**Silver Age (Серебряный век)**

The term “The Silver Age” is usually associated with a period of Russian culture (1880s-1917) characterised by many scholars as a spectacular renaissance in art and literature which also produced many theatrical innovators. During the Silver Age Russia became known as one of the most exciting centres for progressive theatre, drama and performance. Men like Konstantin STANISLAVSKY, Vsevolod MEYERHOLD, Nikolai EVREINOV and Sergei DIAGHILEV achieved recognition outside Russia and enabled Russian theatre to win respect in the West for the first time. Russian modernists’ elevation of art to the status of secular religion and their emphasis on individual creativity enabled many talented women to transgress the boundaries of traditional roles and profit from the trend toward professionalisation in Russia. The achievements of women in Silver Age literature, art and theatre were immense. Many famous artists, poets, writers, ballet dancers and actresses (including Vera KOMISSARZHEVSKAYA, Anna PAVLOVA, Anna AKHMATOVA, Marina TSVETAEVA, Natalia GONCHAROVA and Zinaida GIPPIUS) became celebrities in Russia and in the West due to the cosmopolitan and innovative spirit of this period which encouraged a close collaboration with western artists, directors, playwrights and actors. The popularity of Sarah Bernhardt’s performances, Gordon Craig’s productions, Marie Bashkirtseff’s diary, Oscar Wilde’s works and Henrik Ibsen’s plays in Russia during the Silver Age evidences the fact that the Russian audience was keen to embrace new ideas and challenges to traditional sex/gender ideology associated with Russian Orthodoxy and patriarchal values.

Jean Cocteau’s poster

for Les Ballets russes

(1909)

**Definition**

The expression “The Silver Age” became very popular in the 1950s and 60s as a designation for a body of literary and artistic works associated with RUSSIAN MODERNISM. In the post-Soviet period “Silver Age” often appears as a term synonymous with Russian modernist culture of the 1880s-1930s, despite the fact that some scholars (such as Maria Carlson) describe it as a period associated with *fin-de-siècle* Russian cultural development that took place 1880-1914. The popularity of this definition was reinforced by its inclusion in the title of several anthologies and studies, including Sergei Makovsky’s 1962 book of memoirs *On the Parnassus of the Silver Age* (*Na Parnase Serebrianogo veka*); Carl Proffer’s 1975 anthology *The Silver Age of Russian Culture*; John Bowlt’s 1979 book *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early 20th Century and the “World of Art” Group* and his 2008 study *Moscow & St. Petersburg 1900-1920: Art, Life, & Culture of the Russian Silver Age*; Boris Gasparov’s and Irina Paperno’s 1992 collection of articles *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age*; and Galina Rylkova’s 2007 book *The Archaeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and Its Legacy.* According to Rylkova “[t]he term is often employed to denote loosely a period in Russian cultural evolution that ended with the advent of the Bolsheviks in 1917.” Given the fact that the Silver Age has inspired many works of fiction and memoirs written in the 1920s and 30s, it would be difficult to restrict the usage of this term to the pre-revolutionary period. Clearly, it cast its shadow over the subsequent decades and inspired many authors to conceptualise its main tenets in their essays and memoirs.

**Origins**

It is not clear whether the term “Silver Age” was coined by Nikolai Otsup, Sergei Makovsky, Vladimir Piast, Vladimir Veidle or Nikolai Berdiaev. Makovsky attributes this term to Berdiaev and suggests that it was invented in order to juxtapose a period characterised by a longing for the transcendent, to the Golden Age associated with the era of Alexander Pushkin. It seems that Berdiaev’s comment (published in the third issue of the émigré journal *Milestones* (Versty), 1928) on the Russian artistic renaissance of the beginning of the twentieth century, which was manifested in exciting philosophical, artistic, literary and mystical developments, was mistaken for a description of aestheticism and decadence which implies the existence of the Silver Age of Russian culture. In his 1929 book of memoirs *Encounters* (*Vstrechi*), Piast (Pestovskii, Vladimir Alekseevich, 1886-1940) – Russian Symbolist poet and one of the first biographers of Aleksandr Blok (1880-1921) – offers an innovative model of the succession of literary generations in Russia, in accordance with which Russian nineteenth-century poets and writers become divided into two groups. Piast lists Aleksandr Pushkin, Evgeny Boratynsky, Nikolai Iazykov, Fedor Tiutchev and other less famous poets born approximately in the 1800s as the representatives of the Golden Age. In Piast’s view, the post-Pushkin era poets should be classified as the authors belonging to the Silver Age of Russian poetry.

