish, Moldavian, Chinese, etc.) two titles require further explication. The word '*Katsap*' refers to Russians, but it is hardly equal to the word 'Russian'. Most importantly, '*Katsap*' is not a Russian word, but rather colloquial Ukrainian, a derogatory epithet for Russians. The title of Larionov's painting (in Russian, *Katsapskaya Venera*) has been interpreted to mean a Ukrainian prostitute who serves Russian soldiers.[54] This translation is problematic, since someone described with the adjective *Katsapskaya* would, presumably, herself be Russian. But the confusion is understandable given the apparent strangeness of the title: why would Larionov, himself a Russian, use a crude slur to denote a member of his own ethnic group, rather than a neutral term from the standard language, such as *Russkaya* (ethnic Russian)? Larionov's use of language to raise questions about the relationships between groups does not appear to be either accidental or anomalous. In the 1912 newspaper article, 'Larionov's Venuses', the last picture from the list of works is titled 'Little Russian' (*malorossiiskaya*), a term that refers to Ukrainians but, again, does not correspond entirely to the word 'Ukrainian' (*ukrainskaya*). *Malorossiiskaya* was a common Russian term for Ukrainians that stressed both the disparity and the deep connections between the two groups. The literal English translation, 'Little (or Minor) Russian', and its opposite, 'Great Russian', underline how the terms insist on the differing statuses of the two groups within a Russian imperial system; *malorossiiskaya* was clearly the subservient opposition to *velikorusskaya* (Great Russian). On the other hand, *malorossiiskaya*, though showcasing imperial ethnic condescension, did not have the derogatory connotation of *katsapskaya*.[55] (This does not imply, of course, that the Russian language is lacking in colourful insults for Ukrainians.) What is striking is that Larionov chose a pejorative colloquialism to denote the dominant ethnic group (which constituted the vast majority of his viewers) and, remarkably, did not mirror the insult on to the projected (Ukrainian) voice. The *Katsap Venus*, in its very title, acts as a critique of the imperial system of ethnic Russian dominance. Larionov achieves this, however, in a peculiarly indirect way; first choosing the group within the Russian empire (Ukrainians) most easily assimilated into an ethnic Russian identity, and then ventriloquising an imagined, colloquial, language of resistance.

Although Larionov's position can be understood as aesthetically or even ideologically radical, this does not necessarily imply a concrete engagement with politics. In comparison to politically engaged Russian artists of earlier generations (the realist Wanderers, or even Kandinsky) Larionov's gesture toward ethnicity does not appear politically outspoken.[56] It does, however, reflect a politicised sensibility about ethnicity in the multinational Russian

50. Carol McKay, 'Modernist Primitivism? The Case of Kandinsky', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol 16, no. 2, 1993, p. 28

51. McKay, 'Modernist Primitivism', pp. 22–3.

52. See Robert Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1994), pp. 55 and 64. Kaiser's book offers an abundance of information and analysis about the 1897 Russian census.

53. 'Venery M. Larionova', *Stolichnaya molva*, p. 5.

54. Parton, *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde*, p 52. The author somehow reverses the ethnic terms of Russian and Ukrainian because, he claims, the *Katsap Venus* clearly depicted an army prostitute. While this may be true, it still does not make the *Katsap Venus*, herself, Ukrainian

55 *The Oxford Russian-English Dictionary* defines *katsap* as 'a term of abuse used by Ukrainians of Russians', indicating its etymological origin as a word meaning 'butcher' (p. 277). Russian language dictionaries also cite *katsap* as a derogatory Ukrainian epithet for Russians but disagree about its origin. An *Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language, vol. 2* (Etimologicheskii slovar' russkogo yazyka) claims that the origin is in the word 'goat' because 'to the clean-shaven Ukrainian the bearded Russian looked like a goat' (britomu ukraintsu borodatyi russkii kazalsya kozlom.) (Progress. Moscow, 1967), p. 213

56 Vassily Kandinsky's (1866–1944) work lends itself as a useful parallel because both painters positioned themselves unequivocally within the avant-garde, and wielded the powerful combination of primitivism and modernism. In 'Modernist Primitivism', Carol McKay argues that Kandinsky's decision in 1896 not to accept an academic position at the University of Dorpat (Estonia) indicated the artist's anti-Tsarist, liberal-nationalist politics McKay's argument, though largely circumstantial, gains strength from Kandinsky's training as an ethnographer and his participation in the ethnographic communities that closely coincided with liberal academic discourses opposing Tsarist cultural oppression of ethnic minorities Though Kandinsky's father was from Siberia, his mother's family was of ethnic Baltic descent, and Kandinsky often used themes from Baltic folklore, such as the epic poem *Kalevala*, in his work. In 1889 the Tsarist regime completely 'Russified' the University of Dorpat, forcing faculty and students to cease instruction in German and Estonian, and to conduct all University business instead in Russian. Soon after, in 1896, Kandinsky refused an advantageous academic position at Dorpat and ultimately changed his career path entirely to become a visual artist. (On Kandinsky's ethnographic activities and Baltic nationalist politics see McKay, 'Modernist Primitivism',

