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Cover Page Footnote

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Women Artists to Victims of War – The First Exhibition of the Moscow Union of Women Painters and its Reception by the Contemporary Press

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Abstract

A few surviving visual and documentary sources related to the exhibition *Women Artists to Victims of War* organised by the Moscow Union of Women Painters in winter 1914 represent a useful primary material for piecing together fragments of the history of this short-lived female art group. The Union exemplified impressive gender changes in educational and professional spheres of Russian art. Yet, it failed to attract strong membership and disintegrated a few years after its institution. By analysing available evidence, this essay seeks to uncover and assess the causes of the Union's defeat in establishing a prominent public profile.

Résumé

Les quelques éléments visuels et documentaires qui subsistent à propos de l'exposition *Women Artists to Victims of War*, organisée par l'Union moscovite des femmes peintres à l'automne 1914, représentent une source primaire de documentation utile pour reconstituer les fragments de l'histoire de ce groupe artistique féminin éphémère. L'Union atteste les changements importants concernant les questions de genre au sein des sphères professionnelles et académiques de l'art russe. Cependant, elle a échoué à susciter une forte adhésion et fut dissoute quelques années seulement après son institution. En analysant les témoignages disponibles, cet essai s'attache à mettre au jour et à évaluer les causes de l'échec de l'Union à établir sa légitimité auprès du public.

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Introduction

On 5 January 1915 the Moscow-based newspaper *Russkie Vedomosti* (*Russian Journal*) informed its readers that the Moscow Union of Women Painters, a recently established art society, opened its first exhibition, entitled *Women Artists to Victims of War*. According to the article's anonymous author, the Moscow Union of Women Painters was set up in Moscow in May 1914 by the constituent assembly, although its first general meeting had not taken place until October 1914.¹ This piece of news remains one of the few known direct references to the Union and its activities.

No file containing constitutional or any other documents related to the Moscow Union of Women Painters has yet been discovered in archives or elsewhere. Therefore, piecing together coherent chronicle of the group represents a considerable challenge. In point of fact, the Moscow Union of Women Painters has been very rarely, if ever, mentioned in modern art historical literature in Russia or abroad. The only available account is a short entry in the book *The Golden Age of Art Unions in Russia and the USSR (1820-1932)*, published in Russia in 1992.² According to this authoritative survey, the Union accepted both professional and amateur women artists, numbering 36 full members by 1915. The same year it set up a studio, which ran art classes twice a week. It also organised a series of lectures on art history and held family evening parties each Friday. Regrettably, the only historical source of reference, provided by the authors of the book, Dmitrii Severiukhin and Oleg Leikind, was the above-mentioned article in *Russkie Vedomosti*, wherefore it remains unclear where the factual information came from.

This essay aims to extend art historical knowledge about the Moscow Union of Women Painters by

introducing and analysing primary documentary and visual material concerning the society's first exhibition, *Women Artists to Victims of War*, which the author discovered in the Library of the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and until now has remained largely disregarded. In doing so it also endeavours to evaluate the story of the Moscow Union of Women Painters in relation to gender-sensitive attitudes at work in the Russian art world of the late Imperial period.

The Predecessors

The Moscow Union of Women Painters was not the first female art organisation to be founded in Russia as it was preceded by two other societies, both based in St Petersburg, then the capital of Russian Empire. The oldest, called the First Ladies' Art Circle (*Pervyi damskii khudozhestvennyi kruzhok*), was set up by a group of aristocratic women in February 1882 and aimed at "artistic development in general, while also offering assistance to needy artists and their families."³ The main drawing force in establishing the Ladies' Art Circle was its first Chairwoman Pelageia Kuriar (1848-1898), a landscape painter of noble background, who was a regular participant in the Imperial Academy's annual exhibitions and held the title of the Academy's honorary associate.

The Ladies' Circle acted under the patronage of the Imperial Family, and the majority of its members were women of St Petersburg's high-society, whose artistic skills and tastes were cultivated as an integral part of a gentlewoman's proper upbringing. The Circle held weekly meetings with painting and drawing classes under the supervision of prominent male professional painters. It also organised annual exhibitions, usually at Easter time, inviting up to 100 contributors to take part. Five percent of all exhibition proceeds were donated to the

Note on translation and transliteration. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. The transliteration of Russian names and words observes the form used by the Library of Congress. However, the spelling of some famous names follows long-established tradition—for example, Mayakosky (not Maiakovskii), Olga (not Ol'ga), and Tretyakov (not Treti'akov) Gallery. Surnames of foreign origin are transliterated here on the bases of their Russian form, including Aleksandr Benua (not Alexander Benois), Princess Evgeniia Ol'denburgskaia (not Eugenia of Oldenburg), Emilia Shanks (not Emily Shanks), and the Lemers'e Gallery (not the Lemerier Gallery).

¹ Anon., 'Zhenskaia vystavka' (*Women's exhibition*), *Russkie vedomosti* (*Russian Journal*), 5 January 1915 (#4).

² Dmitrii Severiukhin, Oleg Leikind, *Zolotoi vek khudozhestvennykh ob'edinenii v Rossii i SSSR (1820–1932)* (*The Golden Age of Art Unions in Russia and the USSR, (1820-1932)*) (St Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Chernisheva, 1992), 132.

³ *Statute of the First Ladies' Art Circle*, 2 March 1884.

society's charitable fund. The participation in these exhibitions was not limited to only amateur women painters and members of the circle. Some prominent professional artists—men as well as women—were also invited to contribute their works. Among the affirmed women painters who regularly participated in the Circle's annual exhibitions, to name just a few, were Elizaveta Bem (1843-1914)—a painter and prolific illustrator of children's books; Elena Samokish-Sudkovskaia (1863-1924)—a successful illustrator and poster artist; and Princess Maria Tenisheva (1858-1928)—an enamel artist, patron, educator and art collector. The Circle's exhibitions also featured works by such well-known male artists as Vasilii Vereshchiagin (1842-1904)—an acclaimed battle painter; Lev Lagorio (1827-1905)—a landscape artist; and Il'ia Repin (1844-1930)—the most celebrated Russian realist painter of the time.