The most comprehensive discussion of the Silver Age can be found in Vladimir Veidle’s 1937 article “Three Russias” published in the sixty-fifth issue of the émigré journal *Contemporary Annals* (*Sovremennye zapiski*). Veidle writes: “The most striking in the modern history of Russia is that the silver age of Russian culture which preceded its revolutionary wreck turned out to be possible at all. Although this age did not last long, only about twenty years, and was exclusively and entirely built by those Russian people who did not belong either to the intelligentsia […], or to the bureaucracy […], the bureaucracy together with the intelligentsia partly ignored it and partly treated with unconcealed hostility. Admittedly, its brightness, as befits the ages of silver, was to a certain degree, a reflected one: its thought and its taste turned toward the past and toward the remote; its architecture was retrospective, and all of its art bore an imprint of stylisation, of the admiration for the alien; its poetry (and literature in general), in spite of its outward novelty, lived off the heritage of the preceding century; it did not create as much as it resurrected and rediscovered.” Nikolai Otsup’s 1933 essay “The Silver Age of Russian Poetry,” included into his posthumously published collection of essays *Contemporaries* (*Sovremenniki*, 1961), equates the term with Russian modernist literature and talks about three main features of this movement such as: the breadth and grandeur of its aesthetic tasks; the high tragic intensity of its poetry; prose marked by the orientation towards prophetic discourse; and the highly crafted literary output characterized by the perfection of form. In Otsup’s opinion, although the Silver Age emerged around the 1880s, such writers as Lev Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov should be seen as products of the Golden Age.

According to Boris Gasparov’s 2011 article “Poetry of the Silver Age,” the term “Silver Age” refers to the period of early and high modernism, lasting from the 1890s until the 1917 October revolution. In his opinion, it is inseparable from its idealist philosophical revolution whose influence was especially strongly felt in art and poetry. Gasparov states that the image of the Silver Age which “lay dormant in the collective memory for almost half of the century” was immortalized in Anna AKHMATOVA’s “Poem without a Hero” (“Poema bez geroia,” published in 1965): it describes the silver moon “hovering brightly over the Silver Age.” More importantly, Gasparov identifies a nostalgic lingering towards the Golden Age of the 1800s-1830s as a period of unsurpassable harmony. He writes that: “Against the backdrop of the Golden Age’s absolute ‘harmony,’ the new age cast itself as cursed with self-reflection, torn apart by contradicting passions, willing to go to any length in exploring the heights of the sublime and the depths of the vice, while simultaneously exalted and desperate about its own wretchedness.”

