

NEWS *Continental Europe*

'Most pictures' in Russian avant-garde exhibition could be fakes

Specialists express concern about lack of provenance for works by artists including Rodchenko and Goncharova in recent Italian show

FAKES

Mantua. Sleepy Mantua is the unlikely centre of the latest controversy to enmesh the Russian avant-garde. The small Renaissance town between Milan and Venice recently hosted an exhibition entitled "Avanguardia Russe dal Cubofuturismo al Suprematismo", which closed last month and has been decried by one international specialist as "a total disgrace". Another says he has doubts about "most of the pictures" included in the show.

The exhibition included 61 previously unknown works by 37 Russian artists, ranging from saleroom superstars such as Goncharova, Larionov, El Lissitzky, Rodchenko and Stepanova to more obscure names, including Ivan Gavris, Sergei Senkin and Sergei Romanovich.

The exhibition – comprising 17 paint-

The exhibition has been described as "a total disgrace"

ings, 33 works on paper, eight booklets and three pieces of porcelain – took place in the Casa del Mantegna, built for Andrea Mantegna in 1476 and now used as an exhibition centre by the Province of Mantua. With cash-strapped Italian provinces unable to hire PR officers, the exhibition attracted scant media attention, and security appeared flimsy, with just one member of staff present during opening hours.

The 144-page catalogue was funded by Giacomini Investments, a firm with a track record of sponsoring art exhibitions – although, surprisingly, the Mantua show is not cited on its website (the organisers say that this is because the website has not been updated).



The show was organised by Gianfranco Ferlisi, the head of culture for the Province of Mantua, and Renzo Margonari, a prominent local artist.

In the catalogue, Margonari likened the works to "precious relics saved from a shipwreck". To Ferlisi, their appearance was "a miracle... we are speechless with amazement that an important group of works should emerge from the mists of Mantua."

Amazement has indeed been expressed by several international Russian avant-garde specialists, among them the London-based dealer James Butterwick, who dismisses the exhibition as "a total disgrace" with "hardly any genuine pictures".

Speaking from Moscow, Maxim Bokser, a leading expert on 20th-century Russian art and a member of the board of the Russian Dealers' Federation, tells *The Art Newspaper* that he has "doubts about most of the pictures [in the show], including many of the works on paper". He adds that the exhibition's organisers had done "a lot of work and gathered a lot of materials for their catalogue. But why do so much work and not bother to find specialists for each artist?"

The works are said to be owned by a group of Italian collectors who wish to remain anonymous. Speaking on behalf of the collectors and the show's organisers, Giuseppe Melzi, the head of the Milan-based art legal consultancy Lex Art, says that the works were acquired by private treaty from the now-defunct Brerarte auction firm in Milan in the 1980s, with no record of how they reached Italy – although he says that the collectors know the identity of the works' original owners. The choice of Mantua as a venue was, he says, the result of a chance meeting between Renzo Margonari and one of the collectors.

Melzi says the works were vetted by the veteran art historian Arturo Schwarz, 90, whose survey of the Russian avant-garde in the catalogue talks of "exemplary works" owned by a group of "enlightened collectors". But although his name appears prominently on the cover, Schwarz – best known as an authority on Dada and Surrealism (he donated his 700-piece specialist collection to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 1998) – told *The Art Newspaper* that he had "nothing to do with this exhibition". When asked about this, Melzi pointed out that the show contained two works listed in the catalogue as having come from Schwarz's personal collection. He added:



Experts doubt the authenticity of *Cattedrale*, supposedly by Aristark Lentulov, and *Madonna and Child* (left), supposedly by Natalya Goncharova

"He knows all the work and collections very well and wrote a historical preface [to the exhibition] catalogue."

Melzi says that the show also had the support of Enrica Torelli Landini, a professor of industrial archaeology at the University of Tuscia in Viterbo and the author of a monograph on El Lissitzky and *The Artists of the Russian Avant-Garde*. Her article on "Suprematism and the School of Vitebsk" was due to appear in the catalogue's second edition.

Pigment analysis by the physics department at the Polytechnic of Milan is also said to support the authenticity of the paintings, although one work (purportedly by Rozanova) that was tested

was shown to be of a later date, Melzi says, and was withdrawn from the show.