The circle's practice of inviting distinguished male artists to take part in the society's exhibitions would be replicated by the Moscow Union of Women Painters, as we shall see. However, the First Ladies' Art Circle, which formally was the first women-founded and women-managed association in the field of Russian fine arts, was above all a charitable organisation and not a proper art group. Essentially, its initiatives were an extension of a well-established social practice, promoting the close involvement of the women of upper-classes with philanthropy and patronage of visual arts. The Circle's activities, solidly based on the traditional view on femininity, did not challenge established gender order of the time. The Circle never harboured any feminist aspirations and certainly had no ambition to promote the professional art careers of its members or of any other women artists at that. A case in point is that a number of scholarships in professional art training the Circle set up were, according to the statute, allocated to artists' sons, with no mention of daughters.

The relative prominence of the Ladies' Circle, owing to the high social profile of its members and its

Imperial patronage, did nothing to sooth the traditionally vexed question of women as valid art creators. If anything it ultimately served to add further controversy to the problem. While reports of its annual exhibitions were duly released in the contemporary press, the amateurish quality of works produced by the Circle's fellow members was often sharply criticised by art professionals, thus reinforcing prejudices against the "lady artist" as an idle wealthy woman engaging with visual arts for the own amusement. For instance, Aleksandr Benua (1870-1960), a prominent artist, art critic and founding member of World of Art Group, reviewing the Circle annual exhibition of 1909, mercilessly attacked the works of its members labelling them "a mockery, an affront to the sacred shrine of art." He ended his assessment with the following appeal:

Art is not a joke. It is not a high society game; it is a very serious [...] job. Art can be sometimes playful, but it is never a toy [...]. Stop amusing yourself with your self-deception; stop confusing and obfuscating very significant concepts. Art is one thing; your exercises are quite something else.⁴

Although Benua made it clear that his diatribe was directed exclusively at the non-professional women for whom the making of art was only a hobby, the general tone of his article suggested that the author considered the true and great art as essentially a male domain—a belief shared by many professional artists of the time. In his closing paragraph Benua implored:

Dearest ladies [...], if you like to make something useful do not exceed your capacities, be modest. It is much better for you to serve the real creators than to mimic creativity. Embroider, chisel or cut out what the real master will draw for you; obey him meekly and do not assume that you are able to judge artistic matters exclusively on the ground that you are enrolled in an art circle.⁵

Ten years after the establishment of First Ladies' Art Circle in 1892 another women-led art enterprise called the St Petersburg Society for the Encouragement of Female Arts and Crafts

⁴ Aleksandr Benua, "Exhibition of the Ladies' circle", *Rech (Speech)*, 2 December 1909 (#340).

⁵ *Ibid.*

(*St-Peterburgskoe Obshchestvo Pooshchreniia Zhenskogo Khudozhestvenno-remeslennogo Truda*) was set up in the capital of Russian Empire. Once again the initiative came from a group of society ladies, some of whom were also members of the First Ladies' Art Circle. This time, however, the creation of a new society was inspired specifically by the ideas of women's economic and social emancipation as it aimed to secure proper training and occupation in applied arts for women of unprivileged classes. The Society's first Chairwoman was Maria Argamakova (1840s-after 1901), Head of St Petersburg Practical School of Female Handicrafts. The Society contained about 160 members, all of them women, and represented an important platform for the popularisation and market promotion of female arts and crafts industries, bringing together arts and crafts supporters, practitioners and commercial distributors. The majority of its full members or fellows (*deistvitel'nye chleny*) were upper-class ladies-patrons. The Society also encompassed affiliated members (*chleny-sotrudniki*), who were crafts-women directly engaged in arts and crafts making, and member-promoters (*chleny-sorevnovateli*) who were owners of female arts and crafts workshops, heads of schools of female applied art education, professional artists, and so on. In its annual exhibitions the Society put on display various kinds of applied art produced by its affiliated members such as hand-painted porcelain ware, decorations on wood and silk, pokerwork, embroidery, etc. The same exhibitions also featured works by women who were not members of the Society. Those invited participants comprised both affirmed professionals and some members of the First Ladies' Circle.

The founding of the St Petersburg Society for the Encouragement of Female Arts and Crafts represented an important step forward in promoting female professionalisation in the arts. However, it was enclosed within strict boundaries of applied arts—a branch of art traditionally associated less

with female creativity than with female labour. The Society soon became an integral part of the government system and was subsidised by the Commercial and Manufacturing Department of the Ministry of Finance. A member of the Imperial Romanov family—Princess Evgenia Ol'denburgskaia (1845-1925)—a keen philanthropist and the President of the Imperial Society for the Encouragement of Arts—acted as the Society's patron. All in all, this organisation did not challenge the preconceived knowledge of a conflict between creating art and femininity, and its activities appeared perfectly agreeable in the eyes of the political and artistic establishment. Evidence suggests that the Moscow Union of Women Painters aimed at a very different target.

The Moscow Union of Women Painters: Facts and Conjectures

The Moscow Union of Women Painters was launched a couple of decades later, and compared to the two older societies it operated in a historical period when gender balance within the Russian art world was noticeably changing. One of the major reasons for these changes was the introduction of some important women-friendly policies in the field of art education, including the decision of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St Petersburg to abolish all restrictions against the admission of female students in 1891. In doing so the Academy became one of the first major art institutions in Europe to accept women students on the same conditions as men.⁶

Before 1891 women were allowed to attend classes at the Academy as auditors only, while their participation in the Academy's annual exhibitions was limited to the categories of portrait, landscape, still-life and genre painting. In the best of the scenarios, women could aspire to receive the title of second-class artist, which gave them the right to teach art at schools, but did not give them the

⁶ In France, women gained full admission to the *École des Beaux-Arts* in 1897, while in Britain, female students' access to professional training was subject to special regulations until 1893.

status of a true creator of art. There also existed a few drawing and handicrafts schools, established outside the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, which offered women art training and the opportunity to engage professionally with applied arts or to become drawing teachers. One of the most popular art institutions of this kind was the School of the Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts in St Petersburg.

After women were granted full admission to the Imperial Academy, they became eligible for the title of first-class artist, which gave them an equal professional standing with men and the opportunity to receive Academy-funded training abroad. For instance, Elena Kisileva (1878-1974), who studied art in the Academy under the tutorship of Il'ia Repin, won the Academy scholarship to further improve her art education abroad after her graduation in 1907. It allowed her to live in Paris for two years from 1908 to 1910 and to attend classes in the Académie Julian.

