

LOOKING
AT IMAGES

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Exhibition *Paris-Moscow, 1900-1930*

Introduction

One of the most interesting and challenging examples of cultural diplomacy during the Cold War can be observed in the organization and execution of the exhibition *Paris-Moscow, 1900-1930* displayed in 1979 at the National Museum of Modern Art located in the Centre Pompidou in Paris. This exhibit aimed at showing the cross-influences characterizing the French and Russian vanguards at the rise of Modern art. It displayed *The Black Square* of Malevich, posters from Moor, letters from Osip Mandelstam, porcelain plates designed by Adamovich, chairs made by Rodchenko, tables made by Le Corbusier, Tatlin's Tower—rebuilt from scratch— movies from Vertov, and clothes created by Sonia Delaunay. Two thousand five hundred works of art and documents were displayed. It also highlighted the emergence of Russian symbolism, suprematism, futurism, and constructivism. Through a series of crucial theoretical and aesthetic documents, in addition to the works of art on display, the exhibition demonstrated how the Soviet vanguards broke with the artistic languages of the past and, simultaneously, offered new concepts for organizing an uncertain and emerging way of life. Not only did the Parisian and Russian avant-gardes fundamentally change the vocabulary of expressive means, but they also transformed the very understanding of the material environment and its social potentialities. In 1981, the exact same exhibit was displayed in Moscow.

The French team requested paintings, books or documents that were long banned and forbidden in the USSR. Nevertheless, the French and the Soviet teams managed to produce a challenging exhibition that lasted as one of the major exhibitions of the Centre Pompidou. This extraordinary exhibition raises some questions. How could such a striking and innovative project succeed and take place during the Cold War? Why was the Soviet Union ready to compromise with a Western country?

I claim that throughout this exhibition, cultural diplomacy is embodied in the content of the curation. What is perhaps the most interesting form of cultural diplomacy is in the very fact that the curator presentation of the works of art highlighted moments of cultural diplomacy. First we must briefly consider the general setting of the exhibition. An exhibition between France and the USSR could only take place thanks to previously strong and well-established political frames and diplomatic governmental structures. The Centre Pompidou and the French curatorial teams also played important roles as triggering elements. Second, the innovative aspect of this cultural alternative is embodied in the content of the exhibition and the art of placement itself. It culminated in a bold claim that relations between Russian, Soviet and French artists between 1900 and 1930 were responsible for Modern Art itself.

To attempt to answer these questions, more than two hundred and fifty pictures of the exhibition found in the archives of the Centre Pompidou have been used. It is the very first time that these pictures are used as archives and images to understand the curation of the exhibition.

The General Setting of the Exhibition

The Cold War did not prevent France and the USSR from having rich and developed cultural relations. In the '70s, a range of cultural events between France and the USSR were organized. In 1976, in Paris, at the Grand Palais, an exhibition was displayed: *Russian Painting and Romanticism*; this was followed in 1978 by the exhibition *Realism and Poetry in Russian Paintings*. In 1979, French curators displayed exhibitions in Moscow about French Paintings between 1909 and 1930, and an exhibition about the Walter Guillaume Collection in 1981. Such cultural events were common and organized around a clearly articulated set of rules during the seventies. The French President Valéry Giscard D'Estaing maintained a privileged relationship with the Soviet Union and created a diplomatic context that favored unique cultural exchanges with Eastern Europe. In November 1975, the French newspaper *Le Figaro* published an interview with the French President saying that he didn't intend to alter the soviet system but was willing instead to have peaceful and normal relations with Eastern Europe

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. This political stance, characterized by understanding and openness, was reinforced by official treaties and cultural cooperation. Artistic activities, ballet, fairs, circuses, theatrical plays, movie screenings and exhibitions were organized between France and the USSR.

If the President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing was willing to build cultural bridges between his country and the Soviet Union, the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was ready to do the same. Indeed, and especially after the Helsinki Conference in 1975, the '70s in the USSR were marked by an attempt to broaden its relations to the West.

Nevertheless, even if they played an important role in creating the necessary political and diplomatic frame, official governmental agents were not the only ones acting in favor of increasing cultural exchanges between Western and Eastern Europe. The Centre Pompidou played a major role in the setting up of international exhibitions. Created in 1975, the Centre Pompidou was characterized by its modernity and originality. This new cultural institution defied every other traditional form of cultural institution in France at the time, in terms of architecture but also internal organization. From the moment of its inception, the Centre Pompidou has been a unique, modern, innovative, and independent institution. Between 1977 and 1981, the National Museum of Modern Art freely defined its policy, which was marked by the pursuit of international partners and modern innovations. Four major exhibitions were displayed during those four years: *Paris-New York*, *Paris-Berlin*, *Paris-Moscow* and *Paris-Paris*. They were all decided by the Director of the museum, Pontus Hulten, who was fascinated by cultural exchanges transgressing boundaries. Therefore, he was constantly looking for international partners to set up exhibitions.

The Content of the Exhibition

A closer study of the content of the exhibition points out how the content of the exhibition in itself was a means to cultivate transnational identities between Paris and Moscow. The main idea conducting the exhibition relied on the assumption that the relations between Paris and Moscow between 1900 and 1930 gave birth to Modern Art. It is within the frame of those artistic exchanges and creative dialogues and interactions that the history of art transformed. This dialogue between France and Russia and the USSR is embodied in the display of the works of art observed throughout the pictures from the archives. As there is always an interaction between what is displayed and how it is displayed and as placement always affects perception and meaning, it is crucial to study the link between the presentation and the works of art in *Paris-Moscow*.

