

FOR THE CENTENNARY OF "MIR ISKUSSTVA":
D. V. FILOSOFOV'S UNPUBLISHED MEMOIRS OF A. BENOIS

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There has been a discernible but predictable pattern in the chronological stages through which research about Mir Iskusstva has evolved before a balanced assessment of the era was proposed. Literary biographies and autobiographies came first, with their virtues of immediacy and directness of vision, but with their limitations in the partiality of that vision, inevitable prejudices and myopic disproportion.¹ The first general studies and attempts to present a dispassionate historical treatment followed, interwoven with reminiscences and marked by a tendency to focus on the same pivotal episodes and what is historically apparent.² A disproportion is

¹ Literary biographies and memoirs of this period appeared gradually. Those of A. Levinson, *The Story of Bakst Life*, Berlin 1922; L. Bakst, *Serov i ja v Grecii: Dorožnye zapisi*, Berlin 1923; M. V. Dobužinskij, *O Bakste. Iz moich vospominanij*, Segodnja, Riga 1925; A. Benua, *Vozniknovenie "Mira Iskusstva"*, Leningrad 1928; M. Teniševa, *Vpečatlenija moej žizni*, Paris 1933; Z. Gippius, *Živye lica*, Prague 1925, and *Dmitrij Merežkovskij*, Paris 1951, are only a few of the revealing collections of memoirs recalling the period or aspects of it. In view of the myriad of subsequent publications one wonders if there has ever been another period of Russian culture, whose participants were so urgently prompted to call it back to memory in later life.

² Such early general studies of the time include: P. Percov, *Mir Iskusstva*, in *Literaturnye vospominanija 1890-1902*, Moscow 1933; N. Sokolova, *Mir iskusstva*, Moscow 1934; Serge Lifar, *Diaghilev, With Diaghilev*, Paris 1939. These works are characterized by compendious summary, yet it must be apparent that, valuable as these studies are, the field of vision has been artificially limited in them. The structure and thesis of such studies listed above was augmented by the later general studies: C. Gray, *The Great Experiment in Russian Art 1863-1922*, London 1962; S. Makovskij, *Na Parnase Serebrjanogo veka*, München 1962; A. Gusarova, *Mir Iskusstva*, Leningrad

lent to such studies, owing to the apocalyptic impact of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet sphalm, that *Mir Iskusstva* was a decadent, aristocratic and alienigenate movement outside the realm of true art.³ Next to appear were the more thorough and scholarly studies about individual members, which attest to the awareness that our understanding of the culture of this transitional period is of significance and crucial to an understanding of our own.⁴ These were accompanied by the abundant publications of letters, diaries and notebooks, which helped researchers discern the main stream from the eddies of the movement.⁵ And finally, critical attitudes have developed, whose

1962; Franco Miele, *L'avanguardia tradita*, Rome 1973; early studies by N. P. Lapšina, *Mir Iskusstva: Očerki istorii i tvorčeskoj praktiki*, Moscow 1977. One could almost be convinced that these works are the last word on the subject, yet now they are considered valuable essays in interpretation and chronicles of the aesthetic experience which bring much relevant material into orderly sequence.

³ Ironically, it is a common trait of most early studies published during the Soviet period, and more recently as well, that D. Filosofov's role in *Mir Iskusstva* is either diminished to one of marginal participation, ignored, or appears secondary to that of his cousin S. Diaghilev, or A. Benois, who are established as the presiding animi of the movement. For political reasons, the nature of his work did not permit much commentary in his homeland during the decades of exile and in the years following his death. His artistic individualism transformed into political engagement. Following the Bolshevik revolution, Filosofov together with the Merežkovskie fled to Warsaw, where Filosofov devoted himself to political, specifically anti-bolshevik causes, initially as a loyal ally of Boris Savinkov. Following the latter's return to the Soviet Union, he remained dedicated to opposing the Bolshevik government – naturally he was perceived as a dangerous political activist and an anathema by the Soviet government.