In addition to the Academy, other educational options became available for women aspiring to forge a career in the field of art. These ranged from state-sponsored high art schools, of which the most prestigious rival of the Academy was the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, to a network of private studios in both capitals and other big provincial cities. Many female art students also travelled to Paris, Munich and Rome to study at internationally acknowledged art schools and experience the newest art trends first-hand. According to Wendy Salmond "most women artists in this period moved frequently between private studios and public schools, from the provinces to the capitals, and from Russia to Europe and back again".⁷ As a consequence, in the first decades of the 20th century a steadily growing number of young women started to engage with the visual arts on a professional level.

In the pre-revolutionary decades, the female presence in Russian art world extended well beyond the profession of artist. The considerable

economic independence enjoyed by women from middle and upper classes also secured their effective engagement with private art education, art patronage and art business. As a matter of fact, the first private art school in the Russian Empire was founded in 1869 in Kharkov by a woman artist, Maria Raevskaia-Ivanova (1840-1912). Soon after there appeared other popular private art schools and studios run by women. Some of the most acclaimed included the Tenisheva School in St Petersburg (1895-1903) founded by the already mentioned Princess Maria Tenisheva, as well as two schools established by Elizaveta Zvantseva (1864-1921), a former student of Repin at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St Petersburg: the first was opened in Moscow in 1899 and another one opened in St Petersburg in 1906. Professional staff of Tenisheva's and Zvantseva's schools boasted some of the best painters of the time including Il'ia Repin, Valentin Serov (1865-1911), Konstantin Korovin (1861-1939), Leon Bakst (1866-1924), Kuz'ma Petrov-Vodkin (1878-1939) and Mstislav Dobuzhinskii (1875-1957).

Women were also at the helm of the revival of national arts and crafts, acting as sponsors, organisers, artists and managers. Elizaveta Mamontova (1847-1908), wife of the wealthy industrialist Savva Mamontov, was one of the first to establish an art-furniture workshop for peasant boys at their Abramtsevo's estate in 1876, employing the artist Elena Polenova (1850-1898) as its artistic director. In 1893 Princess Maria Tenisheva founded the Talashkino art colony near Smolensk, which soon became an important centre of Russian Arts and Crafts activities. Sofia Davydova (1842-1915) pioneered the in-depth study of Russian lace making and opened the Maryinskii Lace School in St Petersburg in 1883. These were not isolated cases, as many other enterprising women got engaged in much the same activities. Finally, the two most prominent and dynamic private art galleries of Russia were also women-led. Nadezhda Dobychnina (1884-1949), wife of a

⁷ Wendy Salmond, "Russia", in Delia Gaze, ed., *Dictionary of Women Artists*, vol.1 (London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1997), 119.

merchant and a businesswoman in her own right, opened her Art Bureau in St Petersburg in 1911, while the artist Klavdia Mikhailova (1875-1942) established her Art Salon in Moscow in 1912. Both places remained among the major exhibition spaces in the Russian Empire for the next six years when the drastic change in Russian socio-political life following the October Revolution of 1917 put an end to their art businesses. This impressive female presence in Russian visual arts in the first decades of the 20th century has been effectively summarised by Szymon Bojko: “nowhere else did such startling women personalities appear in such numbers and to such effect. Here was a veritable eruption of talent, producing great minds, beautiful personalities, beacons dispelling the gloom of an autocratic age.”⁸

Despite the growing number of professional female artists, no attempt had been made to bring together these practitioners in a special female art group before the creation of the Moscow Union of Women Painters in the spring 1914. The question as to why the new group emerged at the time when women were already accepted as full members in the existing art societies remains an art historical puzzle. Given that there was no need to campaign for gender-related institutional changes, one of the plausible reasons behind such an initiative might have been eagerness to further improve the visibility and status of professional women artists by displaying their aptitude for true artistic creativity and thus putting an end to the patronising belief that female art was inferior and second-rate in comparison with art made by men. The analysis of the critical responses to the Union’s first exhibition, which will follow shortly, will allow us to get the measure of how successful the society was in achieving this goal.

The scarcity of primary source material regarding the Moscow Union makes it difficult to reconstruct its actual policies with due accuracy, therefore some of the arguments, put forward in this essay should be accepted more as conjectures than as

established facts. It is, however, clear that the Union differed from the two older female organisations in at least two significant aspects. Firstly, it was not a charity, but a proper art group, which sought to bring together women artists of different social backgrounds with the view to facilitate their professional advancement and public recognition through its activities, including exhibitions. In this respect, the Moscow Union of Women Painters sharply contrasted with the elitist First Ladies’ Circle, for whom an engagement with art, disconnected from any career preoccupations, represented first of all a charity and a hobby. Secondly, unlike both the Ladies’ Circle and the St Petersburg Society for the Encouragement of Female Arts and Crafts, the Moscow Union of Women Painters was an independent civil establishment, which sought neither connections to nor the approval of any state power structures. Instead, by aiming at affirmation of female creative and professional self-worth, the group was ultimately undermining the dominant gender order.

The formal inauguration of the group on 8 May 1914 went virtually unnoticed by the wider Russian audience, and no announcement appeared in the press of the day. The public became aware of the group’s existence only in late December 1914-early January 1915 on the occasion of the group’s first exhibition, *Women Artists to Victims of War*, when a number of short reviews of the event were published in the newspapers. The responses of contemporary commentators as well as the catalogue of the exhibition and its advertising poster constitute the major primary material, elucidating some important points about the group and its policies.

The Union’s First Exhibition

The exhibition *Women Artists to Victims of War* took place in the special historical moment, that is just a few months after Russia entered the Great War in August 1914. At first, it seemed that wartime

⁸ Szymon Bojko, “Those Women” in *Women Artists of the Russian Avant-garde 1910-1930*, exhibition catalogue (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1980), 21.

economics and dramatic changes in everyday life should have brought on ‘the winter of the arts’. “Everything was mixed up, broken and overwhelmed by one aim, one idea—the idea of war,”—thus Ivan Kliun, an avant-garde artist and a supporter of Kazimir Malevich, wrote in his memoirs remembering the first months of the war.⁹ However, despite the dramatic historical backdrop, Russian art life continued its course, even becoming in some ways more intense. In particular, the number of art exhibitions, many of which were connected to wartime charitable initiatives, was rapidly growing.

