'As for the connection of the Lenin legend with literature, it is true—the critics of Soviet Russia frankly admit—that no Homer has yet arisen adequately to sing the epic of his or Russia's deeds begun in 1917'.[26] The closing paragraphs of the essay provide the English translations and an ironical commentary of two folklore songs about Lenin, 'A Kirgiz Song' and 'A Ferghana Folk Song', as examples of the new Communist mythology.

It should be noted that many passages in Cournos's articles are the result of deeply-felt experience, rather than academic debate. In 1917 Cournos joined the Anglo-Russian Commission sent by the Foreign Office to Petrograd to observe the Bolshevik Revolution and returned home with a very pessimistic view of events. The immediate outcome of his experience was a pamphlet *London under the Bolshevics: Londoner's Dream on Returning from Petrograd* (1919), where he describes 'the realities of the Bolshevist nightmare'. In *The Criterion* Cournos also published a number of book reviews on works describing life in Soviet Russia, including *New Russia* by A. De Monzie, *Youth in Soviet Russia* by K. Menhert, and *Winter in Russia* by M. Muggeridge.[27] The last review by Cournos of Russian periodicals appeared in January 1938.

The quantity, variety and intellectual and artistic quality of the articles published in *The Criterion* provide not only a record of Russian history and culture but were instrumental in shaping the perception and reception of Russian culture in Great Britain.

26 *The Criterion*, XIII (London, 1967), p. 227.
27 *Ibid.*, XII (London, 1967), p. 524; *The Criterion*, XIII (London, 1967), p. 490; *The Criterion*, XIII (London, 1967), p. 670.

17. 'Racy of the Soil': Filipp Maliavin's London Exhibition of 1935

Nicola Kozicharow

The Exhibition of Russian Art in London in the summer of 1935 was the most extensive showcase of Russian art displayed to the British public since 1917 and prompted much discussion of Russian art at the time.[1] As Herbert Zia Wernher stated in his introduction to the catalogue, '…it may confidently be claimed that the present exhibition… will, for the first time in history, present to the world outside Russia a picture of Russian art in its various branches and phases, which does something like justice to its task'.[2] The Exhibition of Russian Art, however, was not the only exhibition of Russian art in London that year as one artist—Filipp Andreevich Maliavin (1869-1940)—held his first solo show in Britain in October 1935. Maliavin was not represented at The Exhibition of Russian Art, most likely because he did not fit easily into any of the categories of display, which included Silver and 19th-century Paintings, Icons, Porcelain, and Foreign Artists in Russia. Stage Designs was the only section open to an artist of Maliavin's generation, and works by some of his contemporaries such as Leon Bakst and Ivan Bilibin were displayed, for example, but Maliavin did not participate in theatre production at any point in his career.

Maliavin's work may not have been selected for this groundbreaking exhibition, but his Pictures and Drawings of Russian Life solo exhibition at the New Burlington Galleries in London was a significant achievement

1 For a more detailed analysis of this exhibition, see Anthony Cross, 'Exhibiting Russia: The Two London Russian Exhibitions of 1917 and 1935', *Slavonica*, XXI (2010), pp. 29-39.
2 Herbert Zia Wernher, 'Introduction', *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Russian Art* (London, 1935), p. 6.

for the artist. The exhibition not only forged an important place within Maliavin's career but also represents a noteworthy moment in the British discourse on Russian art. This chapter investigates the reception of Maliavin's work by the British public with particular attention to the response of the press.

The Exhibition of Russian Art and Maliavin's solo exhibition occurred precisely at the moment when British relations with the Soviet Union took a more positive turn.[3] The upheaval caused by the Revolution, subsequent Civil War, and death of Lenin made the political situation in Russia appear unpredictable and unstable. By the mid-1930s, however, the permanence of the Soviet government seemed clear. In March 1935, Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden met with Iosef Stalin in Moscow, and this was the first time Stalin had received a Western political leader. The official communiqué of this exchange read: 'The representatives of the two Governments were happy to note as the result of a full and frank exchange of views that there is at present no conflict of interest between the two Governments on any of the main issues of international policy [...].'[4]