⁴ Since the 1960s critical studies about the leading artists of this period appeared with increasing frequency, for example, M. Etkind, *A. N. Benua, 1870-1960*, Moscow 1965; V. A. Zlobin, *Tjaželaja duša*, Washington 1970; I. N. Pružan, *L. S. Bakst*, Leningrad 1975; E. V. Žuravleva, *Konstantin Somov*, Moscow 1980; the list is symptomatic, and by no means complete. In biography and criticism of writers associated with the period, there is no end to the making of books and such studies attest to the awareness of the significance of this period.

⁵ One must admire scholars like I. S. Silberstejn and V. A. Samkov in their editing of *Sergej Djagilev i russkoe iskusstvo: Stat'i, otkrytye pis'ma, interv'ju*, Moscow 1982; Yu. N. Podkopaeva and A. M. Svešnikova for *Konstatin Andreevič Somov: Pis'ma, Dnevnik, Suždenija sovremennikov*, Moscow 1979. Volumes of correspondence diaries and documents chronicle details of the period: A. N. Benua, *Moi vo-*

perspective permits a balanced assessment of the special character of the culture of the age, the sources from which it sprang and the stages and trends to which it led.⁶ Now, by the centenary of Mir Iskusstva, so many disparate elements in Russian cultural life make reference to the movement that it would seem improbable that one could claim a patch of virgin ground.⁷

It is a perversity that the critic must repeat this process time and again, never substantially knowing the significance of the present, until it has slipped at least several decades into the past.⁸ Yet as D. V. Filosofov acknowledged in the third section of the essay printed below, it is a truism that the ability to make valid critical judgements increases in direct proportion to the amount of information available and the amount of time that one is removed from the event. In 1916, Dmitrij Filosofov initiated the process of evaluating the age of Mir Iskusstva with a twenty page essay, which he penned to commemorate the thirty-second anniversary of his association with Aleksandr Benois. This work is the first prescient synopsis and critical assessment of Mir Iskusstva, and appropriately comes from within the

spominanija, New York 1955; *Valentin Serov v vospominanijach, dnevnikach i perezpiske sovremennikov*, Leningrad 1972, as well as collections of correspondence by Aleksandr Ya. Golovin (Moscow 1960), I. Ya. Bilibin (Leningrad 1970), I. Grabar' (Moscow 1974), M. V. Dobužinskij (Leningrad 1976).

⁶ John Bowlt's *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the "World of Art" Group* (Newtonville 1979) is the most provocative study of the group. "*Mir Iskusstva*". *Ob'edinenie russkich chudožnikov načala XX veka* (Leningrad 1991) does more to study and assess the emergent cultural values of the time in and for themselves. More limited and directed interpretations of the age are S. V. Golyneč, *L. Bakst*, Moscow 1991; V. N. Lapšin, *Valentin Serov, poslednij god žizni* (Moscow 1995), while Lynn Garagola's *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (Oxford 1989) is inclined to consider the culture as a preparation for our own.

⁷ The first issue of "*Mir Iskusstva*" appeared on November 10, 1898. The bibliographies of titles on the criticism of the era, provided by John Bowlt in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934* (New York 1976) and further augmented his book *The Silver Age* and most other works cited above, map out the well explored terrain of the period.

⁸ This truism is also a leitmotiv in Filosofov's anthology of essays *Staroe i novoe, sbornik statej po voprosam iskusstva i literatury* (Moscow 1912). See for example his essays *Samobytnost' russkogo zodčestva; Byt, sobytija nebytie; Sud sovremennym* and his essay in honour of Richard Muther contained in this collection.

original group. As such, Filosofov's reminiscences, published below for the first time, are essential additions to the movement's history. In order to appreciate the particular tone of these memoirs, it is important to consider, firstly, certain historical circumstances – the essay was written during the First World War on the eve of abrupt political and ethical changes, amidst irrational violence which contradicted the cherished ideals of Mir Iskusstva, and secondly, personal factors – it was circulated to members of the author's immediate coterie, who could be expected to respond to the nuances of the depiction of Benois and Filosofov's self-portrait.⁹ The sudden dislocations of Filosofov's narrative can be explained parenthetically – these memoirs were meant to be part of a larger personal unpublished essay that he continued to write following his emigration to Poland.¹⁰ Prior to leaving Russia in 1920, Filosofov deposited a version of his essay in the State Russian Museum, which remained unpublished, presumably for political reasons, and with time was overshadowed by other studies.¹¹

