

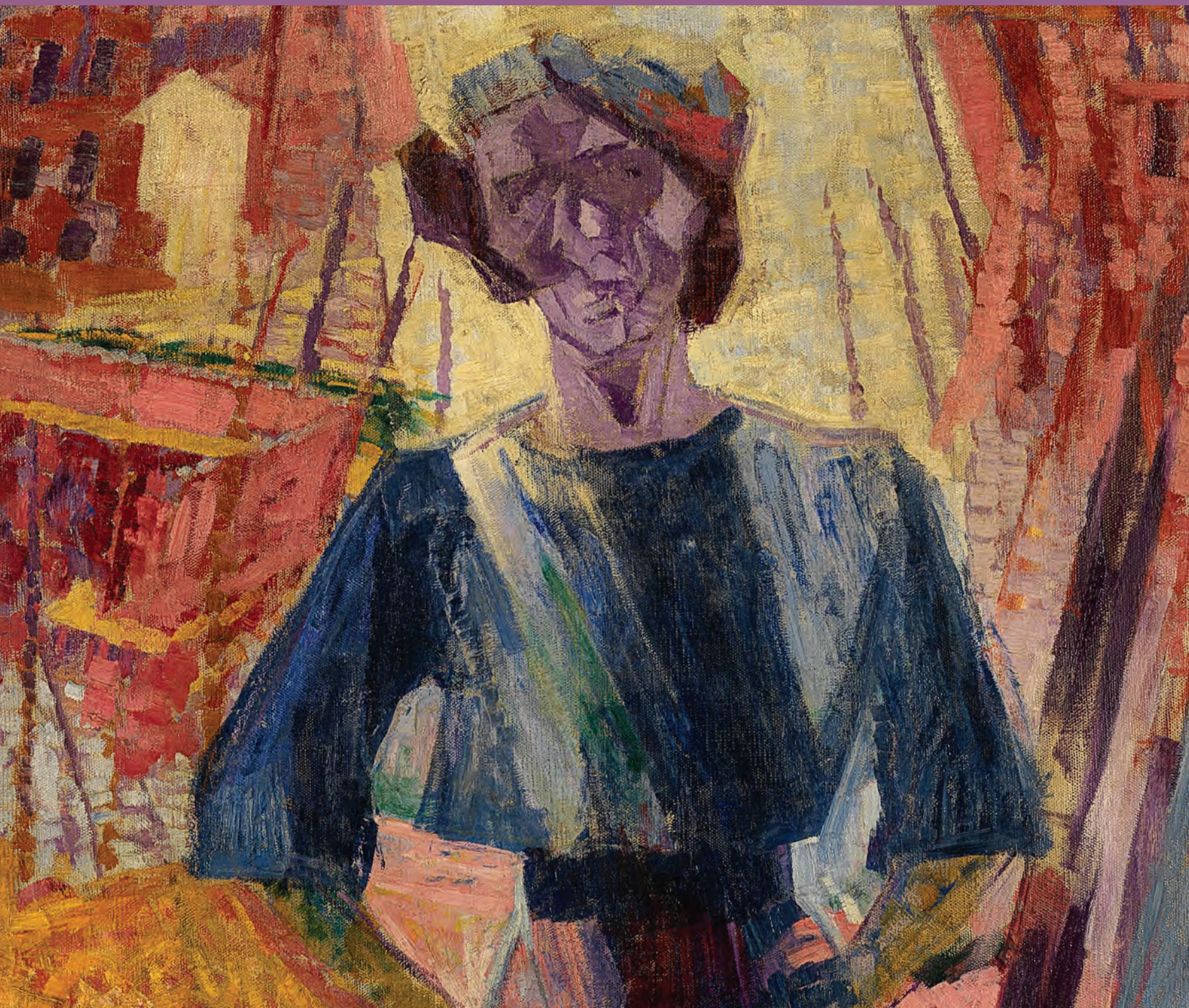
NEW RESEARCH ON ART AND ITS HISTORY

MARCH 2020

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

Drawings by Verrocchio, Lequeu, Boccioni and Osen

An Artemisia Gentileschi discovery | A cameo by Sostratos | Reflections on Arte Povera
Troy in London | Canova and Thorvaldsen in Milan | Dora Maar in Paris



footnotes. This is an invaluable compendium of engraved sources in use at the leading porcelain factory in the German-speaking world.

¹ Engraved sources for porcelain decoration have been the subject of considerable research since the interwar period. See, for example, C. Cook: *The Life and Work of Robert Hancock*, London 1948; *idem*: *Supplement to the Life and Work of Robert Hancock*, London 1958; and G. and S. Guy-Jones: *Bow Porcelain, On-glaze Prints and their Sources*, London 2013.

The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival

By Maria Taroutina. 288 pp. incl. 51 col. + 65 b. & w. ills. (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park PA, 2018), £79.95. ISBN 978-0-271-08104-5.

by ANDREW SPIRA

Maria Taroutina's book adds valuable detail to the established understanding that, despite their wholehearted commitment to modernity, Russian avant-garde artists were openly indebted to the past. This was not the symbolic pasts that had been cultivated by their predecessors – Classical Antiquity, ancient Egypt – but their own. This shift involved the discovery (or creation) of national identity, and a return beyond Russian sources to the origins of the country's spiritual identity in Byzantium, from which Russia adopted Orthodox Christianity.