An interesting viewpoint from which to view this shift in relations is through examining the surge of books on the Soviet Union of both scholarly and popular interest in the Soviet Union appearing in 1930s England. In 1935 alone, 64 Russian or Soviet-related books were reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement*, and many of these concerned daily life in the Soviet Union with titles such as *Law and Justice in Soviet Russia*, *Modern Moscow*, and *We Soviet Women*. One book review in *The Times Literary Supplement* of *The Russian Revolution, 1917-1920* by William Henry Chamberlain reflected upon the positive change in Anglo-Soviet relations: 'The question is no longer, "Where will the Russian Revolution end?" but "When did it end?"'[5]

Though improved, the political situation between the Soviet Union and Britain was still an obstacle when it came to the study and display of Russian art. In the introduction to the book *Russian Art*, which was published in 1935 to complement The Exhibition of Russian Art, the art historian Tancred Borenius noted this difficulty:

> [The study of Russian art] has, unfortunately, in the past, owing to a variety of circumstances, never been easy of attainment for anyone in Western Europe taking an interest in Russian art; nor can the present—for a number of reasons which need not here be gone into—be regarded as a particularly propitious moment for studying Russian art on the spot.[6]

3 Cross, p. 39.

4 Quoted in Major E.W. Polson-Newman, 'Anglo-Russian Relations', *The Contemporary Review* (October 1935), p. 416.

5 'Problems of the Russian Revolution', *Times Literary Supplement*, 17 October 1935, p. 637.

Indeed, none of the objects in the exhibition was lent by Soviet institutions. Instead, the exhibition was formed from an impressive set of European collections, and the selection committee consisted of Russian émigrés, British scholars, and academics. As Anthony Cross discussed in his article 'Exhibiting Russia: The Two London Russian Exhibitions of 1917 and 1935', the exhibition emphasised old Russia as opposed to Soviet Russia.[7] As an émigré, Maliavin, too, would have been firmly identified as a Russian, and not Soviet, artist.

Before emigrating to France, Maliavin had a highly successful career in Russia. He was born in the peasant village Kazanka, and between 1885 and 1891, he trained as an icon-painter at the Panteleimon Monastery in Mount Athos. Having received funding procured by the sculptor and Imperial Academy Professor Vladimir Beklemishev, Maliavin began his studies at the Academy in 1892, working under Il'ia Repin. In 1899, he earned the title of Artist and became an Academician in 1906. Maliavin also achieved success in Europe; his painting *Laughter* won a gold medal at the Paris World Fair in 1900. After the Revolution, Maliavin taught at the Free Artists Studio in Riazan' but produced few works over the next few years, and his financial situation became increasingly precarious. These circumstances most likely led to Maliavin's decision to leave Soviet Russia in 1922 and emigrate to France. Throughout the 1920s and the early 1930s, he exhibited widely across Europe at international shows such as the Salon d'Automne, the Salon des Indépendants, and the International Exhibition in Venice. He also took part in group Russian exhibitions, including those in Brussels, Wilmington, Prague and Pittsburgh. By the mid-1930s, Maliavin had earned enough recognition to hold, over a two year period, solo exhibitions in Oslo, Nice, Prague, Stockholm and Belgrade. Despite actively exhibiting across Europe and America, Maliavin, like many Russian émigrés of his generation, struggled to adapt to a new art scene.[8] Shifting from a Russian public to a European one was difficult for Maliavin, who continued to paint

6 Tancred Borenius, 'Russian Art – An Appreciation', in D. Talbot Rice (ed.), *Russian Art* (London, 1935), p. 1.

7 Cross, 36.

8 For an in-depth discussion of the emigration of Russian artists to France, see Kirill Makhrov, 'History and Modernity: Russian Artists in Paris', in Joseph Kiblitsky (ed.), *Russian Paris 1910-1960* (St Petersburg, 2003), pp. 6-16.

the colourful canvases of Russian peasants that had been popular in Russia. An active exhibitor with the World of Art in Russia, Maliavin did not participate in the group's revival in Paris and never took part in the Ballets Russes or other theatre productions. Instead of settling in Paris along with the majority of the Russian émigré community in France, Maliavin moved to Nice, where he lived an isolated life away from the capital. Although Nice became a popular destination for prominent artists such as Matisse, Picasso, and Léger, Maliavin never learnt a foreign language, so his interaction with other artists was limited. Upon his death in 1940, many paintings which he had exhibited during the 1930s remained in his studio, suggesting he struggled to sell even his most important works.

