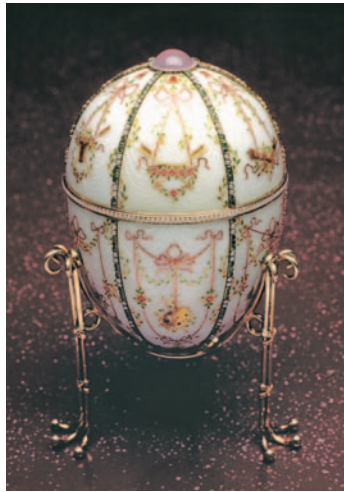




Nathalie Goncharova, 'Factory', 1912', The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg



Nathalie Goncharova, 'Hoar Frost', 1910-11, oil on canvas. The State Russian Museum.



Carl Fabergé, 'Surprise Egg', 1903, fabricated in the Leningrad Workshops. Private Collection

ST PETERSBURG 1900

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 10 July – 23 October, 2005

THIS colourful and expansive exhibition has a far wider compass than the title would suggest – being a rather broad canvas illustrating life centred on St Petersburg, the imperial capital of Russia at the time of the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. It was a turbulent period that the exhibition opens with pastoral scenes of mid-19th century Russian wilderness and closes with the costumes for *Masquerade* that inopportunately opened on the night of the violent revolution of February 1917. Included are examples of the startling experiments of the Russian avant-garde which still echo in art today.

The subject matter includes writers, musicians, painters, choreographers and illustrators of this vibrant and

Kasimir Malevich, 'Suprematis', 1915, oil on canvas. The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg



Ivan Shishkin, 'Winter', 1890, oil on canvas. State Russian Museum
cultured Russian city at a time of great turmoil in world affairs when national roots were explored and the modern nations of Italy and Germany forged. Expressions of national identity – in a way the zeitgeist of the age – matured. In Russia literature had blossomed

giving the world the social realist tragedies of Fyodor Dostoyevsky and the melancholy and impressionistic plays of Anton Chekov. Russian music reached its zenith in this period including Alexander Borodin, Modest Mussorgsky and the Professor at the St Petersburg

conservatoire, Nicholas Rimsky-Korsakov. Music was colourful and patriotic, themed from national history and folklore, inspiring opera and ballet costumes in equally flamboyant mode which later had a wide effect on international art through the influence of the artist designers for the Ballets Russes. Artists and illustrators sought to express the national identity, some as social realists, others in a freer mode influencing international art.

The exhibition includes painting, illustration, photography, costume design, ceramics, textiles and metalwork, as well as folk and other artforms selected from the State Russian Museum and the State Museum of Theatre and Music in St Petersburg. The examples of folk art, such as carved and painted wooden artefacts, are germane to the story for they were an expression of national identity that acted as indirect inspiration for other arts. The colourful paintwork of wooden containers can be seen reflected most particularly in costume design and illustration. From a private collection there is an exquisitely enamelled egg from the St Petersburg Workshops designed by Carl Fabergé in 1903.

The natural interaction within the cultural milieu is clearly illustrated by Count Leo Tolstoy, who loved music, mixed with musicians, had his books illustrated by artists and was a subject for the painter Ilya Repin. The music of Tchaikovsky and others inspired sets, costumes and choreography for opera and ballet by the celebrated Léon Baskt, Alexander Benois and strikingly different ones by Kasimir Malevich whose set designs are absolutely minimal. There are paintings and sketches of the famous dancers Vaslav Nijinsky and Anna Pavlova.

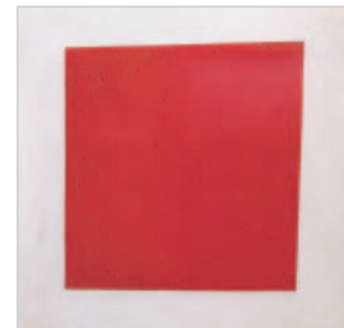
In recognition of the interaction of the various artforms the exhibi-

Kasimir Malevich, 'Aviator', 1914, oil on canvas. The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg



tion is the centrepiece of a major festival encompassing, music, theatre and ballet. The WA Symphony Orchestra gave four concerts with a Russian repertoire, *Cinderella* was performed by the WA Ballet Company, Chekov's *Uncle Vanya* and Turgenev's *A Month in the Country*, were staged.