In the first year of the war this upsurge in exhibition activity was in large part stimulated by a rise of patriotic sentiment, which many artists endorsed. Their participation in exhibitions, of which part of the revenues were donated to support wounded soldiers and victims of war, became a means to join national public mobilisation. At the same time, the exhibitions for the war effort created a special opportunity for marginalised artists. Due to generally more relaxed and democratic selection policy of such fundraising events in comparison with regular group shows, works by lesser known or controversial painters were now more likely to be displayed side by side with renowned masters. Hence charity-connected exhibitions proved to be a suitable occasion for emerging artists to reach wider audiences and attract the attention of art critics. This rule was not limited to individual artists only. Joining the patriotic national cause also enhanced chances of the press and public attending events put together by new and unfamiliar art societies.

There is no doubt that the Moscow Union of Women Painters sincerely embraced wartime public mobilisation, thus deciding to commit their first exhibition to fundraising for victims of war. Yet, the patriotic underpinning of this event might have given it an extra incentive to achieve at least two other important goals: firstly, to reach out to the potential audience, announcing the arrival of

a new art society and, secondly, to establish a favourable public profile. This strategy, however, was not without flaws. The irony was that the Union, which was conceived as a proper art group and not as a philanthropic enterprise, had to fall back on the format of charitable exhibition stereotypically associated with the activities of society ladies. In this situation, the Union had to strike the right balance between the display of patriotic loyalty and the promotion of women as art creators.

The problematics of this dual purpose are discernible in the exhibition’s black-and-white advertising poster, produced by Evgeniia Zaidner, an artist whose personal and professional biography remains obscure. The fact that Zaidner designed the first exhibition’s poster suggests that she might have played a prominent role in the Union’s activities. In her design the artist emphasised the exhibition’s title—*Women Artists to Victims of War*—making it conspicuously larger than the rest of the text (Fig.1). It is, however, important to note that within this visual block the gender allegiance of the event was given special prominence. The word *Khudozhnitsi*—“Women artists”—was in fact slightly bigger in size than the rest of the title, and its white letters visibly stand out on their black background. The symbolism of the Greek goddess Athena, whose seated figure featured in the poster, might also be invested with the same singular combination of wartime patriotic fervour and gender preoccupations. The high helmet and round shield on which she rests her right hand pointed to Athena’s role as the goddess of war strategy and, by implication, connected the female gender with heroic endeavours. Athena was, of course, also the goddess of wisdom and craft. Therefore, by putting her figure on the exhibition’s poster Zaidner might have aimed at asserting women’s right to the noble qualities of heroism, intellect and craftsmanship traditionally considered to belong to the male gender.

⁹ Ivan Kliun, *Moi put’ v iskusstve (My path in art)* (Moscow: RA, 1999), 87. Ivan Kliun (real name Ivan Kliun’kov) (1873-1943)—a painter, graphic artist and sculptor.

Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935)—one of the leading figures of the Russian early avant-garde, inventor of Suprematism.



Figure 1. Ekaterina Zaidner, poster for the exhibition *Women artists to victims of war*, 1914, 47 × 61 cm, chromolithography on paper, Tipografia Russkogo obshchestva pečati i izdatel'skogo dela. Private collection, Moscow.

The Union's logo adorning the title page of the catalogue for the exhibition *Women Artists to Victims of War* is also rich in allegorical references (Fig. 2 and 2a).¹⁰ Made by an unknown artist, it represents a classically draped upright female figure with a burning torch standing on a plinth inscribed with the Union's acronym and the year of foundation: 19-M.O.X.-14. The message implied by this image is not difficult to grasp, as it clearly asserts the group's female-orientated membership and its ambition to keep the sacred light of artistic inspiration high. The logo's neo-classical style seems to vouch for a rather conventional artistic orientation of the group, yet a close

examination of the catalogue of its first exhibition reveals a more complex picture.

The display included 370 works by 62 participants, who, despite the explicit declaration of the exhibition's title, were not exclusively women. In this aspect, the Moscow Union of Women Painters followed the practice of the two earlier women-led organisations from St Petersburg, which, as we know, also kept the custom of welcoming men in their major exhibitions. The comparative number of male and female participants in the exhibition *Women Artists to Victims of War* was a mirror image of the standard gender proportion of other

¹⁰ A copy of the catalogue for the exhibition *Women Artists to Victims of War* is now preserved in the collection of the Tretyakov Gallery library.

contemporary art exhibitions, where the number of women typically stood at 15 to 20 percent.¹¹

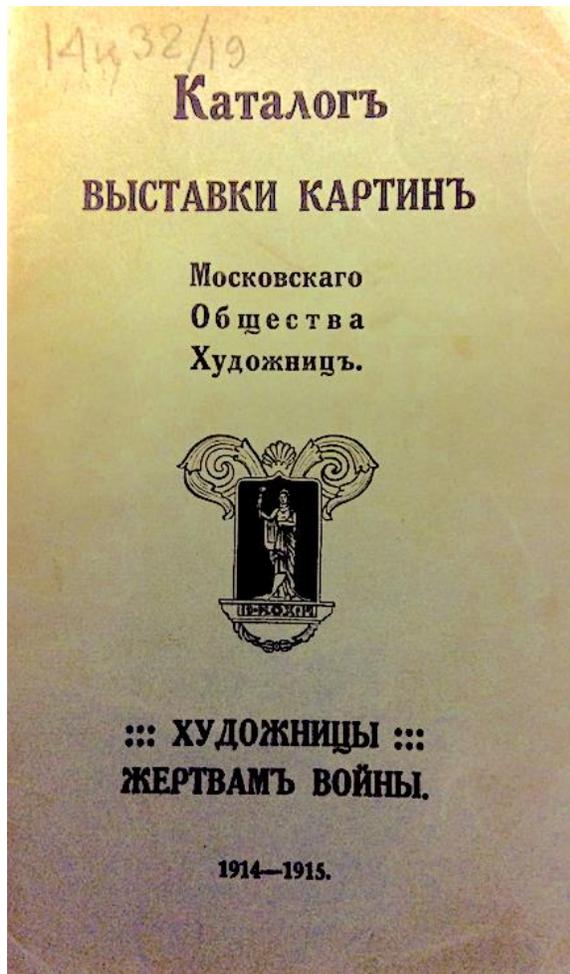


Figure 2. Title page of the exhibition catalogue, *Women Artists to Victims of War*, 1914. Library of the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Two out of the fifteen men who took part in the Union's first exhibition had especially solid professional profiles. They were Leonid Pasternak (1862-1945), an affirmed post-impressionist painter and a professor of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, and his ex-student, Iliia Mashkov (1881-1944), a founding member of the modernist art group Jack of Diamond. The aesthetic orientations of the other male contributors ranged