Before his solo exhibition in London in 1935, Maliavin had taken part in two British exhibitions: one in Birmingham in 1928 and one in London in 1930. The press response to these exhibitions gives an indication of how Maliavin's work had been interpreted in England prior to his solo show. In 1928, the Russian Department at Birmingham University organised an exhibition of seventy contemporary Russian paintings at the Ruskin Galleries, including a range of other Russian artists such as Konstantin Korovin, Natal'ia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov and Isaak Levitan. A reviewer from *The Observer*, however, found the exhibition lacking in variety as it was mostly limited to painters in emigration and could not, therefore, provide a complete picture of contemporary Russian art. The review also attested to 'the spirit of renaissance animating Russian art today', of which this exhibition was a prime example.[9] The review focused its attention principally on Korovin and Maliavin from the 15 artists who participated. Maliavin, who had 8 pictures at the exhibition, was interpreted, along with Korovin, as 'an early rebel against accepted traditions in Russian painting'.[10] In 1899, the Academy did reject Maliavin's painting *Laughter*, awarding him the title Artist for his portraits instead, but this decision stemmed more from the strict traditionalism of older academicians as opposed to radicalism on Maliavin's part. It is not clear if *The Observer* reviewer would have been aware of this specific incident, but referring to Maliavin as a rebel reflects some knowledge of the artist's career, even if it was misinterpreted. The reviewer then especially praised one of Maliavin's paintings, *Peasant Girl*:

9 'Contemporary Russian Art', *The Observer* (21 June 1928), p. 8.
10 *Ibid.*

> [...] 'Peasant Girl' is perhaps the best example of his extreme love of colour. There is no muddiness or dinginess here. The canvas is a stirring glow of bold, refreshing colour, with the pigments richly worked in broad, firm strokes in the texture of the shawl which wraps a head of classical proportions – these bright Russian shawls are an oft-recurring subject in his studies.[11]

This description, above all, stressed the quality of Maliavin's artistic technique, and this emphasis continued in the press response to his work in 1935.

As for the Russian Art Exhibition at the Bloomsbury Gallery in London in 1930, a short review in *The Times* listed Maliavin's painting 'Two Peasant Women' among 'pictures worth noting'.[12] From these reviews, it is clear that Maliavin's work stood out among his contemporaries, particularly his paintings of peasant women. In addition, the focus on Maliavin reveals that the artist played a notable role in the dialogue on Russian art at the time. This praise in the press also set a positive precedent before his solo show.

Without a published catalogue or any related correspondence, it is difficult to construct a complete picture of Maliavin's Pictures and Drawings of Russian Life Exhibition in 1935. Newspaper reviews from the time, however, reveal several of the paintings which were exhibited and other significant information. The exact number of paintings and drawings is unknown: according to the *Observer* there were 200, but *The Times* reported there were 100. 100 is a more likely number, but given that many drawings were exhibited, 200 may indicate the combined total. In any case, both numbers show that this was no small exhibition but a substantial and diverse display of Maliavin's work. The exhibition consisted of works executed both before and after Maliavin's emigration to France. The artist had managed to bring a large number of paintings with him when he left Soviet Russia and exhibited them throughout Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. It is unknown how Maliavin organised such a large solo exhibition in London, but the success of The Exhibition of Russian Art earlier in the year and his own previous critical acclaim in Britain meant that a Maliavin exhibition would have been an appealing venture for a gallery.