From among the memoirs by the members of Mir Iskusstva, Aleksandr Benois' work, *Vozniknovenie Mira Iskusstva*, a brilliant description of the conversion of himself and his friends to a limited yet pure religion of beauty and truth has been taken by clerisy as the definitive account of the group's intellectual background.¹² The publication of Filosofov's essay will complete the lacuna in the chronology of bibliography, research, as well as suggest the possibility of Filosofov's influence on Benois' study. As a limited and direct inter-

⁹ Filosofov's narrative includes several examples of the club's coded argot – for instance *martindokstvovat'*, *skuril'nik*, and *die parfūmierte Distingiertheit, gutirovat'* – the effect of which is augmented by the author's own refined phraseology and polyglot lexicon.

¹⁰ Mir Iskusstva is frequently referred to in Filosofov's anthology *Staroe i novoe*. Exulant in Warsaw, Filosofov wrote two articles related to "Mir Iskusstva", namely "Bakst i Serov" (1923) and "Lev Bakst" (1925). During the years preceeding his departure from Russia, he set himself the task of compiling memoirs of various persons, documentary memoirs about the revolution which remain unpublished.

¹¹ Filosofov's essay is catalogued in the State Russian Museum: Archive of A. Benois, fond 137, ed. chr. 14.

¹² The original edition of A. Benois, *Vozniknovenie "Mira Iskusstva"* (Leningrad 1928) was recently republished (Moscow 1998) with an introductory essay by G. Ju. Sternin, to mark the sixtieth anniversary of this publication of Benois work.

pretation of the age, Filosofov's account can be considered to be the seedbed for the preparation of later works. Although unpublished, it was known by a number of memoirists, specifically A. Benois,¹³ whose work in its structure and tone, descriptions of the daily life of Mir Iskusstva, the epicurean members and associates, and in his far-ranging and provocative overviews both of the years and their larger context resembles Filosofov's lesser known but antecedent work.

More than three quarters of a century after its completion, this short work on Mir Iskusstva provides new information concerning the unexplored amity between Filosofov and Benois. But this introduction presents, in retrospect, three significant hypotheses developed by subsequent researchers. Firstly, Filosofov gignates the idea, that Mir Iskusstva was an agglomeration of individuals, heterogeneous in their talents, homodoxian in their conviction that emotion, not reason, must guide creativity. Secondly, his work proposes the theory that what Mir Iskusstva stood for is what the members were and what they did. For Filosofov it was necessary to distinguish the parts from the whole in order to illustrate the dynamic symbiosis between the individual and the group. For this reason, he chose a description of Benois' life and work as the only satisfactory medium to present his perception of the importance of Benois within the group, and the significance of this association for the evolution of the latter's work. Filosofov concludes that his description of his friendship with Aleksandr Benois would reveal part of the past and perhaps would illuminate aspects of their future careers. In this connection, Filosofov's essay written when he was forty-four years old, illustrates the art of critical journalism which typifies his prolific writing during the last two decades of his life.¹⁴

¹³ A. Benois cites Filosofov's essay in his own work, *Vozniknovenie Mira Iskusstva*, pp. 43-44.

¹⁴ This decade inspired Filosofov's career as a critic of distinction, a versatile essayist, and entrepreneur of artistic influences. The exquisite oil and pencil portraits produced by Benois, Bakst and Serov are matched by Filosofov's literary biographical descriptions which are impressionistic, yet vivacious accounts characterized by an interplay of strict mundane events, emotion and humour – hallmarks of Filosofov's style. A. Benois continued to provide new perspectives in the arts during the first half of the 20th century. His eclectic nature led him to develop an enormous stylistic range which influenced playwrights, critics, painters, designers, architects, directors.