Butterwick dismisses the Polytechnic's analysis as "meaningless" and says that the works were painted in the 1990s and 2000s. In an open letter to Melzi, he says that "the majority of the paintings in your exhibition are simply not by the artists claimed. Is chemical expertise the only evidence you can offer for a painting being genuine? Is there no provenance? No exhibition history, as there should be with any serious study of the Russian avant-garde?"

Butterwick blasts paintings purportedly by Lentulov (*Cattedrale*, 1920s) and Rozanova (*Cubofuturismo*, around 1910

to 1918) as a "sad pastiche" of museum works with similar themes, suggesting that they were produced by the same hand as paintings ascribed to Yakovlev (Pierrot, around 1917-20) and Kuprin (*Still Life*, around 1920-22). He also believes that a work ascribed to Ivan Kliun was "known to every reputable dealer in Russian art as not being by Kliun", despite the fact that the work was reproduced by Maria Valyaeva (as having come from a private collection in Moscow) in *The Morphology of Russian Non-Objectivism*, published in 2003.

Another work that courted controversy was a watercolour, *Madonna and Child*, by Natalya Goncharova, apparently based on a 1911 painting in Moscow's State Tretyakov Gallery. According to Piotr Aven, one of the leading collectors of early 20th-century Russian art, Goncharova "never did watercolour versions of her oil paintings". Aven said this at a press conference in Moscow in 2011,

"If someone says 'this is no good', we say: 'OK, sorry'"

when he claimed that a criminal gang based in France and Switzerland was flooding the market with fakes.

Melzi has invited Butterwick on an expenses-paid visit to Mantua to inspect the collection, or to take the works to London for his perusal. He has also attempted to assuage Butterwick's fears that works from the exhibition will surface on the market by insisting that the collectors have no plans to sell, but only wish to show their works in other venues, in Italy and abroad.

The controversy comes hot on the heels of last year's appearance in Germany of hundreds of Russian avant-garde forgeries (thought to have been produced in Israel), and Butterwick believes that "we are in the middle of a long struggle. The faking will continue and our market will become even worse than it already is."

The mood in Mantua is calmer. "We're very happy with the scientific expertise. As for the authors of the works, we can discuss that," Melzi says. "The collectors do not want doubt. When we read that there may be a problem, we are afraid. We are clear people. We want everything to be clear. If someone says 'this is no good', we say: 'OK, sorry'." *Simon Hewitt*

EUROPEAN NEWS IN BRIEF

EUROPEAN UNION

Returning art in Europe gets easier

n Brussels/Strasbourg. The boom in the illicit trafficking of cultural objects has prompted the European Parliament Committee on Culture and Education to simplify the 1993 directive on restitutions between members of the European Union. The revision will make the procedure more flexible by enabling countries to claim as stolen any object, regardless of its estimated value and age. Previously, the only works that could be claimed were archaeological objects more than 100 years old, and paintings more than 50 years old and worth more than €150,000. Authorities will also have more time to investigate stolen objects and apply for their return: six months, instead of two, to establish the identity and whereabouts of the new owner, then three years, instead of one, to file a restitution claim. The new rules also reduce the financial cost of the process, as the owners of stolen objects will not be entitled to compensation from the state making the claim unless they can prove due diligence in making the purchase. Of the 40,000 objects that are estimated to be stolen in Europe every year, only a very small fraction are ever recovered. Specialists charged by the European Parliament with examining the illicit trade found that Germany, France, Poland and Italy were the countries worst affected. *M.L.B.*

ITALY

Rogue sculpture removed from Circus Maximus

n Rome. The Italian authorities have removed a two-tonne, 3m-high steel sculpture that was surreptitiously installed in front of the Circus Maximus in Rome last November. The work, entitled *Place de la Concorde*, was put there by the artist Francesco Visalli. The sculpture, which is part of a larger project that pays tribute to Mondrian, sat on top of a large plinth covered in plastic ivy and went unnoticed by the authorities until the Italian media raised the alarm, prompting its removal. Visalli, who spent €23,000 on the project, says he wanted "to test the attention of the city authorities". Flavia Barca, Rome's cultural assessor, says that the mayor's office was unaware of the monument because no official permit request had been made. "Rome is extraordinarily rich in art and culture: it's possible to walk past a work of art without asking why it was placed there," she says. *T.L.*



