

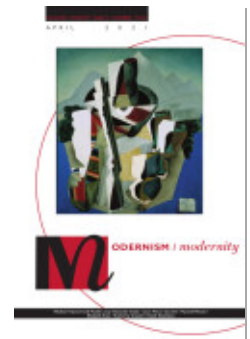


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*The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the
Russo-Byzantine Revival* by Maria Taroutina (review)

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drafts of *The Street* in tandem with Petry's ambivalent record-keeping practices, he could not do so, for there was no manuscript of *The Street*. Or so it seemed: Cloutier kept finding clues that Petry gave the manuscript and other materials to Yale in the 1950s—in spite of there being no record of such a collection. In lieu of a close reading, then, the chapter becomes a detective story, following Cloutier's footsteps as he accumulates “an overabundance of evidence” to prove there was, or had been, a Petry collection at Yale (234). The case is solved when the archivist, presented with Cloutier's case file, realizes to her own surprise that Petry's manuscripts were languishing in the repository's backlog—a resolution that is equal parts bureaucracy and bombshell, given the scarcity of Black women writers' archives.

If the preceding chapters revolve around the “vagabond itineraries” of objects safely housed in venerable archives, Cloutier's final chapter concerns archival sensibilities that elude institutional capture (305). Returning to *Invisible Man*, Cloutier argues that comics—ephemeral objects with “fraught ethics”—are central to the novel's arc (283). The narrator's epiphany, for example, arrives as he observes a trio of young zoot-suiters absorbed in their comic books. Street literature that has something in common with the trash swirling around Lutie in the opening scene of Petry's novel, comics are transformed by Ellison into a counterarchive that “thrived on the periphery, on the burning sidewalks of history's main thoroughfares” (251). Ellison suggests that the true heroes of Harlem—and indeed perhaps its “fleeting, invisible archivists” as well—are not those enshrined at the Beinecke or the Library of Congress (271).

Or are they? This last chapter raises a question that hovers around Cloutier's analysis: the difference, or kinship, between counterarchives and shadow archives. The “archivescape of African American literature,” Cloutier argues, is marked by what Kevin Young calls the “shadow book”—the “unwritten, the removed, and the lost” (2). If McKay's *Amiable* manuscript narrowly escaped this realm of shadow literature, its unlikely rescue only underscores how much of African American cultural history was not archived at all. And yet, in insisting on the Library of Congress as the rightful place for his papers, Ellison engaged in the covert action of counter-archiving, gaining entry not only for his own legacy, but also for his bulging files of ephemera on “those outside the realm of history” (Ellison quoted in Cloutier, 272). The archons of Black literature, Cloutier suggests, anticipated the shadows and thus created counterarchives: unsure of their future fate in the handsome boxes of Ivy League archives, they wove into novel form the “wastepaper, cigarette butts, [and] pink ticket stubs” of Harlem's street scenes (Petry quoted in Cloutier, 222).

***The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival.* Maria Taroutina. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018. Pp. 288. \$89.95 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Sarah Warren, Purchase College

Maria Taroutina's *The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival* is a sorely needed addition to the current scholarship on Russian art. It also offers a broader contribution to our understanding of the role of revival movements within modernism. Opening with the Enlightenment scorn for Byzantium in the eighteenth century, Taroutina offers a nuanced account of how the perception and valuation of Russia's affinities with Byzantine culture developed, often in relation to other intellectual and aesthetic movements. Certainly, the underlying premise of this book—that medieval Russian and Byzantine cultural traditions were important to the development of modernism in Russia—has been explored by several other

386 art historians, notably Wendy Salmon and Oleg Tarasov. *The Icon and the Square*, however, more fully excavates the texts that formed these notions of the Russo-Byzantine, explaining how the concept changed with new scholarly and cultural developments, and also how these new understandings were embodied in scholarly, pedagogical, and religious institutions. The author examines a number of scholarly and critical voices who shaped this literature, ranging from the art historian and archaeologist Nikodim Kondakov, to the religious philosopher Vladimir Soloviev, and even the revolutionary critics Pavel Florensky, Nikolai Punin, and Nikolai Tarabukin, who called for a rethinking of the role of art in the early Soviet period.

As Taroutina explains, a kind of “Byzantine Revival” occurred throughout nineteenth-century Europe, but by juxtaposing Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant’s *The Empress Theodora at the Coliseum* (1889) and Vasilii Smirnov’s *The Morning Visit of a Byzantine Empress to the Graves of Her Ancestors* (1889), she deftly illustrates the gulf between Western and Russian perceptions of the Byzantine. Whereas Benjamin-Constant presented his Byzantine Empress as the apex of corruption, decadence, and sensual excess, Smirnov’s Theodora is a model of enduring faith, humility, and tradition. This contrast is consistent with the particular uses to which the image of Byzantium was put in the later Russian Empire. An emphasis on the Byzantine roots of the Russian state was an important component of a broader critique of the Europeanization of Russia under Peter the Great and his eighteenth-century successors. Again, this is not a new argument, but what Taroutina provides is an exhaustive account of how the scholarly enthusiasm for the Russo-Byzantine period grew into a sophisticated historical literature on and aesthetic appreciation of icons.

