

Щетинина Наталия Владимировна, кандидат искусствоведения, независимый исследователь. kadares@gmail.com

Shchetinina, Natalya Vladimirovna, PhD in Art History, independent researcher. kadares@gmail.com

РАЗВИТИЕ ЭКСПРЕССИОНИЗМА ВО ВТОРОЙ ПОЛОВИНЕ ХХ В. НА ПРИМЕРЕ КОЛЛЕКЦИИ LOUIS VUITTON FOUNDATION: МОСКОВСКИЙ ОПЫТ

THE COLLECTION OF THE LOUIS VUITTON FOUNDATION SHOWS HOW EXPRESSIONISM CHANGED SINCE 1950S: THE MOSCOW EXPERIENCE

A landmark exhibition of contemporary art took place in Moscow at Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts 19 June – 29 September, 2019. All the works from the collection of the Louis Vuitton Foundation appeared in Russia for the first time. This art has already become a part of history but is still very exotic and a rare guest in Russia. The show featured some significant works and artists that illustrate the progress of aesthetics in Western art after WWII. A closer look at these works may give more understanding of contemporary art beyond the patchy information from museum leaflets.

This exhibition is influential because it allows visitors to see the most important artists of the second half of the 20th century and glimpse the variety and the development of the international art scene – a development that is still very obscure even for sophisticated Muscovites. Moscow and Saint Petersburg have hosted several displays of some remarkable artists like Andy Warhol, Marina Abramović, and Arte Povera participants, and other European neo-expressionist artists. However, understanding by the general public and museum workers of the concept of “contemporary” is still somewhere among Van Gogh, Picasso, and Salvador Dalí. The situation originates, in part, from the unwillingness of large institutions to participate in the support and exploration of new culture – they are afraid of the high reputational risks and large investments in public promotion and education. Therefore, it was little surprise that there were mostly young people who were interested in this show. Rare middle-aged museum-goers openly demonstrated their disapproval of things they saw – somebody just repeated “It is not art” stance over and over again, somebody disputed ardently with patient museum attendants over aesthetic categories of ugly and beauty.

The audience highlighted the division of consumers of contemporary art in Russia. Muscovites have a unique mixture of orthodox and bourgeois tastes, but they never miss the chance to keep up to the latest trends. The first sections of the exhibition were full of high-heeled girls in tight black dresses with fancy jewelry clutching men in expensive business suits. Most of them looked overdressed and out of place since, room by room, they were outnumbered by young green/blue/grey-haired girls and boys in oversized grunge clothes. Nevertheless, there seemed to be no better chance to see these two very different groups together. This mixed group of visitors possibly indicates a slow transition of Russian and Moscow society from the luxurious and barbarian remnants of the glamorous 2000s to a global-oriented cultural lifestyle, a lifestyle that demands intellectual and cultural experiences relevant to a new and diverse audience.

The Louis Vuitton exhibition in the Pushkin State Museum started with Yves Klein’s “Anthropométrie sans titre 104” (1960) (Fig. 1) – a huge blue painting that resembles a Rorschach test blot, a burst of ultramarine colour, a splash of upbeat energy that attacks the eyes the moment you enter the show. It is energizing, soul rising and ultimately bright. The abstract layout gives some figurative hints: right in the middle, one sees a Capuchin monkey face; others detect alluring female body curves. The simple game of tracing the figurative in abstract is exciting: a mysterious mammal mating with a crocodile, people chasing one another; etc. Klein’s painting moves from a dramatic, abstract expressionist mode to a postmodern

humor and lightheartedness. The picture is very pleasant to look at – it is symmetrical below the central horizontal line with dominating prolonged upper diagonals, and the huge blot positively affects the spectator’s feelings. The painting’s overall feeling is one of balance. Single spots of IKB (International Klein Blue) pigment shape the depth of the space on the canvas. One can easily study the painting in different directions: up and down, left to right, diagonally, deep inside, or focusing on individual elements, all the while still being able to skate along the flat surface. Multidimensional, intense, energetic, non-aggressive and positively assertive, this picture enabled one to survive viewing the following art objects in the show.

Alberto Giacometti’s modernist sculptures (Fig. 2) opened the exposition opposite Yves Klein’s cobalt painting. His works are extremely dramatic. Mounted on a solid base, the vaguely human figures are thin and aerial. The patchy surface sheathes cord-like bodies and limbs. Hundreds of small pulsating pieces placed tightly together challenge the eyes and feelings by creating uneven rough “skin” that is carved with sharp lights and shadows. Every tiny piece makes you stumble and does not let you move further with ease. The dramatic effect is doubled with the contrast between the massive cylinder base/feet and bodies as thin as strings. It builds up the tension between moving high up and being surface bound, and creates a contradiction that tears you apart. The palpable weight axes the impulse to float.