FRANCE

Nike was once blue and had hair (and a head)

n Paris. A stripe of Egyptian blue once decorated the drapery of the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, a statue of the Greek goddess Nike that dates back to the second century BC and usually graces the Daru entrance staircase in the Louvre, Paris. French conservators have been working on the sculpture since September and have now released the results of their preliminary analysis. They examined the marble surface using video microscopy and discovered traces of a blue colour first used by the Egyptians and then widely adopted by the Greeks and the Romans. These remnants are invisible to the naked eye. This suggests that the statue was once polychrome or partially coloured. Using ultraviolet photography, the conservators also detected layers of lime from previous restorations, and X-rayed the wings to understand how they were assembled in the 19th century. In the process, they made another discovery: a lock of hair at the neck of the winged goddess. Nike is due to go back on display in June. The restoration of the monumental Daru staircase will continue until next spring. *L.D.M.*



Bacon collector to build Monaco home for works

MODERN ART

Monte Carlo. The first art centre devoted to Francis Bacon is to be set up in Monte Carlo. The Francis Bacon MB Art Foundation has been established by Majid Boustany, a Lebanese-born businessman who is a Swiss national and lives in Monaco.

Boustany first became interested in Bacon while studying in London in the 1980s, when he saw the Tate's triptych *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944. He then discovered that Bacon had lived in Monte Carlo in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The artist loved the climate, good food and gambling, and spent a series of winters on the Mediterranean coast.

Boustany's spokeswoman says that he has been building up a "comprehensive collection" of Bacon's work in the past few years. He owns paintings from the late 1920s to the early 1980s, as well as rug and furniture designs made by the artist in around 1930, when he earned his living as an interior decorator.

Boustany's collection also includes graphic works, documents from Bacon's studios, photographs taken by the artist's friends and lovers, works by Bacon's peers and a comprehensive set of exhibition catalogues.

The collector and his brother Fadi have a major interest in Monte Carlo's Hotel Metropole. The Bacon foundation is being established in the Villa Elise, in Avenue de l'Annonciade. Martin Harrison, the editor of Bacon's catalogue raisonné, is on the foundation's board.



Francis Bacon with his friend Reinhard Hassert in Monte Carlo in 1981

The centre will host occasional temporary exhibitions, along with a display on Bacon's life, focusing on his visits to the Riviera. It will be open to the public by appointment, with a simple booking procedure. The centre is expected to open in September.

Martin Bailey

Van Gogh foundation to open new home in Arles

The Vincent Van Gogh Foundation Arles will inaugurate its new home in the Hôtel Léautaud de Donines in the southern French city next month with an exhibition of contemporary art. The foundation's artistic director, the Swiss curator Bice Curiger, who was appointed in 2012, will oversee the exhibition programme of three shows a year. The first is "Van Gogh Live" (7 April-31 August), which places the work of nine contemporary artists, including Elizabeth Peyton, Gary Hume, Thomas Hirschhorn and Camille Henrot, alongside a selection of early paintings by the Dutch artist. "In Van Gogh's paintings, all is movement, all is animated. It's also the way I look at things," Henrot says. The 15th-century building belongs to the city of Arles; the renovation has been funded by the foundation, which declined to disclose the cost of the project. *G.H.*

Paris court will rule on copycat claim

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Paris. The Paris-based sculptor Xavier Veilhan, whose monumental works were displayed at the Palace of Versailles in 2009, has launched a legal battle against the French artist Richard Orlinski. Veilhan alleges that Orlinski has directly copied his glossy, angular sculptures of animals; a judgment is due in a district court in Paris this month.

"This issue first came to my attention through my Swedish dealer, who saw a piece [by Orlinski] that resembled my work in a gallery in Switzerland," Veilhan told the French website *Le*

Richard Orlinski's *White Wolf*, 2013 (below left), and Xavier Veilhan's polar bear in Courchevel in 2009

Quotidien de l'Art. "Meanwhile, people skiing in Courchevel [in the French Alps] say they've seen my works on the ski slopes. But I've only made a polar bear [sculpture] for the Cheval Blanc hotel there. They were in fact referring to a sculpture of a white wolf by Orlinski."

Veilhan and his Paris-based dealer, Emmanuel Perrotin, say they have taken legal action "against Orlinski for counterfeiting and unfair competition". Orlinski denies all the charges. "The case is under way and no ruling has been made," says Julie Jacob, Orlinski's lawyer.

Gareth Harris

