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## Sense and Religious Sensibilities

By **Paul Abelsky**  
Russia Profile

### Russia's Orthodox Establishment Takes on Modern Art Again

If the period of post-Stalinist "thaw" symbolically ended with Nikita Khrushchev's crude tirade against abstract painting during an exhibit in 1962 driving non-conformist artists underground and unleashing a new chill in cultural life, contemporary art in post-Soviet Russia never quite recovered from an episode eight and a half years ago. On Dec. 4, 1998, during the Art-Manezh fair, Avdei Ter-Oganyan engaged in a performance called "Young Atheist," hacking Orthodox icons with an axe and defacing them with obscenities, nails and fake excrement. The exhibit was closed after protests and a criminal case was opened on charges of fomenting "religious enmity," forcing Ter-Oganyan to flee to the Czech Republic.

A growing number of cases in recent years has kept contemporary art – along with homosexuality and popular culture in general – as the lightning rod for religious censure. "Our society has designated a number of topics as being outside the pale, such as ideas of racial superiority or nationalist hatred, but for a long time, religious sensibilities remained outside this legal field," said Archpriest Maxim Kozlov, rector of the St. Tatyana Chapel at Moscow State University and a professor at the Moscow Theological Academy. "Today an ongoing legal elaboration will help draw the line with what must be publicly inadmissible. We are talking about works that engage in an explicit profanation of religious symbols, regardless of the display's artistic merits."

Matthew Bown, a renowned scholar of Soviet painting and owner of a London gallery that specializes in Russian art, says the parallels with Soviet repression may be misleading. Last November, he was detained at Sheremetyevo Airport and had five of eight photographs by the Blue Noses collective confiscated. The pictures showed a frolicking group of men, adorned with masks of Vladimir Putin, George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, in compromising positions. The following day, eight masked men trashed an exhibition at the Marat Guelman Gallery in Moscow, destroying a show of paintings by Georgian artist Alexander Dzhikia.

"Although confiscations and prosecutions are undoubtedly intimidating, I wouldn't compare the degree of intimidation to that faced by dissident artists in the Soviet period," Bown said. "If we consider the flourishing Russian contemporary art scene — increasing number of galleries, record prices, booming art fairs, growing band of collectors, private museums - I don't see much evidence of a chill. There's no doubt that in practical terms there is substantially more artistic freedom and opportunity in Russia today than 20 years ago."

While artists can still gingerly tread on the minefield of political ideas, encroaching on the realm of religious symbolism is a personal and legal gamble. Orthodoxy is the closest thing today's Russia has to an overarching system of belief, and its advocates have been less than timid in defining the boundaries of the artistically permissible. Criminalizing this conduct, however, has only displaced any constructive public debate over the matter, setting legal precedents for what some describe as a new form of censorship.

"The goal is to introduce ideological checks on the arts, creating a form of cultural and aesthetic censorship after its political equivalent has been established," said Yevgeny Ikhlov, head of the Information and Analytical Department of the Moscow-based group For Human Rights. "Looking back at 1998 and the case against Ter-Oganyan, that is exactly when former intelligence officers started coming to power. The first cases of artistic persecution date back to those years. Having deprived the country of a viable political opposition, the next stage is ideological control."

The Second Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art came and went this spring, but one of its exhibits is certain to continue making headlines. After a quiet opening, a show called "Forbidden Art" at the Andrei Sakharov Museum and Public Center has snowballed into yet another clash over the uses of religious symbols in art. On June 14, the Tagansky District prosecutor's office announced the opening of a criminal inquiry in connection with the exhibit.

The show featured a set of two dozen works that were barred from other Moscow expositions over the course of 2006. Most of them overlaid emblematic religious themes with subversive – or profane – messages, depending on the point of view. Some items were simply lewd; others parodied or paraphrased archetypal religious scenes, superimposing the Order of Lenin medal, for example, in place of Jesus's head on the cross. To the extent that religious symbols have themselves long entered popular culture, the artists seemed to be engaged in little more than Pop Art did decades ago with corporate logos and other signs of consumerism.

Ikhlov sees deeper roots in this critique of the church. He says the artists aimed not to offend religious feelings, but to engage the ecclesiastical authorities in a polemic that actually challenged the profanation of religion in Russia while using unabashedly modern means of artistic expression. Ikhlov traces the approach to Protestant condemnation of the excesses and the idolatrous elements of Christian worship. "Similar ideas have been expressed in theology, and it may be that these visual statements are more provocative," he said. "In essence, however, this is a critique of the church's luxurious ostentation and hypocrisy. It is a reaction to the desecration of Christianity in Russia – perpetrated by the Orthodox Church and abetted by the state – a spiritual critique that often resorts to parody and absurdist images."