Yury Annensky’s

Portrait of Anna

Akhmatova, 1921-23

**Symbolist Aesthetics and the Silver Age**

SYMBOLISM was the dominant artistic movement of the Silver Age and, as such, its aesthetics left an indelible mark on the era. Gasparov points to the diversity of this period and identifies the year 1910 as an important dividing point between Symbolism and post-Symbolism. The latter includes various groups of artists and poets such as FUTURISTS, Ego-Futurists, Imaginists, and ACMEISTS. The Russian Symbolist movement comprises an elder and younger generation of poets and thinkers. The elder stage is usually associated with such poets, critics, fiction writers and thinkers as Dmitry MEREZHKOVSKY, Valery BRIUSOV, Zinaida GIPPIUS and Konstantin BALMONT. The second wave of this movement is linked to the activities of such leading figures as Viacheslav IVANOV, Andrei BELY, Aleksandr BLOK and Maksimilian VOLOSHIN. Gasparov identifies three major influences on Russian Symbolism’s philosophical and aesthetic concerns: Charles Baudelaire’s poetry, Friedrich Nietzsche’s notion of the eternal return and Richard Wagner’s music that explores mythopoeic aspects of the creative self. The lyrical subject of Symbolist poetry is preoccupied with transcendent moments in life that enable him to overcome the contradictions of everyday life and his fragmented self. Symbolist culture is also characterised by its urbane and cosmopolitan character. Most Symbolist poets felt at home in Renaissance Italy, ancient Rome and ancient Greece. Some of their collections of poetry were given exotic titles (mostly Latin): thus Briusov’s publications include books bearing these titles: *Tertia Vigilia* (1900), *Urbi et Orbi* (1903), *Stephanos* (1905), and *Rea Silvia* (1916). Both Merezhkovsky and Briusov wrote historical novels featuring the Middle Ages, ancient Rome and Renaissance Europe, and explored in their works such popular topics as pagan beliefs and the occult. Briusov’s 1908 novel *The Fiery Angel* (*Ognennyi angel*), set in 16th-century Germany, portrays a love triangle between Renata, Ruprecht (a knight) and Madiel, the fiery Angel. It incorporates historical details with extensive descriptions of occult activities in Cologne. Briusov’s novel served as a basis for Sergei Prokofiev’s opera *The Fiery Angel* (1919–27). It is partly autobiographical because it was inspired by a love triangle featuring Briusov, Nina Petrovskaia and Andrey Bely. To this end, it corresponds to the general tendency of this period to turn private life into artifact. As Vladislav KHODASEVICH’s 1939 book of memoirs *Necropolis* (*Nekropol’*) points out, Symbolism “did not want to be merely an artistic school, a literary movement” and it continually “strove to become a life-creating method.”

Leon Bakst’s portrait

Of Sergei Diaghilev,

1906.

Khodasevich’s words are applicable to the whole modernist movement in Russia, especially because of Silver Age poets’ strong interest in myth and the mythopoeic aspects of literary activity. Just like their European counterparts, Russian modernists embraced the notion of simultaneity discussed extensively in the works of the French psychologist and philosopher Henri Bergson. According to Hilary Fink’s 1999 pioneering study on the reception of Bergson’s ideas in Russia, “the most important reason for Bergson’s popularity in Russia in the early twentieth century was that Bergson’s pronouncements on the active role of artistic intuition in the process of life-creation and participation in existence satisfied the Russian modernist desire to unite word and world.” Michel Foucault’s explanation that while “the great obsession of the nineteenth century was history,” the twentieth century “may be viewed as the age of space instead” also illuminates how Russian poetic manifestations of time and memory “in an era of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the scattered” were closely associated with the Bergsonian belief in the diminishing role of chronological depiction of events and the coexistence of several temporal dimensions that could be easily grasped by artists. That is why, as Gasparov rightly pinpoints, Briusov’s subject “appears more interested in grasping ‘moments’ (*migi*) of transcendent vision than in representational phenomena that might trigger them.” Many Symbolists became interested in theosophy, magic, ancient rituals and beliefs, as well as in primitive cultures. Thus, for example, Balmont’s 1912 travels to Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Polynesia (including Fiji, Samoa and Tonga) resulted in the publications of several poetic adaptations of Maori and Polynesian legends and fairy tales. Balmont’s poetic explorations of primitive cultures sought to establish a universalist aspect of human psychology and creativity. Likewise, Nikolai Roerikh’s 1912 painting “Forefathers” – which served as a sketch for the opening of Igor Stravinsky’s infamous 1913 ballet *The Rite of Spring* – presents an Orpheus-like primitive man who charms with his piping a circle of bears, alluding to the ancient Slavic belief that bears were man’s forefathers.

The younger generation of Symbolists remained dedicated to cosmopolitan and metaphysical issues but their outlook was shaped largely by their belief in a mystical Russian mission and the radical spiritual transformation of life. Gasparov points to the importance of Ivanov’s Dionysian view of Russian culture for the younger generation of Russian Symbolists. He writes: “Ivanov hailed Dionysus as the ‘Slavic god’ […], viewing his confrontation with the indigenously Hellenic Apollo as a prototype of the challenge to Western rationalism by proponents of the ‘Russian idea’ like Dostoevsky and Vladimir Soloviev.” Ivanov’s plays *Tantalus* (1905) and *Prometheus* evidence the renewal of Dionysian drama.

