

Cloth Factory: Natalia Goncharova's Folk Modernism

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Textiles ran through Natalia Goncharova's veins. Born to what the Tate describes as 'impoverished aristocrats' in 1881, the family's wealth was built on fabric fortunes. Her ancestors supplied canvas to the Russian navy in the eighteenth century, and her parents continued in textile production. Goncharova grew up amongst planting and harvesting, shearing and weaving. *Polotniana Zavod*, the name of the family estate, translated to Cloth Factory.

These narratives open the exhibition at Tate Modern, which showcases Goncharova's cultural production across painting, print and book design to interior design, fashion and theatre costume in ten colourful rooms. From the outset, the fabric of life in rural Russia underpins the story. Selections from Goncharova's collection of folk art, where myths and morality tales are picked out in bold primary chain stitch, are displayed alongside a nineteenth-century embellished festive garment from the Tula region, layered with multiple skirts and detailed with geometric cross stitch motifs in rusty reds, creams and black. These provide context for Goncharova's 1910 portrait, *Peasant Woman from Tula Province*. The sitter's gaze is penetrating but it seems secondary to the detail afforded the embroidered blouse and the floral headscarf, outlined in thick black lines for emphasis. The portrait depicts the traditional art forms that Goncharova campaigned to preserve, but its painterly style shows all the self-conscious pictorial flattening of the modernists.

This blending of a modernist view with a folkloric taste is a leitmotif of the exhibition. Goncharova was an artistic pioneer in pre-revolutionary Russia. Educated at Moscow's School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, where she met her lifelong partner, the painter Mikhail Larionov, Goncharova was influenced equally by Cezanne and Russian religious icons. She shared some of the same aesthetic sensibilities as her avant-garde contemporaries in Paris but, in her own words, she was defiantly 'not European'. Accordingly, the exhibition is filled with colour and brushstrokes as wild and bold as any Fauve or Futurist but the reference points are repeatedly rural and Russian.

Floral entwine with cockerels in her designs for textiles as well as in her paintings. Goncharova was a prolific and adaptable practitioner, turning her hand to diverse forms and media on an extraordinary scale. Aged 32, she was the subject of a one-woman retrospective at the Mikhailova Art Salon in Moscow with some 800 items on display, making the exhibition at that time the largest ever staged by any Russian avant-garde artist. Larionov and the writer and artist Ilia Zdanevich coined the term 'everythingism' to describe her style. This encapsulates Goncharova's range but one could also see such eclecticism as a disadvantage. At times the Tate exhibition suffers from a similar everythingism and the paintings in particular can lack coherence as Goncharova played with so many styles at once, and with so many subjects: agriculture and city scenes, parrots and wrestlers, vases of flowers and depictions of Christ.

The thread that provides the clearest path to follow, for me, is Goncharova's enduring interest in cloth. She lived the modernist ideal of the total work of art, wearing her visions

and designing them for production. As Sergei Diaghilev noted, ‘the young crowd doesn’t just emulate her as an artist, they imitate her appearance too’. Whether dressed *a la mode* in the commissioned designs for Nadezhda Lamanova and Marie Cuttoli’s fashion houses, or masked and plumed for the avant-garde artists’ balls she helped devise, Goncharova cut a dash in Moscow, Paris and beyond. Textiles appear in the paintings she produced in the style she and Larionov named Cubo-Futurism. Here the themes common to other modernists – speed, motion, energy and technology – are evoked but the familiar conjunction of man-and-machine is adjusted to woman and industrial loom (*The Weaver*, 1912-13). Likewise, *Linen* of 1913 brings together depictions of a domestic iron and bolts of fabric into a refracted view with suggested shapes of steam, suds and lace.

The final room shows Goncharova’s finest work. Full of drama, the low lights and royal blue walls of the gallery allow the glitter and spectacle of her costumes for the Ballets Russes to sparkle. Stravinsky and Rimsky-Korsakov provide the soundtrack and archival film clips and costume designs set the scene. *Le Coq d’Or* (*The Golden Cockerel*) was the work that brought Goncharova international fame when it was first performed in Paris in 1914. The outfits in the Tate are from a 1937 production in London. As hardworking garments they are full of presence, with the golden cockerel costume the *pièce de résistance*. A gold lamé knitted silk leotard and skull cap form the base for gilded leather wings and the cock’s curly comb. In this final flourish, burnished metallics and country motifs, from religious icons to folk art, intersect again as the themes and materials that underpin this multi-textured show.