The Sakharov Museum is a veteran of religious wars. In 2003, its "Caution, Religion!" show caused an uproar. The display featured an architectural model of an Orthodox church made of vodka bottles and the image of Christ against the red background of a Coca-Cola advertisement, with a line that read: "This is My Blood." After a group of Orthodox radicals vandalized the exhibit days after its opening – and then had all charges against them dropped – a case was opened against the artist, the curator and the museum's director. In March 2005, Moscow's Tagansky court acquitted artist Anna Mikhailchuk, but sentenced Yury Samodurov and Lyudmila Vasilovskaya as the organizers to a fine of 100,000 rubles.

"Although the Sakharov Museum has tried to become the platform for an artistic dialogue on religious issues, the more moderate elements of Orthodoxy have found themselves paralyzed and unable to take part," Ikhlov said. "The fundamentalist wing of the church has led the way. In a sense, the Moscow Patriarchate has tried to manipulate the situation to defuse a critique of its leadership on the part of the more zealous parishes and groups, redirecting their passions onto artistic freedoms."

The challenges of negotiating artistic freedoms and religious sensibilities are far from unique to Russia. Most notoriously, cartoons of the prophet Mohammed in a Danish newspaper last year incited riots and a worldwide debate on the bounds of free expression with regard to religion. Despite the frayed nerves, the European establishment deliberated on how to respond, whereas Russian authorities countered similar publications with a knee-jerk reaction. Local authorities in Volgograd closed down the Gorodskiye Vesti newspaper last February after it featured a cartoon drawing of Mohammed disapprovingly watching the footage of the riots next to Jesus, Moses and Buddha. In Vologda, Anna Smirnova, editor of the Nash Region newspaper, was convicted and fined 100,000 rubles for partially reprinting the Danish cartoons, although the sentence was later annulled by the Vologda district court.

In the United States, scandalous art shows have brought down the fury of politicians for years, starting with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's 1990 exhibit at the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati. The center's director was indicted on obscenity charges for exhibiting seven portraits of sado-masochistic acts, but he was acquitted after a trial. Still, national public funding for the arts was slashed by Congress, and the issue continues to reverberate.

Fireworks erupted again during an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999, where British artist Chris Ofili showed a painting of a black Madonna covered in elephant dung and pornographic cutouts. After then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani denounced the exhibit and cut off the institution's founding, the museum sued the mayor, charging him with violating the First Amendment. It ended up winning the case and having the municipal authorities restore the funding. Just last March, a midtown Manhattan gallery withdrew the display of a six-foot sculpture by artist Cosimo Cavallaro, featuring a naked Jesus Christ on the cross, his figure fashioned entirely of milk chocolate. The "My Sweet Lord" statue, whose presentation was timed to coincide with Holy Week, caused an outcry among the area Catholics, including Archbishop of New York Cardinal Edward Egan.

"In Russia the fighting is rougher, tougher and dirtier, but the debates themselves are not unique to Russia," Bown said. "Also, I think it's wrong to assume that the Russian bureaucracy is monolithic in its attitudes. There's clearly a difference of opinion between the Ministry of Culture, which provides export licenses and museum wall-space for the Blue Noses and others, and the Customs' authority and FSB, which holds up and confiscates their work."

Whatever political points were scored during these confrontations in the United States and Europe, the arguments usually stayed within the bounds of civic debate. In Russia, on the other hand, critics of artistic excesses have found recourse in the criminal code. Bown believes, however, that the courts in Russia could provide a modicum of civility and a sensible forum for deliberating the issues at stake. "I don't think we can logically berate Russia for its lawlessness and at the same time complain when people do use the legal channels, albeit to achieve ends with which we may disagree," he said. "The sequence of events – leading from exhibition to complaint, criminal investigation, prosecution and judgment – is essentially a civilized one, for all the imperfections of the Russian legal system, unless one believes that art is above the law."

For Father Maxim, after the legal guidelines are made clear, distinct parts of the country should be designated for incendiary art, similar to gambling zones that are being set up. He says that introducing a legal component has the potential to defuse the tensions and establish functioning mechanisms to negotiate future conflicts. "What we are seeing is that a sharply divisive public issue is entering the field of jurisprudence, whereas earlier we witnessed poorly organized discussions or even some violent attacks taken because of the lack of a legal option," he said. "The current tendency to steer these disputes to the courts has to be supported, because it dictates a sense of restraint on both sides, as well as the need to put forward coherent and plausible arguments."