Taroutina's study opens with a chapter on the rehabilitation of Byzantium in the eyes of Russians, following a century of pro-westernisation instigated in the late seventeenth century by Peter the Great. One of the reasons the subject is interesting is that it clearly exposes the mechanisms of influence. First of all, the concept of Byzantium had to be distilled from the physical fact that the Byzantine Empire had become the Ottoman Empire and that Hagia Sophia, the greatest church of Byzantium, had become a mosque. In the 1780s Catherine the Great had planned to recreate the Byzantine Empire with its capital in Constantinople (she named one of her grandsons 'Constantine', in anticipation of his future role there). She had even hoped to have a replica of Hagia Sophia built outside St Petersburg, although her plan came to nothing; the substitute church, designed by the Scotsman Charles Cameron, is neo-Palladian, reflecting the architect's relative lack of interest in the nationalistic potential of style. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the impulse towards identity

formation in Russia became more focused. Napoleon's doomed invasion of Moscow in 1812 led to disenchantment with all things French (excluding revolutionary ideas, for some) and galvanised the burgeoning interest in what it meant to be Russian. The invasion gave rise to the first great monument in a Russo-Byzantine style, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, begun in 1839 to commemorate Russian losses to Napoleon. But the dream of a reconstituted Byzantium remained alive. Indeed, it was exacerbated by wars between imperial Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the 1850s and 1870s, which led to Russian reclamation of Byzantine territory in the Balkans. At the start of the century, young Russian artists were still travelling to Venice and Ravenna in search of the roots of their art. It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century, Taroutina suggests, that the gaze of scholars shifted towards Russia itself and the art of Kiev, Vladimir, Novgorod and Pskov.

While scholars projected their image of Byzantium outwards, into geographical space and historical time, they also concretised it in the here and now by assembling collections of Byzantine and early Russian artefacts in museums that local people could visit. Especially from the 1880s collections were formed, not only in St Petersburg (the Hermitage and Russian Museum) and Moscow (the Rumyantsev Museum, the Historical Museum and the Tretyakov Gallery, which later absorbed much of the Rumyantsev Museum), but also in due course in Vladimir, Vologda, Kiev and elsewhere. Temporary exhibitions were also an important medium of exchange. One of the strengths of *The Icon and the Square* is the detailed accounts that Taroutina gives of these enterprises. Indeed, although they are to some extent presented as background information to later chapters dedicated to the ways in which the sacred art of Byzantium catalysed the art of Mikhail Vrubel, Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich, they are arguably the book's most original contribution.

Having said that, the chapters dedicated to these artists capture the essence of their responses to the Byzantine tradition, linking their artistic developments closely to the availability of these new sources. Taroutina explains in detail how Vrubel's patchy, painterly style was precipitated by a commission he received in 1884 to complete a damaged cycle of Byzantine mosaics in St Sophia Cathedral, Kiev, with painted simulations. This stylistic relationship was later celebrated in Russia as it

enabled patriotic commentators to attach the new interest in the expressive potential of art to Russian sources, challenging the view that the emergence of Modernism in Russia was entirely due to the influence of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists (who were indeed richly represented in Russian collections). Interestingly, it also transpires that after the Revolution, even Vrubel (1856–1910) – a painter of both visionary scenes and of 'bourgeois' portraits – was manipulated by the Bolsheviks into being understood as an anticipation of Soviet Constructivism and Productivism, firmly rooting those developments in Russian soil.

Taroutina's distinction between Byzantine and early Russian sources is nuanced. She explains how, although the Kiev mosaics directly reflect the influence of Byzantium on Orthodox Russia, the medium had not been continued in Russia until it was revived on account of its 'byzantinism' in the nineteenth century, and it therefore conveyed associations with Byzantium more than with ancient Russia. Significantly, Kandinsky expressed an independent interest in Byzantine, as distinct from Russian, art. Taroutina observes that he read Nikodim Kondakov's doctoral thesis *History of Byzantine Art and Iconography Traced in the Miniatures of Greek Manuscripts*, published in 1876, citing it in his *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911) and even copied one of the miniatures reproduced in it. Kandinsky was attracted to all sacred art and his interest in Byzantium (which he read about in French) did not necessarily have a 'national' implication, even in its broadest sense.

Wooden icons, on the other hand, did. Although icons were painted throughout the Byzantine world and Byzantine panel paintings were collected for Russian museums, icons were typically perceived as distinctively Russian. Unlike the Byzantine world, which abounded in more precious materials, in Russia wood was the only material that was readily available. As Taroutina points out, both Tatlin and Malevich appropriated aspects of icons that had deep national resonances – their physically constructed nature on the one hand, which (unlike Vrubel) influenced Constructivism, and their traditional placement in the corners of Russian homes on the other, a tradition associated with Byzantium only in legend. As such, these artists reflect a kind of response that differentiates them both from Vrubel, who was arguably as interested in Byzantine as in Russian art, and Kandinsky, whose interest in Byzantine art developed while he was living in Germany in 1896–1914 and which was cosmopolitan. Taken together, the artists Taroutina has chosen to

focus on reflect the variety of purposes to which the legacy of Byzantium could be put in pre-revolutionary Russia.

