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| **Natalia Sergeevna Goncharova (1881-1962)** |
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| One of the most talented and prolific of 20th-century Russian artists, Natalia Goncharova was not only a leading member of the Russian avant-garde in the years before the First World War but also achieved widespread recognition afterwards for her work as a stage designer for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. As a painter she was a leading exponent of neo-primitivism but subsequently engaged in abstraction and Rayonism, becoming one of the first non-objective artists in Russia. |
| One of the most talented and prolific of 20th-century Russian artists, Natalia Goncharova was not only a leading member of the Russian avant-garde in the years before the First World War but also achieved widespread recognition afterwards for her work as a stage designer for Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. As a painter she was a leading exponent of neo-primitivism but subsequently engaged in abstraction and Rayonism, becoming one of the first non-objective artists in Russia. Baptized by the press as a ‘Russian Futurist’, Goncharova participated in avant-garde theatre, film and public debates and engaged in the practice of face-painting as a means to *épater le bourgeois*. In 1913 her one-woman retrospective exhibition in Moscow attracted the attention of Serge Diaghilev who invited her to make designs for his production of *Le coq d’or* in Paris in 1914. A year later she committed herself to a career in stage design, joined the Diaghilev company in Switzerland, and never returned to Russia. In Paris in the 1920s and 1930s she became a well known easel painter, graphic artist, fashion designer and stage designer. She die in Paris in 1962.  Natalia Goncharova was born in Tula Province, Russia, in 1881 and spent her childhood on her grandmother’s estate where she was caprivated by the life and culture of the Russian peasantry, later a subject of fundamental importance in her work. She trained at the Moscow School of Art where she met Mikhail Larionov, her partner and life-long colleague. Her earliest works were executed in an Impressionist style but from 1908 on she became increasingly interested in the work of Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse and the *Fauves* and emulated their example. During 1910 Goncharova gradually moved beyond French modernism and engaged in a distinctly Russian form of expressionist painting known as Neo-primitivism. Early masterpieces in the style include *Washing Linen* (Moscow: State Tretiakov Gallery), *Spring Gardening* (London: Tate Modern) and *The Evangelists* (St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum) all of 1910. Goncharova deployed Neo-primitivism as a weapon in a war of cultural politics waged against the polite and refined standards of the *status quo* and her works were considered highly controversial. Her apogee as a Neo-primitive painter was achieved in 1911-12 when she completed two series of apocalypitc paintings: *The Harvest* and *The Vintage* (component paintings diversely located).  As a woman artist Goncharova was keenly aware of the limitations placed upon women in her society and many of her works reflect upon those limitations and adopted strategies to breach them. *The Breadseller* of 1910 (Paris: MNAM) and *Loom + Woman*  of 1912 (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales) both expose, in different ways, the fact that women were victims of economic, social and cultural forces beyond their control. In her own practice Goncharova challenged the limitations placed on women artists. In *The Wrestlers* of 1910 (Paris: MNAM) she painted in a raw, expressive and masculine manner whilst in her religious works she challenged the Orthodox convention that only men could paint holy images.  During 1912 Goncharova became aware of Futurism and Analytical Cubism and began to explore abstraction in works such as *Woman in Hat* (Paris: MNAM). She also adopted Larionov’s style of Rayonism and executed a remarkable series Rayonist landscape and seascape paintings such as *Blue and Green Forest* of 1913 (New York: MOMA). Shortly after Goncharova broke through into non-objectivity in works such as *Void* (Moscow: State Tretiakov Gallery) which explore the expressive power of pure colour, line and texture. She played a key role at this time in the development of Russian Futurism starring, for example, in the very first avant-garde film *Drama in the Futurists’ Cabaret No.* 13 (Dir. Vladimir Kasianov, Moscow, 1913). Goncharova may be considered, alongside Larionov, the leader of the artistic avant-garde in Russia in the years before the First World War.  In 1914 Goncharova achieved remarkable public success in Paris with her designs for Diaghilev’s balletic production of *Le coq d’or*, which were executed in a vibrant Neo-primitive style. This led to a long collaboration with Diaghilev and Goncharova subsequently made designs for the ballets *Sadko* (1916), *Les noces* (1923) and *L’oiseau de feu* (1926) in which she began to reconfigure tradtional approaches to stage design. On tour with Diaghilev in Spain in 1916 she was excited by the vivacity and colour of Spanish culture and in the years that followed she executed an extensive series of paintngs on the theme of the *Espagnole* (e.g. Paris: MNAM). Goncharova continued to work in the theatre after Diaghilev’s death making designs for scores of ballets, operas and plays becoming one of the most respected and best known of twentieth-century stage designers. In these years she also remained a committed easel artist and enjoyed success as a graphic designer and Art Deco fashion and textile designer working for Parisian *haute-couture* houses such as Salon Myrbor. In the economically stringent times of the 1930s she returned to naturalism in her painterly work but concluded her career in 1958 with an innovatory series of non-objective works entitled *Espace* (e.g. Paris: MNAM) that celebrated the advent of space-travel. |
| Further reading:  (Bazetoux)  (Bowlt)  (Eganbiuri)  (Chamot)  (Chamot, Goncharova: Stage Designs and Paintings)  (Kemfert and Chilova)  (Kovtun)  (Kramer)  (Loguine)  (Musee National d'Art Moderne)  (Parton)  (Russian Museum in St. Petersburg)  (Sharp)  (Tretiakov Gallery) |