empire. Larionov, as mentioned earlier, was himself from the Southern region of Bessarabia, a region known for its ethnic diversity.[57] Bessarabia was a long-contested site: home to the native Moldavians, but also to several minority populations of vestigial refugees, who moved back and forth for centuries between the shifting Byzantine, Tartar, Russian, and Ottoman powers of the Black Sea region. Bessarabia and Tiraspol, moreover, were located in the Pale of Settlement, the limited area in which Jews were permitted to live under the Tsar.[58] Indeed, four of Larionov's Venuses may in fact be considered 'Bessarabian' Venuses: the Katsap (as conqueror), Moldavian, Gypsy, and Jewish. This Russian, Moldavian, Gypsy, and Jewish mixture was unique to Bessarabia, and what makes this combination even more striking is that those four were the only Venuses realised (in any form) from the original 1912 list.

Bessarabia, like the Baltic states in Carol McKay's examination of Kandinsky, was a uniquely apt area for the negotiation of ethnic difference in the Russian Empire. The Russian-Ottoman border had been contested for almost a century, as we saw in the beginning of the essay, and Voltaire used Bessarabia as a metaphor for Russian triumph over the Turks and, consequently, of the victory of European reason and civilisation over Asian savagery and despotism.[59] Although captured by Russia in a number of conflicts, Tiraspol did not become a (relatively) permanent part of the Russian Empire until 1812, only sixty nine years before Larionov was born. Having grown up in this imperial borderland, Larionov must have been acutely aware of the conditions that spurred the intense debates about nationality in the late empire. In the *Katsap Venus* Larionov uses a low slur, '*katsapskaya*', instead of a word from the literary language, indicating his desire to 'lower' the level of discourse surrounding ethnic discourse, further problematising it as a source of conflict and instability. Moreover, by using an insult in connection with the Russian figure alone, he linguistically decentres the dominant Russian voice. Such a position does not claim Larionov as a proponent of any specific ethnic or nationalist politics; he was not an intellectual like Kandinsky, and his *Katsapka* demonstrates the low, everyday discourse in which he chose to engage the much-contested questions of national minorities. Larionov negotiates a delicate triangulation of competing national voices by ventriloquising a subject people's ethnic slur against the dominant imperial group.

Conclusion

The goal of the current study is neither to construct a privileged position for the Russian avant-garde within modernism—that is, an exemption from the larger critique of modernist primitivism—nor is it to rehabilitate the primitivist project as a whole. The point is not that Larionov is necessarily a unique case (although he probably is), but simply that there existed relations of identity, politics, colonialism, and painting in the Russian empire that were wholly different from the versions given within Western accounts of modernist primitivism. By re-examining these works by Larionov we can see how the peculiarities of Russian imperial cultural politics allowed for a distinctive model of modernist primitivism, one that resembled its Western counterpoints in form, but diverged fundamentally in its resonance. The Russian example (as demonstrated through Larionov) is instructive in that it presents a more fluid model of colonial relations, identities, and geographies within modernist painting. Although, admittedly, I have narrated this fluidity through juxtaposition with 'simpler' examples of Western European

pp. 20–36. Peg Weiss thematises the connection between Kandinsky's graphic art [especially abstraction] and his study of Finno-Ugric culture and folklore [such as the *Kalevala*] in her book *Kandinsky and Old Russia. The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* [Yale University Press: New Haven, 1995]) There are, however, obvious limits to a comparison of Kandinsky's and Larionov's recourse to notions of the folk. Kandinsky's early paintings recall specific episodes and archetypes from the Baltic and other Finno-Ugric folklore and mythology that he studied as a field ethnographer. As McKay outlines, this literature had already been politicised within the struggle for autonomy among Baltic minority populations and intellectuals. This academic engagement with the politics of ethnography and empire belong to a period in Russian intellectual history distinctly earlier than Larionov and his *Venuses* Kandinsky's ethnographic work and his rejection of an academic career predate the tumultuous historical events of both the Russo-Japanese War and the 1905 Revolution. Clearly Larionov worked under distinctly different cultural conditions, but certain differences of intention can also be noted. Larionov did not engage in the kind of institutionalised academic discourses that occupied Kandinsky before his career change. Furthermore, Larionov's political activities, if they existed at all, are almost entirely unknown (Elena Ovsyannikova claims that Larionov visited fellow students jailed for their activities during the 1905 Revolution. Ovsyannikova is the granddaughter of Nikolai Vinogradov, an associate of Larionov's who organised the first exhibition of lubki, and the claim, though possibly true, is entirely anecdotal See Ovsyannikova 'Iz istorii pervikh vystavok lubka', [From the history of the first *lubok* exhibitions] *Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie* [Soviet art studies], vol. 20, 1986, pp. 423–4.)