The abstract other-worldliness reflected in Ivanov’s language became replaced in the 1910s by the vivid depiction of the physical world exemplified by the poetry of Aleksandr Blok and the Russian Acmeists. The notion of the Eternal Feminine was one of the most popular topics of the 1910s. Some scholars link its representation in Blok’s poem “The Unknown Woman” (“Neznakomka,” 1906) to the theme of the theatricality of modern life and the use of the images of Harlequinades related to the Italian tradition of commedia dell’arte. Folk sources and religious traditions (such as hagiography) also became appropriated by Russian modernists in the 1900s-1910s: Mikhail KUZMIN’s play *On Alexis, Man of God* (1907) and Aleksei REMIZOV’s drams *Devil’s Comedy* (1907) and *The Tragedy of Judas, Prince of Iscariot* (1908) embody these tendencies very well.

**Post-Symbolist Influences on the Silver Age**

1910 is considered to be the year associated with the crisis of Symbolism. Around this time Nikolai Gumilev emerged as a leader of a small group of young poets related to Acmeism. Acmeists were opposed to the Symbolists’ obsession with abstract, irrational and metaphysical aspects of poetic expression. According to Osip MANDELSTAM’s article “The Morning of Acmeism,” this new school was preoccupied with the yearning for world culture and appropriation of diverse cultural chronotopes. Likewise, Anna Akhmatova’s lyric subject engages with a diverse variety of situations and roles borrowed from Ancient Greek texts, European medieval literature, and the Bible. The orientation towards intertextuality and role-playing is also felt in the poetry of Russian Futurists and Cubo-Futurists, including Vladimir MAYAKOVSKY and Velimir KHLEBNIKOV. Yet their works were characterised by radical experiments with trans-rational language (zaum’) and vigorous attacks against established conventions and customs. Marina TSVETAEVA and Boris PASTERNAK shared many of the concerns of Russian Futurists related to the transformation of reality into the sensations of a hypersensitive creative self. Yet their poetry features a submission of the self to the dynamic force of the world and presents the new humility of the creative self in the face of historical change. Tsvetaeva’s 1928 collection of poetry *After Russia* (*Posle Rossii*) represents a successful synthesis of many styles found in the poetry of the Silver Age. According to Michael Naydan, its translator into English, the collection resembles a chronicle, especially owing to its extensive allusions to such historical chronicles as The Bible and Homer’s *The Iliad*. Simon Karlinsky also praises this book for its neoclassical tendencies. In one of her most striking poetic cycles, *Wires* (*Provoda*), addressed to Pasternak, Tsvetaeva speaks of the crisis of representation in the late 1920s, suggesting that the language employed in the works of Racine and Shakespeare is incapable of expressing her shock at the fragmented world of modernity to which she belongs. Arguably, Tsvetaeva’s volume implies the rejection of the Silver Age as a time of excess, experimentation and individualism, mapping a new direction for the construction of the creative self through poetry. The reception of the Silver Age has now become an important topic in scholarship, thanks to attempts to appropriate and mythologise the era by leading Thaw generation authors and filmmakers. While scholars like Rylkova argue that the “the Silver Age has finally come to occupy its rightful place in the landscape of Russian culture”, others believe that readers are still offered a hybridised version of this artistic period, as seen through the filter of its successors in the 1960s. The place of the Silver Age in Russian culture remains a contested topic.

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Images:

Several posters featuring Diaghilev’s ballets: <http://turnofthecentury.tumblr.com/post/4386754056/jean-cocteau-met-serge-diaghilev-in-1909-and>

<http://blog.visitlondon.com/2010/09/diaghilev-and-the-ballet-russes-at-the-va/>

Akhmatova’s portraits:

<http://www.pravmir.ru/anna-axmatova-galereya-portretov-foto/>

Leon Bakst’s works: <http://arktal.livejournal.com/30398.html?thread=197054>