The French and Soviet curators claimed that the first exchanges between French and Russian vanguards were mainly due to Russian art merchants and patrons. Sergei Diaghilev, creator of the Russian Ballets and famous Russian art critic, gave his ballets in Paris and presented the Parisian artistic life to some young Russian painters. Bask, Benois, Roehrich, Korovin and Goncharova took part in this experiment. Going back to Russia, Diaghilev brought back samples of the French symbolist movement called "Art nouveau". Apart from the figure of Diaghilev, Russian art merchants played a crucial role in the exchanges between French and Russian artists. Indeed, to name only the two most famous, Ivan Morozov and Sergei Shchukin had a tremendous collection of French paintings. This incredible passion for French artists led them to own more than three hundred and fifty French paintings, from Monet's to Picasso's, and in 1911 Matisse made the paintings *La*

Danse and *La Musique* for Shchukin's house in Moscow. Russian artists became attracted by Paris. They emigrated to the city and created an "Ecole russe" there. Exhibits were frequently organized between the two capitals and Matisse, Picasso, Gleizes, Léger, Le Fauconnier, Derain, Vlaminck and Gris met and bonded with Malevich, Kandinsky, Larionov, Popova, Lentoulov, Machkov, Kontchalovski and Falk. This dialogue is represented by a display that favors the placement of French and Russian works of art in mirror, facing each other, responding to each other.

Here are two pictures of the reproduction of a French and a Russian salon at the end of the 19th Century. The parallel between the two is highlighted by the fact that they were facing each other in the room. Those two salons also resemble the salons of the patrons which stresses out the role they played in the development of the artistic exchanges between the two cultures.



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour

This other picture shows on the left side a sculpture from the French sculptor Maillol, on the right side, facing it, two paintings and three sculptures of Russian painter Vroubel and in the middle of the room, in between Vroubel and Maillol, there is a large panel called *La Méditerranée* made by French artist Pierre Bonnard but paid and ordered by Russian patron Morozov. The artistic dialogues between the two countries are made clear in this room.



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour

The parallel between the French and Russian artists is also shown throughout architecture and literature. The curators insisted on using every artistic medium they could find. It led them to create a multi-disciplinary exhibition.



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour

The title of the room “ARCHITECTURE RUSSIE FRANCE 1900 1917” insists on the parallel between the two countries.

By 1913, the Russian vanguard had assimilated and surpassed the French avant-garde. Artists such as Larionov, Goncharova, Tatlin and Malevich explored rayonism and suprematism. The exchanges increased between the “Ecole russe” in Paris and the Vasilieff Academy, and Archipenko, Chagall, Soutine, Survage, Larionov, Zadine, Lipchitz met Parisian artists in Montmartre and La Ruche. This outstanding detachment of the Soviet schools is made visible during the exhibition by displaying the Soviet works of art separated from the French ones:



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour

The exhibition was divided into two distinctive parts. The first part concerned the period running from 1900 to 1917 and the second one, from 1917 to 1930. The fracture was represented by the October Revolution. The central place between those two parts was a rotunda with Tatlin’s Tower and the agit-prop posters, plates, clothes and photographs. The works of art displayed in this section highlighted the cultural, social and political hopes of the first years of the Soviet regime. Those works of art were the symbol of the Communist utopia. The Soviet vanguards dedicated every form of art to the building of a new society. They decorated trains, buildings, bridges, monuments, boats and windows with revolutionary and propaganda art. They used windows of empty shops to display propaganda posters in

Rosta windows. Their works of art reflected the enthusiasm of the artists before the censorship and the political strictness of the 1930's.



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour



Detail from a Rosta window
 Cheremnykh, Mikhail Mikhailovich
 Text: Mayakovski Vladimir Vladimirovich
 Hand-stenciled gouache on paper
 6 pages
 each approx. 44 x 35 cm
 1921



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour



Adamovitch, Mikhail
Celui qui ne travaille pas ne mange pas.
 Diam: 26,4 cm
 Porcelain, overglaze painting
 1922

After this “pause” within the exchanges between Paris and Moscow, the unfolding of the exhibition develops again parallels between the two countries with the art of the “années 20”. In the next picture, the painting from Chagall is next to a painting from Robert Delaunay.



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour

Conclusion

It should be kept in mind that this exhibition *Paris-Moscow* represented a turning point in the history of exhibitions. One of the major reasons is that for the first time in France literature, music, theatre, dance and cinema were on display, raising questions such as how music can be displayed. For instance, the next pictures point out how music was displayed: through the placement of a piano made by the Soviet constructivist, next to a real piano in a room where Soviet music concerts were given:



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour



Photographie Paris-Moscou, 1979. Archives MNAM, photographie Jacques Faujour

To put it in a nutshell, both the French and the Soviet curatorial teams were aware that the exhibit was not perfect; but it was still an astonishing opening for the Soviet Union and a

great discovery of the Russian and Soviet vanguard paintings for the French public. When the exhibit was displayed in Moscow in 1981, the Soviet public discovered the paintings for the first time since 1930, when they had been hidden in museum cellars. Henri Froment-Meurice, the French Ambassador in Moscow in the 1970s summed it up by saying that “every form of cultural exchange even the smallest, even a not perfect one, is always better than isolation.”

¹ Schreiber, Thomas, *Les actions de la France à l'Est ou l'absence de Marianne*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000, p. 149

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