57. According to the 1897 census, only eight percent of the Bessarabian population were ethnic Russians. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism*, p 64.

58. Besides the Moldavian majority, and the already mentioned Russian, Gypsy, and Jewish populations, Bessarabia was also home to significant Ukrainian, German, Bulgarian, and even Swiss minorities. The Russian authorities encouraged immigration into the war-ravaged area partially to prevent the return of earlier Turkish and Tartar inhabitants, who were resistant to Russian imperial rule. Serfdom as it existed in Russia was never introduced in Bessarabia, except for the Romany (Gypsies), who remained as the property of the landed classes. Crowe, *A History of the Gypsies*, pp. 158–9.

59. In the 1770 letter to Catherine quoted in the beginning of the essay Voltaire writes: 'I would still wish that the course of the Danube and the navigation of that river belonged to

modernism, I also believe that, with a different eye, the same complexity can be found to be more the rule and less the exception within more canonical examples of modernist primitivism.

Another reason to look more closely at Larionov's work, in particular, is the broad, but often unacknowledged, significance he had for Soviet modernism. Although Larionov left Russia in 1915 (to join Diaghilev and the Ballet Russes) and never returned, his early and acute influence on both Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin is enough to recommend his work as foundational to the revolutionary Soviet avant-garde.[60] Larionov may have been in Europe, but his primitivist and rayist painting, as well as his anti-institutional activism, helped set the stage for the painterly, rhetorical, and institutional manifestation of both suprematism and constructivism. One important consequence of this continuity, I hope to suggest, is that the politics of non-objective art in the Soviet Union should not be couched solely in terms of socialism and state propaganda. Just as Larionov's absence from Russia after 1915 does not signify a corresponding absence from the collective memory of the Russian avant-garde, the collapse of the Russian empire after 1917 does not equal the erasure of the 'nationality question' from mass consciousness (despite the Bolsheviks' attempts to fashion an internationalist state). Reading the codes of the nationality question within Soviet modernism is a project that has only just begun to be attempted (in the work of T. J. Clark and Victor Margolin, for example), and it is a task that requires a great deal of attention to be paid to the unique character of national identity formation and expression in the wake of the Russian empire.

you.' Voltaire, in Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*, p. 214.

60. Larionov and Goncharova never intended to stay in the West permanently. At first they were fully occupied with Diaghilev's company, but towards the end of the twenties, and certainly after Diaghilev's death in 1929, circumstances were difficult for them and they had little work. The fact that Larionov and Goncharova remained in Paris after 1929, I believe, was a result of the couple's fear of political, or at the very least, economic, reprisal in the Soviet Union. Though neither artist publicly stated opposition to Bolshevik rule, they had concrete reasons to believe that they would be unwelcome in the new Russia. In the early twenties Larionov developed a correspondence with Olga Leshkova, the widow of Mikhail Le-Dantyu (a member of the Target group). Larionov wrote Leshkova several letters asking her to send him photographs of works by Goncharova, Le-Dantyu, and himself for publication in France. In September of 1925 Leshkova sent the artist a chilling response in which she recounted with grim detail and flourish the misery of Soviet Petrograd. 'Don't forget,' she reminded him 'our country has undergone a revolution, after which not a stone has been left standing.' (Tretyakov Gallery, Manuscript Section. Fund 180. Letter from O. I. Leshkova to M. F. Larionov, 5 September 1925.) In 1927 Goncharova also received a letter from art historian Nikolai Punin that must have been very troubling. Punin was in Japan organising an exhibition of Russian art and used the opportunity to send Goncharova a request for photos and information related to the poet Nikolai Gumilev, because, as he said 'to write about Gumilev from Russia is difficult'. Further, Punin requests that when Goncharova replies to his request, she should never mention Gumilev's name, but refer to him only as 'N. S.' (Tretyakov Gallery. Manuscript Section. Fund 180. Letter from N. N. Punin to N. S. Goncharova. 7 July 1927.) This may very well have been a stark wake-up call for the couple, who had befriended the Acmeist poet (and husband of Anna Akhmatova) in Paris in 1917. Gumilev, of course, is well-known as the first artistic luminary executed by the Bolsheviks in 1921.