The juxtaposition of two key figures of the 20th century art – Giacometti and Klein – is a conceptual one. The first represents modern art, which spans about a hundred years from the middle 19th century. Giacometti’s art matured in the experimental field of modernist art. The objective of modernism was to free expression by means of either pure shape, or composition, or colour. Klein, in contrast, was an agent of the new wave of the avant-gard movement, which steered off from the highly expressive and dramatic modernist mode towards skepticism, and finally to a clearly Utopian modernist ideology. The irony that determines the conceptual side of Klein’s “Anthropométrie...” painting marks a crucial change in the position of the artist, the process of creation/production of art, and the artwork itself. Pathos, metaphysics, drama, utopianism bordering on religion, and effects were expelled from the art agenda.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, expressionism recovered in its new forms, with new proponents, restored the power of emotions in the art field. One of the leading artists of this period – Gerhard Richter – highlighted the development of expressionism. Unfortunately, in the exhibition, large Richter’s works were installed in a narrow, corridor-like space. This cramped room could not support the radiation of energy emitted by the pieces. This decision made by the curators indicated an ignorance of basic laws of art presentation. Such art demands a lot of space around and in front of it. The essence of Richter’s works was neglected, the whole effect crumbled, and only the intensity of chaotic colours remained.

Richter’s “Lilak” (1982) (Fig. 3) features brushstrokes that swathe and wrap the space like a poisonous net. It attracts weak-willed viewers, inviting a fall into the depths of a painted world that is definitely bigger on the inside. With large paint strokes and patches, Richter creates depth and complex systems of space.



Fig. 1. Yves Klein. Anthropométrie sans titre 104. 1960. The collection of the Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris. <https://www.fondationlouisvuitton.fr/en/the-collection.html>

Fig. 1. 1 Yves Klein. Anthropométrie sans titre 104. 1960 (detail)

The relationship between colours, their position, translucency, and density of paint builds up specific illusionary dimensions — a vaguely familiar dreamlike nowhere that we observe through a smudged window. Richter's abstract works exemplify the new wave of expressionism, which was less personal and closer to reality than its modernist predecessor of the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1980s, neo-expressionist painting was open to the world of popular culture, readily absorbing the elements of daily routines — plates, graffiti, and signs of the city.



Fig. 1.2 Yves Klein. Anthropométrie sans titre 104. 1960 (detail)

At the same time, graffiti-laced New York gave birth to Jean-Michel Basquiat. Sadly, his primordial and exorcising pictures at the Moscow show were sentenced to hang against each other in an even more narrow space of the gallery; their individual power lost to a lack of space and forced proximity to each other. In "Grillo" (1984) (Fig. 4), the huge figure of the crowned character towers over viewers who are wandering around, absorbing the reds, yellows, and brown-blacks on the white background. This domination determines the relationship between the painted figure and small, living audience in front of it, as



Fig. 2. Alberto Giacometti. Three men walking. 1948. The collection of the Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris. <https://www.fondationlouisvuitton.fr/en/the-collection.html>

if of a god or potentate and its devotees or subjects. This spirit of slums, the king of the walls is scary and omnipotent, his face is a mask and his body a machine, a system that operates in rhythm with the city. His viscera is a labyrinth — a spell guiding a shaman into a state of trance. The mechanistic style of the main figure's interior is intensified in repeated phrases — “Buzzer-bell” “Buzzer-bell” “Buzzer-bell” “Buzzer-bell” or “sugar” “sugar” “sugar” “sugar” “sugar” “sugar” — that arrange the space of the picture. These are the spells of the busy city life, full of machinery sounds, clatters, clicks, and sputters. The repetition of these simple, daily words and sounds produce an effect of mantra.

The end of the 20th century saw art that gloried in the appropriation of cultural icons, something that turned out to be the most effective tool in the reevaluation of the short and busy period from around 1910 to 1970. From the whole Louis Vuitton collection displayed in Moscow, the exemplary work “Empress of India II” by Bertrand Lavier (2005) (Fig. 5) appears to be one of the most sophisticated, smart, beautiful, and truly artistic pieces. This piece is revelatory — our culture and psychology reject appropriation as theft — but here we are challenged and seduced by a painting that makes us want to justify and allow this kind of theft.



Fig. 3. Gerhard Richter. *Lilak*. 1982. The collection of the Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris. <https://www.fondationlouisvuitton.fr/en/the-collection.html>

Fig. 4. Jean-Michel Basquiat. *Grillo*. 1984. The collection of the Louis Vuitton Foundation, Paris. <https://www.fondationlouisvuitton.fr/en/the-collection.html>