from realism (Iakov Bashilov (1882-1940); Mikhail Shemiakin (1875-1955)) and symbolism (Veniamin Gal'vich (?-?); Vasilii Denisov (1862-1922)) to moderate modernism (Eksan Kron (1882-1959); Mikhail Leblan (1875-1940)). The exhibition also included experimental avant-garde paintings by Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), the future creator of Suprematism. Still a relatively unknown artist, he was desperately seeking ways to exhibit his works. "I was kicked away from three exhibitions [...], and only darling Moscow women gave me shelter in their society," reported Malevich (with a pinch of cynic humour) to his close associate, the avant-garde painter and musician Mikhail Matiushin.¹² It seems obvious that each of the participating men had his own reason for taking part in the event. While Pasternak and Mashkov might have been attracted by the exhibition's charitable purpose, Malevich jointed the initiative out of desperation.

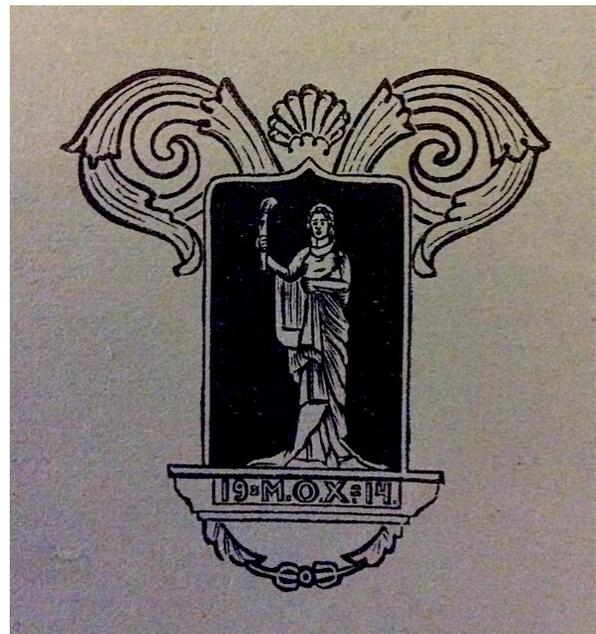


Figure 2a. Logo of the Moscow Union of Women Artists.

¹¹ Avant-garde events represented the only exclusion from this gender misbalance. Their exhibitions, where the number of participating men and women was often equal, were significantly more egalitarian.

¹² Kazimir Malevich, "Letter to M. Matiushin", early January 1915, from Moscow to Petrograd. *Malevich o sebe. Sovremenniki o Maleviche. Pis'ma. Dokumenty.*

Vospoinaia. Kritika. (Malevich about Himself. Contemporaries about Malevich: Letters. Documents. Memoirs. Reviews), Irina Vakar, Tat'ana Mikhienko eds, vol. 1 (Moscow: RA, 2004), 64. Mikhail Matiushin (1861-1934)—one of the prominent figures in the Russian early avant-garde.

Analysis of female contributors' professional biographies reveals the same diversity in their professional status, stylistic orientation and possible motives for participation. In terms of modern art history the most celebrated participant was Olga Rozanova (1886-1918), a daring and inventive avant-garde artist associated with Russian Cubo-Futurists and later Suprematist circles. However, in December 1914 she (much like Malevich, her close associate) was struggling to establish her career. The Union's exhibition was for her a rare chance to show her work. A few women with well-established contemporary reputations included Emilia Shanks (1857-1936)—a realist genre and landscape artist of British descent and the first woman to be accepted as a full-member into the influential Association of the Travelling Exhibitions (*Peredvizhniki*); Elizaveta Krasnushkina (1858-after 1914)—a prominent printmaker of realist style, who received her art training at the Imperial Academy in St Petersburg and from 1894 lived mostly in Rome, without, however, losing contact with Russian art circles; Roza Riuss (?-?), who in 1912 had a joint exhibition with Vasilii Denisov, a symbolist artist of distinction and one of the male contributors of the exhibition *Women Artists to Victims of War*; Ekaterina Gol'dinger (1881-1973)—a prolific Post-Impressionist portraitist, landscape and genre painter as well as a book illustrator, who studied art under the tutorship of the above mentioned Leonid Pasternak; and Elena Villiam (1860-1919)—a versatile watercolour and pastel artist, who specialised in landscapes and portraits. Villiam put on display as many as 30 works—sketches, portraits and landscapes. Less prominent, but fairly established participants included Rimma Brailovskaia (1877-1959)—a graphic and applied artist of the Art Nouveau style; Nadezhda Budkovskaia-Kibal'chich (1874-1952)—a landscape and still-life artist, who graduated from the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and

Architecture; S. Sukhovetskaia-Ispolatova (1875-?)—a realist painter and participant of some of the *Peredvizhniki* exhibitions; Elizaveta Grudistova (1864-1932)—an artist of moderate modernist inclination, influenced by contemporary French painting; Iulia Kron (1882-1956)—a member of the Jack of Diamonds group and wife of Eksan Kron, who also contributed to the exhibition; and Bronislava Korvin-Kamenskaia (?-1945)—an emerging avant-garde artist involved with the Russian Cubo-Futurists. But the majority of the female participants now remain completely obscure. Apparently, being at the start of their professional path in 1914, they did not manage to build a distinguished career in visual arts. The Union's exhibition, without doubt, gave them a good opportunity to attract public attention.

Little is known about the selection policy adopted by the exhibition's organizers. The only contemporary source containing a few short bits of information on the subject are two letters from Malevich to Matiushin, one of which has been mentioned above. In that same letter Malevich also let Matiushin know that the organisers, who accepted his unconventional works, later regretted their decision, but "it was too late".¹³ In the earlier letter sent to Matiushin on 28 November, a month before the opening of the exhibition, Malevich invited his friend to "send 3-4 small-scale sculptures", being, apparently, confident that Matiushin's pieces would be received by the organisers favourably.¹⁴ These details point to a rather relaxed selection policy which eventually resulted in a wide stylistic diversity of the display. At the same time, Malevich's remark about the organisers being in the end displeased with his works—he exhibited five deliberately provocative paintings—suggests that the women in charge with the Union and its activities did not approve of cutting-edge artistic experimentations.¹⁵

In the same letter dating from November, Malevich also communicated that "the venue has been

¹³ Malevich to Matiushin. *Malevich o sebe*, vol. 1, 64.