The exhibition and festival were the brainchild and passion of the Director of the Art Gallery, Alan Dodge, who spent 10 years bringing it to fruition. His interest had initially been kindled following a three-month sojourn in Russia which resulted in the exhibition "From Russia with Love" at the National Gallery in Canberra and at AGWA in the 1990s. This show, however, will only be seen in Perth. Alan Dodge and curator Melissa Harpley designed the exhibition as a "prequel" to provide a broader understanding of what led to the extraordinary avant-garde works produced during the early part of 20th century. Where the exhibition commences the painters, in parallel with music and literature, were Social Realists forming a nationalist movement commonly referred to as *Peredvishniki* (wanderers), who sought to discard all foreign influences. It was an epoch



Kasimir Malevich, 'Red Square', 1915, oil on canvas, painterly realism of peasant woman in two dimensions. The State Russian Museum

when Russian artists discovered landscape leading to atmospheric paintings that depicted anecdotal reality, as in Repin's detailed study for the *Volga Boatmen*

The *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) group which followed had a more liberal aesthetic, which had been initiated by Alexander Benois and Serge Diaghilev and included K. A. Korovin, A. Y. Golovin and Léon Baskt. This group was to have a major influence on 20th century art and fashion. In the illustration section Maria Yakuchikova-Weber's cover for the *Mir Iskusstva* journal and Ivan Bilbin's *Volga with his Brotherhood* are notable. These artists also designed for the vibrant theatre and ballet scene and had a great impact on French art when Diaghilev's Ballets Russes opened in Paris in 1909.

Konstantin Ivanov's sketch for his candyfloss set for Tchaikovsky's



Alexander Benois, 'Pasha Costume' design for Rimsky-Korsakov's 'Pavilions of Aramides'. State Museum of Theatre and Music, St Petersburg



Costume design by A. Golovin for 'Orpheus and Eurydice'. 1911, State Museum of Theatre and Music, St Petersburg



Maria Yakuchikova-Weber, front cover design for the influential *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) journal in 1899. The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg



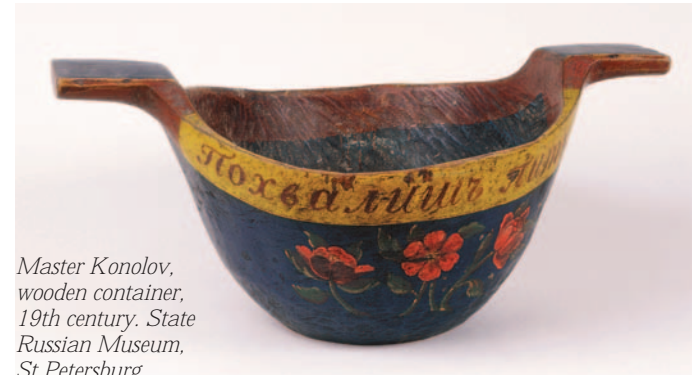
Konstantin Ivanov's set design for the premiere of Tchaikovsky's 'The Nutcracker Suite' ballet in 1892. State Museum of Theatre and Music

well-loved *Nutcracker Suite* is on display, as are designs from other famous productions. Benois is represented by a delightful series of costume sketches and set designs, including his pasha costume for Rimsky-Korsakov's *Pavilions of Aramides*. The artist and designer Mikail Vrubel is represented by a magnificent costume worn by his wife in the composer's opera *Sadko*.

Those interested in more modern art are well catered for with iconic works from Nathalie Goncharova, Vladimir Tatlin and Malevich. The latter may surprise as he is represented by an early portrait and other Style Moderne works ranging from his Cubist *Aviator* showing a clear debt to Braque and Picasso, to his revolutionary Suprematist work *Red Square*. Goncharova's work also shows a similar transition in styles



The magnificent beaded costume designed by artist Mikail Vrubel for his wife's performance in Rimsky-Korsakov's opera 'Sadko'. State Museum of Theatre and Music



Master Konolov, wooden container, 19th century. State Russian Museum, St Petersburg

Alexander Repin, 'Duel of Onegin and Lensky', 1901, oil on canvas. State Museum of Theatre and Music

from her *Hoar Frost* of 1911 to her strong Futurist work *Factory* of 1912 to Rayonism with its colourist theories which she began to apply after moving to Paris to design for the Ballets Russes.

The exhibition spans the turbulent time of the Great War and the prelude to the Russian Revolution of 1917. At this time speed and the dynamism of the machine influenced artists and Futurism was one of a series of creative explosions occurring in Europe. The Fauvres were also influential as was Cubism in which both Malevich and Goncharova were key players, with Malevich taking it apart to abstract geometry as in *Suprematis* and going back to beginnings – to pure nothingness as in his legendary *White-on-White* square where he pushed abstraction to the limit. His *Black-on-White* square of 1913 was the first Suprematist work and had a profound influence on 20th century art. His *Red Square* is on exhibition. Vladimir Tatlin, another pioneer of abstract art who initiated Constructivism, is also represented in the show but in an earlier figurative style. Another artist of interest is the lesser known Olga Rosanova who died at a young age. Her painting *Non Objective* predates by almost 100 years much contemporary work seen today in local art galleries.

Dr Dorothy Erickson