With the most recent flare-up at the Sakharov museum, the plaintiffs are hoping for drastic professional repercussions for the organizers, calling for them to be forever banned from any curatorial work. Andrei Yerofeev, the exhibit's main coordinator, has already been temporarily suspended from his duties as the curator of modern art at the New Tretyakov Gallery. Prosecutors in Moscow have launched an inquiry in response to a suit filed by Narodny Sobor, an organization that represents hundreds

of Christian groups in Russia, that alleged the insult of religious feelings and fomenting strife.

After Ter-Oganyan's flight to the Czech Republic, where he received political asylum, a similar fate befell Oleg Mavromati. In April 2000, his performance on Bersenevskaya Embankment in Moscow was filmed, showing him on the cross with the inscription "I am Not the Son of God." Intended as part of a documentary about radical artistic exploits, his act caused outrage among local parishioners who appealed to Moscow's prosecutor. Months later, Mavromati emigrated to Bulgaria.

Sensationalism and shocking antics have been the stock in trade for contemporary art ever since its inception, from Marcel Duchamp's readymades to the more recent provocations of Damien Hirst and many others. The forays into religious symbolism by Russian artists have hardly been devoid of similarly market-savvy self-aggrandizement. "There are various possible paradigms for the interpretation of the lawsuits – one is 'Russia-is-the-new-USSR,' but another might be 'avant-garde-art-needs-the-oxygen-of-scandal,'" Bown said. "What use is the Blue Noses' satire if someone doesn't get upset by it? Does Aidan, depicting a veiled woman with a dildo, really think that no one will be offended? If you are in the art world, you will be aware that scandal is indeed used as a publicity tool."


Simply decreeing religion out of bounds will likely have mixed effects, unless the most stringent censorship is enforced. As Orthodox activists consolidated their ranks, campaigning not just against offensive exhibits but rallying in protest of Madonna's concert last September and demonstrating against smut in popular culture, the artistic community has retreated, or at least attempted to inject a measure of caution into its actions.

Not only did the exhibit at the Sakharov Museum open under the title of "Forbidden Art," but the interior layout tried to insulate it from the more vulnerable viewers. The works were hidden behind a screen enclosure framing the gallery's entire perimeter. Art could only be seen through peepholes in the partition, punctured just high enough that most visitors needed to clamber on top of a stool to take a peek. While the presentation had an undoubted tongue-in-cheek voyeuristic quality, implicating the audience by the effort required to engage the works, it also padded the incendiary items with just enough visual and spatial cushioning to ward off any extreme reactions.

To declare such a display illegitimate is to affirm that even the idea of a public artistic critique of religion remains outside the law. As always, the problem with the most well-meaning formulation of censorship is that its enforcement and oversight are fraught with vague definitions of what is permissible. Bown remains optimistic that the spirit of enterprise will prevail over other motives. "My feeling is that the art world in Russia will continue to grow and flourish, and that the lure of creativity and commerce will win out over the instinct to censor and control," he said.

What remains troublesome, however, is that finding legal equivalents for "blasphemy" and "sacrilege" inevitably warps the criminal code. As religious categories enter jurisprudence and create legal precedents for the prosecution of some abuses, similar practices could begin to be punitively applied across the board. Eduard Limonov's notorious National Bolshevik Party was banned and declared an extremist organization in April by the Moscow City Court, although the legal justification seemed flimsy at best. Last year, Vladimir Rakhmankov, editor of the internet newspaper Kursiv in Ivanovo, was taken to court and fined for calling Putin "Russia's phallic symbol" following the president's call to boost fertility rates in his annual Address to the Federal Assembly.

Whether Russian authorities have embarked on the slippery slope toward outright censorship of distasteful, incendiary, or just plain dissenting opinions, the persecution of artistic antics has bolstered the legal context for such actions. The unambiguous divide between the sacred and profane in religion, however, is hardly applicable in a secular society that is trying to promote civic institutions and free discourse. The pursuit of a handful of scandalous artists can resonate far beyond the entrenched confines of galleries and museums.

Such prospects suggest that the criminal inquiry will not reach the trial phase. "This will be equivalent to passing judgment on the remains of artistic freedom in Russia, and the case will resonate far and wide," Ikhlov said. "That is why I have a timid hope that it will never go to trial. Otherwise this will mean an unambiguous start of a new cultural Cold War." 

*Photo: ITAR-TASS*