¹⁴ Kazimir Malevich, "Letter to M. Matiushin", 28 November 1914, from Moscow to Petrograd. *Malevich o sebe*, vol. 1, 62. Matiushin did not participate in the exhibition. The reasons for this decision are unknown.

¹⁵ According to the exhibition catalogue Malevich's display included: *What mind does not comprehend* (230); *What mind does comprehend* (231); *Peasant woman carrying buckets* (232); *Servant with a samovar* (233); and *Aviator* (234). *Peasant woman carrying buckets* (1912) is now in the collection of the MoMA, New-York; *Aviator* (c. 1914) belongs to the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

already rented. It is an apartment; therefore, the number of paintings and sculptures is rather limited.”¹⁶ This excerpt sheds light on other particulars concerning the group. In all evidence by the end of 1914 the Moscow Union of Women Painters did not have premises of its own, nor had it access to any other suitably equipped exhibition space in Moscow. As a consequence, the organisers had to deal with an area which was not specifically designed to host an extended art display. This far-from-ideal arrangement was fraught with serious problems from the start. It must have restricted the choice of works to medium and small formats (this is indirectly confirmed by Malevich’s advice to Matiushin to send “small-scale sculptures”); the apartment’s windows were unlikely to provide adequate lighting; the works would have been very close to each other; the venue’s layout might have hindered the smooth flow of the visitors. Any of these issues was potentially detrimental enough to compromise the overall impression of the event.

The Reaction of the Press

Despite *Women Artists to Victims of War* exhibition lasting for a month from 26 December 1914 to 26 January 1915, it solicited only a very limited number of reviews. The responses were discouragingly negative, although the newspapers that published them ranged from conservative to fairly progressive. Analysis of the major points of criticism expressed by the reviewers might help one to see the major difficulties with which the Union was forced to contend. It can also evince some conflicting attitudes lurking beneath the surface of the increasingly gender-impartial artistic environment of the time.

Utro Rossii (*Morning of Russia*) published a very short article that at first glance seems purely informative. The newspaper notified its readers that the Moscow Union of Women Painters had opened the exhibition at a venue in Leontievskii Lane. This defines the fact that the apartment

rented by the Union was located in a very respectable and affluent central area of the city in close proximity to a Tverskoi Boulevard and Tverskaia Street. The author goes on to say, without mentioning any names, that the display included few works by men who had been invited to take part. Only the closing line, which reads “The quality of the men’s and ladies’ pieces is very mediocre,” suggests a veiled gender bias. Instead of neutral “women’s” or “female’s” (*zhenskii*) works (which would perfectly agree with the language of the time) the anonymous reviewer used the phrase “ladies’ (*damskii*) works”. This deliberate or involuntary slip of tongue evoked the negative association with dilettantism and inferior quality of amateur art produced by upper class women, especially considering that the same adjective *damskii* featured in the name of the First Ladies’ Art Circle (*Pervii Damskii Khudozhestvennii Kruzhok*).¹⁷ It signalled that the condescending view on female art was not at all extinct.

The article in *Russkie Vedomosti* (*Russian Journal*) supplied a more extensive account, which opened with the already quoted passage about the establishment of the Moscow Union of Women Painters in spring 1914. This reviewer obviously strived to present a balanced assessment, opening his article by congratulating the “new and fresh group” (*molodoie obshchestvo*) on organising its first exhibition so promptly, a “mere two months since its first general assembly”.¹⁸ He then reported that “the size of the collection subjected to public judgement is very modest. In a few small rooms hang 370 pieces, among which there are no large paintings at all.” This passage corroborates our previous assumption about the exhibition’s limited space, which impacted on both the selection of works and quality of the display.

Celebrated Cubo-Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1881-1944) in his review published in the illustrated weekly newspaper *Nov’* (*Virgin soil*) confessed that he held high expectations about

¹⁶ Malevich o sebe., vol. 1, 62.

¹⁷ Anon., *Utro Rossii*, 28 December 1914.

¹⁸ Anon., “Zhenskaia vystavka”, *Russkie vedomosti*.

the event inaugurating a feminist newcomer to the national art scene:

One hopes to relieve one's boredom at least by visiting the exhibition of the Moscow Union of Women Painters. After all, this is a young society, in addition to which there surely must be some brilliant outcome of feminism on such a scale.¹⁹

Sadly, the exhibition did not live up to the poet's optimistic forecast:

One walks around. There are some good paintings. One consults the catalogue: Iliia Mashkov, Kazimir Malevich. But wait a moment, they are men! All the rest comprises sweet little bunches of flowers in little golden frames. How sad if this is how

Amazonia flourishes

All made up of ladies!

Why is there no important young art?²⁰

Mayakovsky, however, could hardly be considered an unbiased viewer if we take into account the belligerent avant-garde stance of the poet who urged the public to “throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity.”²¹ He was, therefore, unlikely to appreciate conventional artistic styles which appear to have prevailed in the exhibition's display. Iliia Mashkov and Kazimir Malevich were the only names which Mayakovsky cared to mention in his review. Interestingly, at that precise time both artists together with Mayakovsky were actively engaged in the activities of the patriotic *Segondiashnii Lubok (Contemporary Lubok)* enterprise, which was producing vividly coloured satirical cartoons, mocking German, Austrian and Turkish troops and extolling the heroism of the Russian army. Mayakovsky seems to have seized his chance to promote his close associates, implying that their masculine art was a standout in the otherwise feeble and saccharine works made by women. To make this contrast particularly sharp, he did not care to mention any avant-garde women artists whose pieces were also part of the display.