Given that religion was to all intents and purposes banned in the Soviet Union, there is some logic in concluding a book on the influence of religious art at the Revolution. But, as a feature of the legacy of icon painting in Russia, this cut-off point is too absolute. Ironically, aspects of the icon painting tradition continued to pervade the atheistic culture of Communism. This is another story, and it has been widely addressed by scholars; but what perhaps has not received due attention – and it is a shame that it does not appear here – is the impact that the Russo-Byzantine tradition had on more mainstream artists in the 1920s and 1930s. Now that the anniversary of the Revolution is behind us, there is a case for addressing the continuities that marked this tumultuous time and are reflected in art that is only now beginning to surface. In an epilogue Taroutina references the Pussy Riot debacle of 2012 and various other post-Soviet exercises in ‘iconicity’, but iconophile artists from the circle of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin in the 1920s, such as Leonid Chupyatov (1890–1941) and Evgenia Evenbach (1889–1981), are overlooked.

The book is a pleasure to read. Well written and richly illustrated, it gives a comprehensive sense of the way in which the Byzantine ground of Russian national identity was laid throughout the nineteenth century, without which some of the most influential manifestations of world modernism could never have flowered the way they did.

Pier Groups: Art and Sex Along the New York Waterfront

By Jonathan Weinberg. 232 pp. incl. 34 col. + 66 b. & w. ills. (Penn State University Press, University Park PA, 2019), £31.50. ISBN 978-0-271-08217-2.

by JACK PARLETT

In a recent talk at New York University, the queer theorist Jack Halberstam observed that queer ‘utopias’ are not always optimistic or forward-looking. In turning to the past, we observe the utopian promises of other worlds that never came to be. New York’s abandoned Hudson River piers, which were a locus of rich artistic and erotic activity in the 1970s and 1980s, are for Halberstam and many others a consummate example of such lost queer horizons. As dilapidated spaces where gay men

cruised and various artists created, the piers have become synonymous with the queer, the clandestine and the ephemeral – aspects all too easily fetishised or flattened by the orthodoxies of criticism. From the vantage point of the hyper-gentrified era of Grindr and online dating, the piers seem particularly available to nostalgic rewriting. Indeed nostalgia, as the late scholar Svetlana Boym wrote, ‘is not always about the past’; it is considering ‘the future’ that ‘makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales.’¹ What does it mean to take responsibility for nostalgia? And how might this sense of loss be made instructive?

Jonathan Weinberg’s book is animated by such questions. The author candidly frames his history with the admission that he, as an occasional participant in the life of the waterfront, may be prone to a certain nostalgia. Admirably, then, his book offers a markedly ambivalent picture of the piers. He turns a critical eye, for instance, upon the unquestioned radicalism of the interventions that artists performed in the quasi-public space of the piers. Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Day’s end* (1975) is perhaps the best-known of the numerous site-specific works that were staged or constructed in the spaces of the piers. Matta-Clark cut holes of various sizes into the walls of Pier 52 to create a spectacle of changing light, altering the conditions of the space itself. Yet during the making of what he termed anarchitecture – defined as the meeting of anarchy and architecture – Matta-Clark made the markedly less radical gesture of locking up the building in order to keep out

the groups of gay men who used it for sex. As Weinberg writes, ‘it could be argued that Matta-Clark’s seizure and “renovation” of city-owned property was far more criminal than the trespassing or lewd conduct’ of these gay men (p.3).

Matta-Clark was one among a number of ‘ostensibly “straight” artists’ who had an antagonistic relation to the ‘piers in the Greenwich Village area that were most frequented by gay men’. Many avoided them, ‘consciously or unconsciously’ (p.29) aware of this gay sexual subculture, and chose to create their projects in piers further downtown. Vito Acconci, on the other hand, whose *Untitled, project for Pier 17* (1971) involved him waiting on the outskirts of the eponymous pier in order to disclose personal secrets to strangers, forged ahead with his work but compared himself to a ‘nice straight guy [who] goes to prison’ (p.48). The simultaneous fascination with, and disavowal of, the gay world of the piers on the part of these artists makes for uncomfortable reading, but that is not to say that this sexual subculture was in itself a totally enlightened one. Although it held the potential to be, and for some was, a democratising Whitmanesque paradise of anonymous sex that looked beyond the hierarchies of desirability found in the gay ‘scene’, those same hierarchies were nonetheless reproduced along the Hudson. And the piers, even beyond the erotic frisson of a certain sketchiness, were genuinely

8. *Sunbathing on the edge, Pier 52 (Matta-Clark’s Day’s End)*, by Shelley Seccombe. c.1977. Photograph. (Courtesy the artist).

