

## REES 1173 'From Things Real to Things More Real': Symbolism and Spirituality in Russian Modernism

### **Course Description**

The motto '*a realibus ad realiora*' (Lat., 'from things real to things more real') coined by Russian symbolist poet and philosopher V. Ivanov, encapsulates the spiritual orientation, developed by Russian Symbolist poetry and art at the turn of the 20th century. This spiritual search extended to the avant-garde movements that flourished throughout the Russian Empire in the early decades of the 20th century. Drawing from the spiritual wisdom of Russian realist writers, Christianity, Eastern religious teaching, and esoteric philosophies and mysticism, Russian iterations of international modernism went far beyond the ideas of aesthetic revolution and embraced a broader array of cultural phenomena from family relationships, sexual practices and gender identities to social utopianism. These modernist visions of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century later supplied spiritual themes to the artistic and literary realms of the Soviet era.

This course aims to explore the great masterpieces of Russian modernist art and poetry focusing on their underlying philosophical, spiritual, and esoteric content. In particular, we will delve into the history, international contexts and the intellectual foundations of significant modernist and avant-garde movements and forms, such as symbolism, futurism, cubism, abstraction, and other innovative geometric and non-figurative art forms. Additionally, we will examine how the intellectual and artistic syntheses that originated at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to manifest themselves during the Soviet era, both through the works of non-conformist artists and writers, as well as the official culture.

All readings and discussions in this course are in English.

### **Class Structure**

- ☐ Class meets TR 12:00–1:30 PM
- ☐ One museum visit will be scheduled outside of class time in conversation with all students in the class, and one or two regular class meeting will be dropped.
- ☐ Other museum visits are optional but encouraged; extra credit points will be awarded for participation

### **Outline of Assignments & Assessments**

- ☐ Daily homework including written assignments, reading, and preparation for discussions.
- ☐ Two interpretive papers, each 2–3 pages long, one focusing on artwork and one on theoretical ideas.
- ☐ Final project: you can choose any one option below:
  - Working in teams, students will have to prepare a virtual museum space based on the contents of the course, and present a 15-min. virtual excursion to the class.
  - Create a creative work inspired by the themes covered in the course.

- Regardless of project choice, each student will require to write a 350+ word proposal with a condensed description of the main ideas, theoretical background and primary and secondary materials of the project.

### **Required Materials**

- ☐ John E. Bowlt. *Moscow and St. Petersburg 1900–1920: Art, Life & Culture of the Russian Silver Age*. Paperback. Vendome Press; Illustrated edition (April 21, 2020).
  - Will be available at Penn Book Store.
  - New from \$22, Used from \$19 on Amazon.com.
  - Earlier editions are acceptable.
  - Available at Penn Libraries, via BorrowDirect, and E-ZBorrow.
- ☐ Readings and handouts from instructor will be posted to Canvas.