This silence is particularly telling with regard to Olga Rozanova (1886-1918), an ingenious and radical artist of the early Russian avant-garde, whom Mayakovsky knew very well and whose art he had always held in high regard. The exhibition *Women Artists to Victims of War* was the first occasion when Rozanova, one of the leading figures in the Union of Youth art group and a bold illustrator of provocative Russian Cubo-Futurist books, exhibited her innovative designs for applied art, based on her concurrent avant-garde experiments with abstract collages. It is rather difficult to identify precisely which pieces were actually displayed, for in the catalogue they are simply indicated as “a bag”, “a collar”, “a cushion”, etc. The reproduction of one of Rozanova's contemporary creations chosen to illustrate this article may, in fact, not be the same work displayed in the exhibition (Fig. 3). The style, though, must be the same, for judging by Rozanova's artistic biography, she must have exhibited designs commissioned for the pioneering embroidery enterprise Verbovka, an art colony founded and managed by the artist Natalia Davydova (1875-1933). Just a year later, in 1915 stylistically related works by other women avant-garde artists for Verbovka embroideries (Fig. 4) would receive accolades from the critics on the occasion of the *Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art* at the Lemers'e Gallery in Moscow.²² Mayakovsky's silence about Rozanova, which seems puzzlingly opportunistic, makes sense if we consider that he was essentially following the same stereotyped pattern already offered by many other contemporary commentators, that is, juxtaposing good art made by men with mediocre bricolage produced by women. Giving a positive evaluation to even one female participant within this context would have spoiled his whole narrative.

¹⁹ Mayakovsky, *Nov'*, 29 December 1914.

²⁰ Mayakovsky in his review quotes two lines from the poem by Igor Severianin, *Prosvet Amazonii (Flourishing Dawn of Amazonia)*, 1913.

²¹ David Burliuk, Alexey Kruchenykh, Vladimir Maykovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (Moscow: Geleia, 1912), 3.

²² *The Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art: Embroidery and Carpets Designed by Artists* ran from 6 November to 1914 to 8 December 1915. It featured embroidered items from the two arts and crafts colonies of Verbovka and Skoptzy together with embroidery designs produced for the same colonies by avant-garde artists Kseniia Boguslavskaiia (1892-1972), Ekaterina Vasilieva (1884-1957), Natalia Davydova (1875-1933), Kasimir Malevich, Aleksandra Ekster (1882-1949) and others.

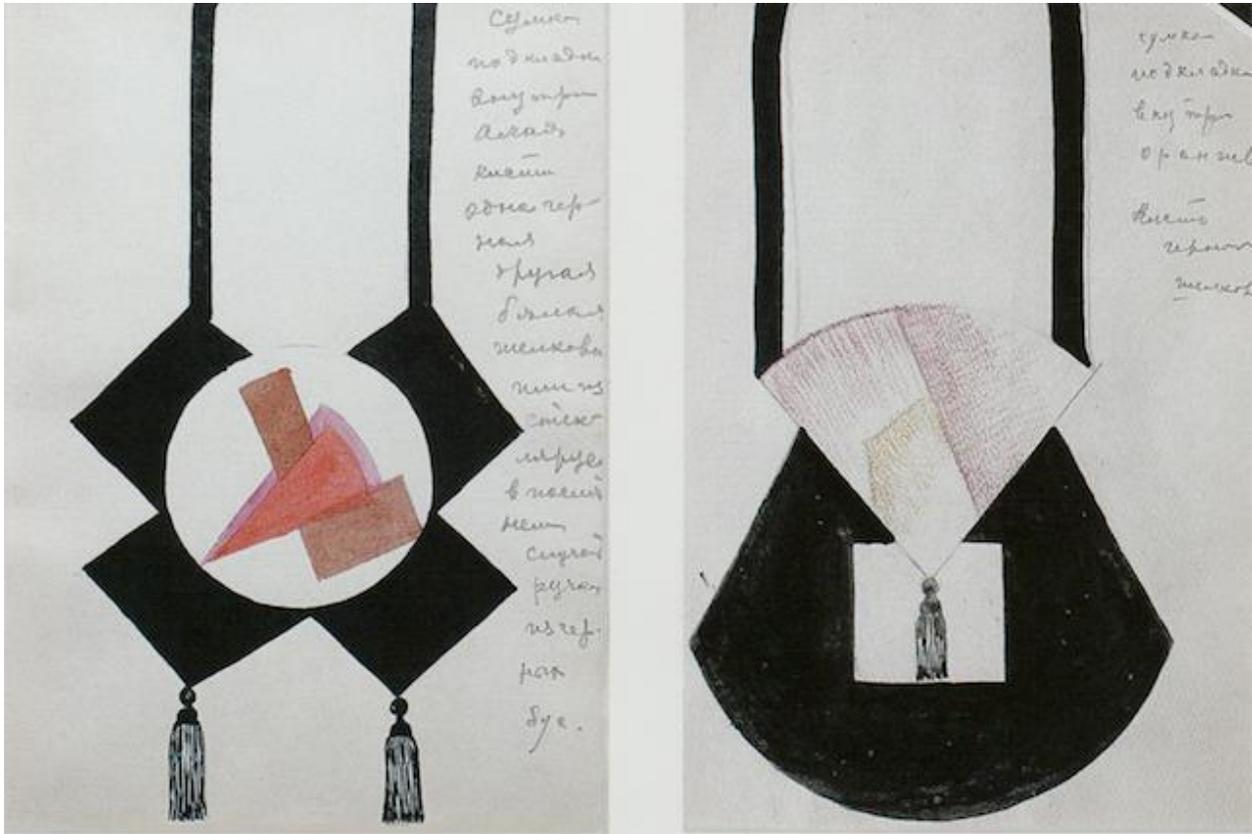


Figure 3. Olga Rozanova, *Design for a bag*, ca. 1914-1917, 19.2 × 13.3 cm, watercolour and pencil on paper. Private collection, Moscow.

The analysis of the press gives one the feeling that the exhibition in general was, indeed, lacking true inspiration. In addition to having several logistical problems, the Union neither offered a compelling aesthetic programme, nor did it put on display a sufficient number of remarkable or, at least, provocative works of art. The only stirring moments seem to have been caused by Malevich's paintings, if we are to believe the artist's version of events reported in one of his letters to Matiushin: "Their exhibition opened, and the public started to gather in front of my works and, headed by newspapers' scribblers, to criticize [them] loudly".²³

While none of the "newspapers' scribblers" ever referred to such episodes in their reports, one critic offered his explanation as to why the first exhibition of the Moscow Union of Women Painters

missed the mark. This aforementioned anonymous reviewer from *Russkie Vedomosti* was also the only correspondent who reported any female names at all. According to him: "Prominent women artists who showed their works included Villiam, Gol'dinger, Riuss and Shanks".²⁴ That was, indeed, a rather short list, hardly able to attract big crowds. His article ended by suggesting possible reasons of the exhibition's lack of success:

It appears that "women among themselves" are less impressive when compared with the same women artists taking part in joint exhibitions. This can be explained, perhaps, by the fact that the most accomplished and talented of them obviously have bigger names. And the ones who have well-known names and prominent places in the large exhibitions are reluctant to send their best works not to the Union of Russian Artists or to the Association of the

²³ Malevich, *Malevich o sebe*. vol. 1, 64.