This essay describes four stages of the history of Mir Iskusstva viewed through the prism of the author's relationship with A. Benois.¹⁵ Part One (1885-1890) commences as Filosofov and Benois became acquainted as students at the Maj Gimnazija in St. Petersburg, and confirms that the shared experience of the teenaged philocalists was the original and enduring basis of Mir Iskusstva. They did not have the temper of literary revolutionaries. Rather, in his recollections of their meetings, which took place in an amiable atmosphere of European artistic life imbued with St. Petersburg conviviality, Filosofov detects the revolutionary attempt to break with the recent past and to explore new means of artistic expression, purged of irrelevant descriptions of nature, scientific discursiveness and social moralizing. In his own meticulous records of meetings during the eighties and nineties, Filosofov perceives the essential doctrine of Mir Iskusstva – that it was not the subject but the treatment that mattered in art.

The second chapter (*Otčij dom*) swarms with documentation of personalities and private foibles. It was in the early years of association with Benois that he first detected the divergence which permanently characterized their association. The author's own childhood memories of family mores and descriptions of visits to the Benois household in Peterhoff, imbued with personal detail, initiates a significant leitmotif: Filosofov interpreted Mir Iskusstva to be an exotic hybrid of cultural traditions and values, which his bond with Benois metaphorically represented.¹⁶ Filosofov's descriptions of the minutiae of the day, however disconnected and incoherent, convey associative childhood ideas, his encounters with Nikolaj Benois,¹⁷ Evgenij Lansere,¹⁸ whom he recalls with affection, an entire alien world of refined European taste to which the author reacted, as if he

¹⁵ Interestingly, most subsequent works about "Mir Iskusstva" adopt Filosofov's format to describe the birth of the movement.

¹⁶ Filosofov's memoirs of the Benois family are matched by Benois' chapter "Filosofov" in *Moi vospominanija* (New York 1955), pp. 498-507. The contrast of impressions supports Filosofov's perception of the cultural antithesis between their respective families.

¹⁷ Nikolaj Leont'evič Benois (1813-1898) was a gifted and prolific architect in St. Petersburg. See M. I. Barteneva, *N. Benois* (Stroiizdat, SPb. 1994).

¹⁸ E. N. Benois, N. L. Benois' youngest daughter, married the sculptor and painter Evgenij Lansere (Lanceray, 1875-1946).

were *dépaysé*, “like a Moscow boy in the XVII century who landed in the German Quarter”. Filosofov theorizes, that the dialectic tensions between himself and Benois stimulated a synergetic fusion which produced the achievements of *Mir Iskusstva*. Ultimately in Filosofov’s opinion, his bond with A. Benois constitutes a rare instance when divergent intellectual artistic and cultural affinities, coalesced and formed distinct original aggregate which would have a revolutionary effect on future generations.¹⁹ In retrospect, Filosofov realized that he and his friends were attempting something which to the next generation would seem unthinkable. Since it could have been thought of only by people in a favoured social position at a particularly favourable moment in the history of Russian culture.

The third section (1890-1894) describes the university years of the “*miriskussniki*” and the group’s zealous devotion to new influences in art and literature. Benois is presented as a developing self-taught young disciple of contemporary artistic critics and theories of the *fin de siècle* period, Filosofov cites the catalytic influence of Richard Muther’s *Geschichte der Malerei im XIX Jahrhundert*,²⁰ which had a decisive effect on the development of their understanding of criticism and theory, and which led to the publication of Benois first essay on Russian art in the work’s eighth edition. Of equal importance was their acquaintance with Charles Birlé, who was very much at home in Parisian literary circles, and to whom Filosofov attributes the expansion of the group’s understanding of the motives of formalism and aestheticism, their turn from mere decadence as an artistic concept towards a quasi-understanding of incipient Symbolism and the underlying cultural patterns of the period.

Filosofov’s reminiscences in his final chapter of the years 1895-1904 (*Gody sosredotočenija*) suggest that the group was not a mutual admiration society. He documents the persistent cultural tension between himself and Benois with quotations from their epistolary dialogue, which lends precision in chronology, clues to mood and temper and a peculiarly penetrating immediacy to their episodes of disaffinities. In Filosofov’s descriptions of the operations of the group in St. Petersburg, while Benois was composing articles abroad

¹⁹ Filosofov elaborates this idea in his essays *L. Bakst* (1923) and *Bakst i Serov* (1925), contained in D. Filosofov, *Literaturnye Esse* (Ekaterinburg 1998).