There were advertisements in *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Illustrated London News* announcing the exhibition, and the show itself lasted for two weeks. Reviews appeared in *The Times* and *The Observer*, and both reveal significant information about the exhibition itself and Maliavin's reception

11 *Ibid.*
12 'Russian Art', *The Times*, 14 February 1931, p. 10.

by the British public. *The Times* praised the subject matter of the paintings, especially their 'rollicking humour'.[13] The best example of this comedy was to be found in one picture titled 'Country Ablutions', representing '[…] a stout damsel, nude, being drenched from a blue bucket by a peasant woman before an astonished and slightly scandalized audience of cows, a horse, two goats, and a hen'.[14]

The picture's lengthy description in *The Times* review suggests that genre scenes, as opposed to more decorative works, appealed to a British public.

The Times review also highlighted other works (which, unfortunately, are currently unidentifiable from their titles) that were considered 'both racy of the soil and interesting in their direct colour-impressionism […]. Artistically, the work of M. Maliavin belongs to the decorative realism of the late 19th century—with affinities with our 'Glasgow School''.[15] Here Maliavin's work was described as 'racy of the soil', or nationalistic, but was not classified as specifically Russian in character. By tying him to the Glasgow School and comparing him to artists like James Guthrie who also depicted the country surroundings of their national land, the reviewer placed Maliavin within the category of late 19th century's impressionist-influenced realism. This provided the British audience with a recognisable context for his art, but one that was noticeably not in any sense a contemporary one.

This review stands in sharp contrast to the French discussion of Maliavin's paintings, which emphasised the exotic. In his book *Art Russe*, published in 1922, the art historian Louis Réau wrote of Maliavin's 'jubilant peasants with their brutish gaiety and their multicoloured accoutrements, which explode with the red of the cotton fabric the Russians call *koumatch*. This orgy of colours and wild movement created the European success of "Laughter" and "Whirlwind"'.[16] The British reception of Maliavin avoided this kind of exotic language when describing his work and instead discussed him in a more concrete art historical context.

13 'Russian Life', *The Times*, 26 October 1935, p. 10.

14 *Ibid*. Listed as 'Sudenyi dush' (1930) in O.A. Zhivova, *Filipp Andreevich Maliavin, 1869-1940: zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow, 1967), p. 272. The painting was not illustrated in Zhivova's book but can be identified as lot 183 at Sotheby's London, 'Russian Paintings Day Sale', 9 June 2010.

15 'Russian Life', *The Times*, 26 October 1935, p. 10.

16 'les paysannes en liesse avec leur grosse gaieté animale, leur accoutrements bariolés où éclate le rouge de cette cotonnade que les Russes appellent Koumatch. Cette orgie de couleurs, ce mouvement endiablé firent le succès européen du "Rire" et du "Tourbillon"' (Louis Réau, *L'Art Russe de Pierre le Grand à nos jours* (Paris, 1922), p. 227).

Fig. 17.1 Filipp Maliavin, *Country Ablutions* (1930). Oil on canvas, 73 x 60.5cm, Private Collection. Reproduced by permission of Sotheby's.

Unlike *The Times*, *The Observer* was more critical of Maliavin's work:

> These two hundred bold, burly transcriptions of peasants, priests, and dancers have undoubtedly been painted full... They have all the air of being tremendous *tours de force*, in which the four-inch brush has been wielded with all the gusto of undaunted improvisations. No one would attempt to deny the sheer virtuosity of such pieces as 'Country Ablutions' (23), 'Swinging Bells' (40), or of the life-sized 'Troika' (56), yet if they were four times smaller

one might like them twice as much. That is to say, they somehow fail to justify their area by the inward complexity of their content.[17]

First of all, this review confirms that the painting *Troika* was exhibited in London;

Fig. 17.2 Filipp Maliavin, *Troika* (1933). Oil on canvas, 201 x 224 cm, Private Collection. © Stockholms Auktionsverk.

Maliavin had executed this large-scale work two years earlier and subsequently showed it around Europe over the next few years, but it remained in his studio upon his death. The review's disapproval of the size of Maliavin's pictures, and *Troika* in particular, suggests a preference for restraint rather than drama, at least for one British reviewer. Overall, this analysis of Maliavin's work reflects strong admiration for the artist's technique and skill, with less regard for the paintings themselves.