²⁴ Anon., *Russkie vedomosti*.



Figure 4. The Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art in Lemercier Gallery. Photograph by A. I. Savel'ev published in the illustrated magazine *Iskri*, 8 November 1915 (#45)

Travelling Exhibitions [...], but to the a small, modest, and only just established exhibition.²⁵

It was no accident that the commentator brought up into his narrative two of the most respected art groups of the time: the Association of the Travelling Exhibitions (founded in 1870) and the Union of Russian Artists (founded in 1903). In fact, three out of four prominent artists he listed in his review were already members of these groups: Shanks was the first woman to become a full member of the Association of the Travelling Exhibitions (in 1891), which preached realism, while Gol'dinger and Villiam were members of the Union of Russian Artists. None of these female artists, according the author from *Russkie Vedomosti*, sent any of their important works to the exhibition Women Artists

²⁵ Ibid.

to the Victims of War. “Apparently—concluded the reviewer—there are just not enough martyrs of the feminist idea in Russian society to produce a revolution even if only in the field of fine arts”.²⁶

Conclusion

Examination of the published responses to the exhibition *Women Artists to the Victims of War* allows us to make some reasonable assumptions about the issues concerning the Moscow Union of Women Painters and, more generally, women's participation in the Russian pre-revolutionary arts. While no reviewer writing about the event actually questioned the right of women to be professional artists, their texts revealed various degrees of deeply entrenched prejudices against

²⁶ Ibid.

women's ability to produce great art. Denouncing the first exhibition of the Moscow Union of Women Painters as mediocre and uninspiring, none of the authors offered an assessment of any of the female works in particular. Moreover, all but one did not even bother to mention any woman artist at all. Such a generalised outlook created in the reader's mind the impression that each and every piece on the exhibition's display was uniformly dull (which did not seem to be the case). This kind of criticism harked back to the perception of women as only capable to engage with art for mere social 'accomplishment'.

Having said that, one must also recognise that the Union shared responsibility for reinforcing such a damaging view because of the poor organisation of their first public event. The rented venue was not adapted to host an art exhibition and, more importantly, the selection policy lacked clear criteria due to the fact that the Union did not pursue any coherent aesthetic policy. This approach might have appeared convenient for artists struggling to find access to any other exhibition spaces, but it was unlikely to secure support from distinguished women artists, of whom only a small number decided to join in. Consequently, the eclectic display of the exhibition *Women Artists to Victims of War*, featuring works of mostly unknown artists of all kind of artistic styles, failed to impress a public spoiled for choice with many other exhibitions mounted in Moscow during the first wartime winter of 1914-1915. As a result, the attempt to establish a favourable public profile of the new art group fell flat. Instead of promoting female achievements in the field of arts, the Union came under harsh criticism, which was potentially frustrating for women's professional prestige.

This lamentable turn of events poses the question of how sound was the idea of creating a separate female group at the time when women were already accepted into all influential art groups with access to important exhibition spaces. The absence of direct testimonies from people who set up the Union makes it impossible to grasp their true

motives. It seems nonetheless safe to conclude that by 1914 the idea of joining a women-only art society held little appeal for the majority of the female artists determined to carve out a solid career. Despite the fact that they had to face up to persisting prejudices and challenges of achieving equal status within a profession largely dominated by men, women artists seem to have preferred to be part of joint initiatives rather than confine themselves to gender segregation within a female group. This kind of attitude was particularly conspicuous in the Russian avant-garde circles where the number of women and level of their involvement with various projects was on a par with men.

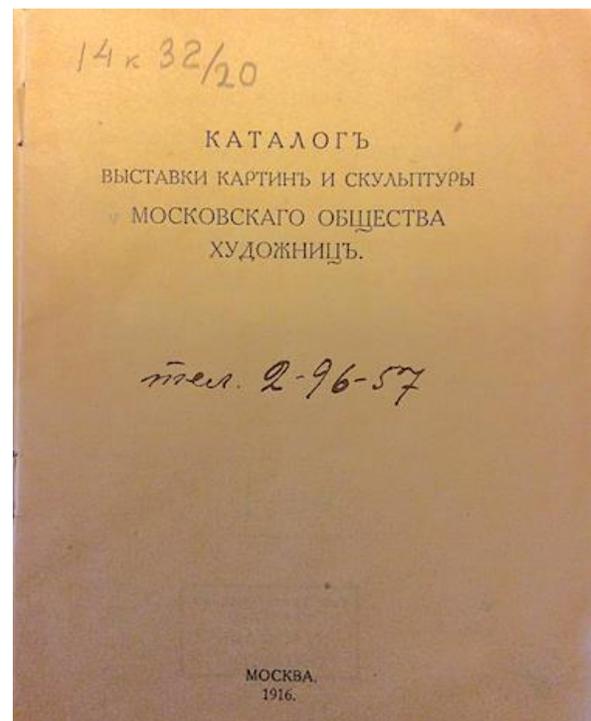


Figure 5. Title page of the catalogue *Exhibition of painting and sculpture of the Moscow Union of Women Artists, 1916, Moscow*. Library of the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

Epilogue

The further history of the Moscow Union of Women Painters remains for the most part unknown. The aforementioned book *The Golden Age of Art Unions in Russia and the USSR* indicates that it disintegrated in 1915, only a year after its estab-

lishment. Yet, the Library of the Tretyakov Gallery holds the catalogues of the Union's exhibitions related to later dates (Fig. 5). The group's next exhibition of 1916, although slightly larger than the first, involved a lower number of distinguished contributors. It did not enlist the participation of Emilia Shanks, Elena Villiam, Rosa Riuss, Ekaterina Gol'dinger and Ol'ga Rozanova, who apparently lost interest in the Union's initiatives. A few members of the Union also took part in the first and third exhibitions mounted in the historical town Segiev Posad by the Troitse-Sergiev Art Society in 1915 and 1916 respectively. The contemporary press ignored these events altogether. However, the Union seems to have still been active until the advent of the October Revolution, which totally reshaped Russian gender politics as well as the purpose and organisation of Russian arts.

Acknowledgments

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