²⁰ See Filosofov’s article *Richard Muter*, “*Staroe i novoe*”, pp. 294-298.

in France and Germany, the dialectic of the former's native Russian heritage and the latter's cosmopolitanism is implicit. Filosofov's admiration for his friend's sensibility and vitality are tinged with slight overtones of irony, since he portrays his subject leading a semi-idle life of a bohemian socialite, unaware of omnipresent practical problems at home in St. Petersburg.²¹

Filosofov contends that the cultural duality he describes launched the publication of the journal *Mir Iskusstva* which is generally regarded as the quintessential expression of the *fin de siècle* spirit in Russia. Through it Russian writers and especially artists were no longer bound by a rational programme or a dependence upon mimesis, and could give reign to intuition and the charms of unreason.

In his essay Filosofov refers to *Mir Iskusstva* variously – as a clique, circle, coterie, *cénacle*.²² In defining the group Filosofov stresses that any name implies fixity where there was perpetual flux, and uniformity where there was divergence and innovation. Thus, he concludes that the spirit of the *Mir Iskusstva* and its journal is expressed best by the term “*igra*” – since the members were searching for ways to dispense with fixity and absolutes. In so doing, Filosofov implies that they began to learn the lesson of our time, how to live with uncertainty. In his final paragraphs one senses Filosofov's melancholic nostalgia, tinged with cynicism – the effect of politics – which has overtaken the exhilaration of the earlier decades. The tone

²¹ Filosofov's essay illustrates Benois' remark that Filosofov played a significant role in maintaining the genial social climate of “*Mir Iskusstva*”, thanks to his ability to affect a reconciliation of difficult and angular characters and with the creation of the general spirit of tolerance and compromise which triumphed over the disputes and acerbities which were also part of the environment (A. Benua, *Vozniknovenie Mira Iskusstva*, pp. 38-39)

²² The term circle (*kružok*) which Benois frequently uses in his essay, never really applied in Filosofov's estimation, since it implies a definable shape, whose members were equidistant from the centre. Rather than pointing out similarities, Filosofov's account suggests divergencies, for example between Somov and Benois. In addition to personal frictions, there were constant disagreements about the value of one another's work, for example concerning the assessment of Vasnevov's work, to which both essayists refer, and whose controversy was published in their journal: D. Filosofov, *Ivanov i Vasnevov v ocenke Aleksandra Benua*, “*Mir Iskusstva*”, 9-10 (1901) pp. 217-230, which provoked: A. Benua, *Otvet G. Filosofov*, “*Mir Iskusstva*”, 11-12 (1901), pp. 301-309.

of ambivalence in Filosofov's final comments is characteristic of his eclectic literary personality, which had already spanned the birth and demise of a host of movements which sought to provide new artistic perspectives.

The last decades of our century have witnessed a remarkable revival of interest in the *fin de siècle*, apparent in the cult of *Art nouveau*, *Victoriana*, Oscar Wilde, the reappearance of a St. Petersburg journal entitled *Mir Iskusstva* in the spring of 1998, and the complex mixture of pathos and nostalgia that continues to be aroused by pre-revolutionary Russia. On the one hundredth anniversary of *Mir Iskusstva* it is appropriate to recognize Filosofov's essay which inaugurated research about *Mir Iskusstva*, to pay tribute to his belief in the necessity for a transvaluation of all values to keep man's imagination alive, and to ponder his conclusion, that the audacities of one age become the platitudes of the next.

Concerning the editing of this essay, it has been reproduced as accurately as possible. Filosofov's idiosyncratic punctuation has not been altered. However, occasionally Filosofov used a dash either preceding the opening word of a sentence or following end punctuation, an idiosyncrasy which I have not reproduced. Filosofov's use of initial letters in referring to names of people or to titles of books and journals poses a problem to any editor. When necessary and possible, I have identified them with completions square brackets. Where underlined words or phrases occur in the text, Filosofov's emphasis is indicated. Misspellings have been corrected. When Filosofov made cancellations in ink, he usually scratched to illegibility. The brief explanatory footnotes are Filosofov's own notations.