17 'Phillipe Maliavine', *The Observer* (3 November 1935), p. 18.

To announce Maliavin's exhibition, *The Illustrated London News* published his *Portrait of Leon Trotskii*.

Fig. 17.3 Filipp Maliavin, *Portrait of Leon Trotskii*. Oil on canvas, whereabouts unknown © *Illustrated London News*, 26 October 1935. Ltd/Mary Evans.

Prior to leaving Soviet Russia, Maliavin had had a prestigious career under the Bolshevik government, and in 1920 was officially invited to the Kremlin to sketch portraits of members of the Soviet High Command, including Trotskii. He was allowed access to closed sessions and meetings and was one of the few artists permitted to draw Party Leader Vladimir Lenin from life. Maliavin drew Trotskii between 1920 and 1922, and several of these drawings survive, but there is no record of a finished portrait executed in Russia. Maliavin took many of his political drawings with him into emigration as life-drawn portraits of Soviet political figures would have been useful security if the artist were stopped by the authorities, and, additionally, they might have been marketable abroad. This published portrait, whose whereabouts are unknown, reveals that Maliavin finished a portrait of Trotskii. The artist may have taken the painting into emigration, and it was simply unrecorded; or, as is more likely, Maliavin may have painted it in

emigration from the drawings in his possession. Regardless of when it was painted, however, this portrait has an even wider significance: with Stalin's rise to power, portraits of Trotskii were ordered to be destroyed from the late 1920s. Even this surviving black and white photograph of Maliavin's portrait is an important contribution to the body of images that remain.

In *The Illustrated London News*, the portrait was accompanied by a curious caption: 'The artist is royalist, rather than revolutionary, in his sympathies; indeed, when he has shown on the Continent, he has been frequently honoured by the patronage of the Greek royal family'.[18] A portrait of Trotskii might pique the interest of visitors to the exhibition through controversy, but by describing Maliavin as royalist, the caption purposively distanced the artist from any revolutionary or communist associations. Labelling him as loyal to the Greek royal family, however, was also not without controversy. In 1935, the Hellenic Republic was overthrown, and the royal family was reinstated to power by November, so when this caption appeared in October, the conflict between the republic and the royalists had come to a head. In reality Maliavin appeared largely apolitical, as the practical necessities of his career meant that his loyalties tended to shift towards those in power. Finding work abroad was difficult, and Maliavin depended financially on painting portraits, no matter whom they depicted.

In 1935, the British reception of a portrait of Trotskii would have been mixed. His obituary in *The Times* in 1940 stated: 'The murder of Leon Trotsky [...] will draw few tears from the vast majority of mankind'.[19] On the other hand, one might expect that this portrait would have drawn the attention of the British Left, with which Trotskii was largely popular. The fact that this portrait was overlooked in leftist circles is surprising, especially given the Left's interest in contemporary Soviet art at the time.[20] Maliavin, however, was part of a generation of Russian émigrés who fled the changes brought by the Revolution and was viewed as a Russian, not Soviet, painter. Maliavin's placement within the framework of an earlier realist tradition also most likely made him appear outdated and far from the contemporary socialist realism discussed by writers of the British Left such as Francis Klingender in the mid-1930s.

18 'Concerning Art Exhibitions: Notable Pictures in London Galleries', *Illustrated London News* (26 October 1935), p. 698.
19 'Trotsky', *The Times*, 23 August 1940, p. 5.
20 See, for example, the essays collected in Betty Rea (ed.), *5 on Revolutionary Art* (London, 1935).

On the whole, Maliavin's solo exhibition in London earned him positive attention from the press and individual recognition in Britain. His technique and skill were stressed above all but were done so in a way that tied the artist to a late 19th century artistic context, as opposed to contemporary developments. In reviewing an exhibition titled 'Pictures and Drawings of Russian Life', the critics markedly omitted any discussion of Maliavin's depiction of Russian life, or, indeed, Russia itself. His work may have been 'racy of the soil' and tied to Russia through its subject matter, but Maliavin was incorporated into a wider discourse on art in Britain.