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| World of Art (МИР ИССКУСТВА) |
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| Born in St. Petersburg on the threshold of the 20th century, the World of Art group of artists, writers, and musicians was a primary representative of the Russian Silver Age, supporting the Symbolist notions of artistic sythesism, independence of the work of art from social and political prerequisites, the organic interdependence of the fine and applied arts, and the artist’s right to appreciate and interpret ideas and motifs from many cultures, past and present, east and west, primitive and sophisticated. Led by Sergei Diaghilev, internationally acclaimed for his creation and supervision of the Ballets Russes (1909–1929), the World of Art published its own deluxe art review (1898–1904), organized exhibitions both at home and abroad, and made every attempt to place modern Russian culture in its European context.  To this end, the review published illustrations of French Post-Impressionism and the English Arts and Crafts movement, essays on Richard Wagner, translations of French poetry and drama, and reports on cultural life in Moscow, Paris, London, and elsewhere. |
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To this end, the review published illustrations of French Post-Impressionism and the English Arts and Crafts movement, essays on Richard Wagner, translations of French poetry and drama, and reports on cultural life in Moscow, Paris, London, and elsewhere. Leading members of the World of Art included the artists Léon Bakst, Alexandre Benois, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Evgenii Lanceray, and Nicholas Roerich, the writers Konstantin Balmont, Andrei Bely, and Aleksandr Blok, and the musicians Nicholas Medtner and Alfred Nourok. The World of Art continued as an exhibition society in Russia until 1924.  The title World of Art (*Mir iskusstva*) subsumes a variety of phenomena and activities, especially the magazine of the name (*Mir iskusstva,* St. Petersburg, 1898-1904) and the cycle of art exhibitions (1899-1906, St. Petersburg and Moscow) as well as the loosely-knit membership consisting of artists, writers, musicians, and performers who, in championing the principle of ‘art for art’s sake’, hoped for a rebirth of Russian culture.  File: Pamphlet.jpg  Figure 2 Promotional pamphlet for the journal *World of Art* by Leon Bakst, 1903.  Led by Sergei Diaghilev, a lawyer by training and an impresario by vocation, a man of remarkable aesthetic perspicacity and social malleability, a talented singer and author, the associates of the World of Art coalesced as a recognizable group in the late 1890s, developing from their preceding and somewhat casual group known as the Nevsky Pickwickians. Convinced that Russian culture was on the threshold of a renaissance and that the humanities should be above the dictates of socio-political reality, the founding members of the World Art such as Alexandre Benois (Aleksandr Benua), Diaghilev, and Konstantin Somov argued that Russian art, in particular, deserved to be a principal component of European culture. They felt that Russia’s new poetry, music, and painting could best be promoted via prestigious publications and exhibitions and ensured that their journal and their exhibitions were versatile and polyphonic, promoting both Russian and Western movements such as Impressionism, Art Nouveau, and Jugendstil, articles and illustrations concerning modern English book design, the national schools of Scandinavia and Germany, modern French, Italian, and Spanish painting alongside the decorative productions of Abramtsevo and Talashkino, exhibition reviews of Benois and Diaghilev, vignettes of Leon Bakst (Lev Rozenberg) and Somov, and photographic reproductions of paintings and designs by Ivan Bilibin, Sergei Maliutin, Elena Polenova, Viktor Vasnetsov, Mikhail Vrubel’, Mariia Yakunchikova, and a host of other modern Russian artists.  Joined by other artistic talents such as Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Evgenii Lanceray, Anna Ostroumova, and Nicholas Roerich, the World of Art group concentrated on the applied or minor arts, refurbishing the traditions of engraving and xylography, the applied arts (porcelain, architecture, book illustration, furniture), and the less glamorous media of the watercolor and the drawing. Contesting the primacy of realism and the didactic picture, the *miriskussniki* criticized the Wanderers such as Ilya Repin and their supporters such as Vladimir Stasov, and, instead, called for scrupulous technique, linear elegance, artistry, and good taste – after what Diaghilev regarded as the vulgarity of the nineteenth century. In this respect, the World of Art magazine, with its handsome covers, chromolithographic reproductions, rice paper insets, and fine amalgams of text and image, upheld the values of aesthetic grace, sense of measure, and formal beauty – as did the exhibitions, even if, at the 1906 exhibition names from the emergent avant-garde such as David Burliuk and Mikhail Larionov were included among the contributors. True, from a social standpoint the World of Art artists were not especially radical, content with the assured life of the bourgeois intelligentsia, and their art was informed as much by bygone cultures, especially 17th and 18th century France (e.g., Versailles) and the Russian portrait painters under Catherine the Great (e.g., Dmitrii Levitsky), as by contemporary developments. Consequently, for the most part, the World of Art members retained an aloofness from the minutiae of every day, even though the 1905 revolution did inspire Bilibin and Dobuzhinsky, for example, to offer their cartoons and caricatures to the service of politics, criticizing the Tsarist regime in underground journals such as *Polumet* and *Zhupel.