The Icon and the Square also demonstrates the concrete continuities between the philosophical and aesthetic understanding of Russo-Byzantine icons before and after the October Revolution. While Taroutina resists claims that the icon was a universally accepted model for the fundamental challenges posed by the early Soviet avant-garde, she describes this spiritual framework as a point of tension between the different avant-garde positions adopted in the wake of the Bolshevik revolution, tensions that were constitutive of the differences between, for example, Malevich, Tatlin, and the Constructivists.

The structure of the book mostly serves this argument; chapter one builds the foundation of the intellectual history, with detailed descriptions of the historical narratives of the Russo-Byzantine by the scholars and critics noted above, among others. The second chapter surveys the history of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting medieval icons in imperial Russia. The last three chapters explore the uses of the icon by a number of important Russian modernists, with chapters devoted to Mikhail Vrubel, Vasily Kandinsky, and the last to the related but contrasting approaches of both Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin.

The chapter on Vrubel is an important addition to the scholarship on an artist whose work is underexamined in English. Contrasting Vrubel’s work with his more conventional contemporaries, such as Victor Vasnetsov, Taroutina argues that Vrubel was a sophisticated interpreter of Byzantine notions of pictorial space. She also persuasively posits that Vrubel’s signature block-like brushstrokes—which earlier critics likened to Cézanne—were developed out of his work restoring ceiling mosaics in the eleventh-century St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev.

In her chapter on Kandinsky, Taroutina develops her concept of the “Iconic Subconscious” and connects Kandinsky to the religious revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (139–48). Along the way, she provides a remarkably clear narrative of how the artist’s spiritual (rather than formal) understanding of the icon informed his transition to painterly abstraction. Kandinsky created abstract forms out of Byzantine and medieval religious imagery, which he believed endowed his images with some of the spiritual power of their sources. His focus on the spiritual force of his works put him at odds with both the dematerialized formalism of later modernist critics, such as Clement Greenberg, and the hyper-materialist Constructivists, his contemporaries in early Soviet Moscow.

The final chapter looks at the work of both Malevich and Tatlin, who, as Taroutina explains, “used the icon as an ontological and philosophical model for reimagining ‘the concept of art’” (180). At the milestone exhibition *0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting*, both Malevich and Tatlin hung their most important works in the corner of their respective galleries, echoing the “sacred corner” of the most revered icons in Orthodox homes. Some of the two artists’ motivation for turning to the icon as model, the author concedes, was an effort to distinguish their work from European modernist trends, to claim for their own innovations an “indigenous genealogy” (183). But the model of the icon as an object inhabited by a spiritual presence, or one that held within it a spiritual realm, was far more fundamental to Malevich’s and Tatlin’s innovations than superficial nationalist polemics. The close connection between Malevich’s *Black Square* and the icon has long been acknowledged, but Taroutina gives us a fuller understanding of the paradoxical use of the icon in Malevich’s “zero of form,” claiming that it “was ironically able to reverse the sacred-profane binary of secular and religious representation, intimating the transcendental despite its categorical assertion of nonobjective materialism” (209). Tatlin’s appeal to the icon as model, on the other hand, has received significantly less scholarly attention, and Taroutina rectifies this absence, making a powerful case that Tatlin’s engagement with the spatial and three-dimensional aspects of his materials was a result of his deep loyalty to the icon, rather than a departure from it.

A book of this ambition, however, rarely comes without flaws. Though she relates the importance of Russia’s Byzantine roots in establishing the imperial notion of the “Third Rome,” and gives evocative examples of the political uses of icons in post-Soviet Russia, the author hardly touches upon the politics of icons within her chosen time period (60). Because of the rigor of Taroutina’s scholarship and the strength of her contribution to the field, this blind spot is particularly puzzling. Though an excellent account of the development of both aesthetic and scholarly understandings of medieval Russian art, *The Icon and the Square* attempts virtually no analysis of how the changing notions of the Russo-Byzantine were entangled with the changing political landscape of late imperial and early Soviet Russia. There are a few exceptions to this rule; a discussion of the 1909 essay collection *Landmarks* (Vekhi) acknowledges the relationship between religious revivalism and the political reform movement before World War I. In addition, Taroutina gives a compelling description of Malevich’s disillusionment with the dogmatic conservatism of Soviet artistic life after the death of Lenin. These are instructive and relevant examples, but the events and conditions that, in large part, determined the changing cultural role of icons—the abolition of serfdom, the assassination of Alexander II and the ensuing reactionary policies of Alexander III, the Revolution of 1905 and its aspirations toward both ethnic self-determination and religious freedom, Nikolas II’s dissolution of the 1905 reforms—are almost entirely absent from the book. Despite her careful excavation of the concept of the Russo-Byzantine, Taroutina seems unwilling to examine how, for example, attempts to heal the cultural divide between former serfs and the educated classes informed public understanding of icons, or how religious imagery that was inseparable from Russian national self-understanding had symbolic power during a period in which national and religious minorities struggled for self-determination within the Russian Empire.

Despite the absence of this important dimension of the Russo-Byzantine, *The Icon and the Square* is an invaluable contribution to the field. Taroutina provides a powerful framework for understanding the intellectual history of the icon and the uses to which it was put by modern artists.