*  If, for the World of Art, the visual arts were of primary interest, the journal also served as a keen literary review, publishing poems and prose by contemporary authors such as Aleksandr Blok, Andrei Bely, Valerii Briusov, Dmitrii Filosofov, Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, and Vasilii Rozanov and, thereby, supporting and disseminating the culture and philosophy of the Symbolist movement. Furthermore, the World of Art also gave considerable attention to music and the performing arts, running reviews of Wagner’s operas, the Imperial ballet, and various concert engagements in Russia and abroad. In other words, the World of Art represented a plurality of styles, ideas, and personalities, for, as Filosofov claimed, ‘it was a cult of dilettantism in the good and true sense of the word’.[[1]](#footnote-1)  The World of Art did not issue a loud manifesto or exclusive declaration of intent and, while its activities were fundamental to the Russian Silver Age, it would be misleading to treat the society as a component of the avant-garde, even if it was intolerant of the jejune art of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts and the narrative painting of the realists — and, certainly neither Benois, nor Diaghilev, were reticent in their condemnations of vulgarity and superfluity, the latter referring to the ‘anti-artistic canvases[[2]](#footnote-2) of the Wanderers. On the other hand, perhaps the lack of a single, exclusive program enabled the World of Art to attract so many artists and writers, to regroup as an incorporated exhibition society in 1910 (organizing regular exhibitions until 1924), and to initiate a number of extra-mural events that confirmed and emphasized its basic principles. Among these was Diaghilev’s organization of the Russian section for the ‘Salon d’Automne’ in Paris in 1906, in which he included both medieval and contemporary Russian art, the ‘Historical and Artistic Exhibition of Russian Portraits’ which he organized at the Tauride Palace in St. Petersburg in 1905 (an enormous panorama of Russia’s eighteenth and nineteenth century aristocratic and celebrity portraits), and the many allied publications such as the series of Russian fairy tales illustrated by Bilibin published by the State Department for the Preparation of State Papers. But, above all, it was the Ballets Russes that Diaghilev inaugurated in Paris in 1909 that both continued and expanded the World of Art initiative and remained its most enduring and effective monument. Not only did the company offer Bakst, Benois, Dobuzhinsky, Roerich and other World of Art painters in the capacity of stage designers to European and American publics and promoted some of the most distinguished Russian dancers of the twentieth century such as Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky, but it also combined Russian and Western music in the repertoire and, if an extension of the Russian World of Art, performed exclusively in the West, never in Russia.   The World of Art also existed briefly as a titled exhibition group in Paris during the 1920s, attracting younger members such as Simon Lissim, who maintained its esthetic, decorative style. But after the division of the group into those who stayed in Russia (Ostroumova, Lanceray) and those who emigrated (Bakst, Benois, Dobuzhinsky, Somov), and with the passing of Diaghilev in 1929 and the closure of the Ballets Russes, the World of Art lost its rationale and momentum.  File: SkatingRink.jpg  Figure 3 *Konstantin Somov, Winter, The Skating Rink, 1915.*  During the Soviet period the accomplishments of the group were maligned or disregarded and only with Richard Buckle’s Diaghilev exhibition in Edinburgh and London in 1954 was some of its former glory rediscovered.[[3]](#footnote-3) |
| Further reading:  (Bowlt)  (Kennedy)  (Petrov)  (Petrova)  (Petrova, The World of Art)  (Bowlt, Moscow and St. Petersburg, 1900–1920. Art, Life and Culture of the Russian Silver Age)  (Scheijen) |

1. D. Filosofov. Quoted in A. Grishchenko and N. Lavrsky: *A. Shevchenko*, M: NKP, 1919, p. 3, where original source is not given. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. S. Diaghilev (1897). Quoted in N. Sokolova: *Mir iskusstva*, Moscow-Leningrad: Gosizdat izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv, 1934, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See R. Buckle: *The Diaghilev Exhibition*. Catalog of the exhibition at the Edinburgh Festival, 1954. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)