

Cultural exchange

Despite recent political tensions, the long-designated UK–Russia cultural year is providing a platform for cooperation and dialogue between our two countries, as NADFAS-accredited Lecturer **Theodora Clarke** explains

Anyone who has visited Russia – with its world-class museums and palaces, golden-domed Orthodox churches and famous ballet companies – will know that it is a nation with an outstanding artistic heritage. Indeed, it is not necessary to have even visited the country to have been touched by its rich culture: one only needs to have read Tolstoy's masterpieces, been enthralled by Chekhov's plays, listened to Tchaikovsky's music or admired Kandinsky's paintings.

This year Russian culture will take centre stage at venues across the country. It's all because of the UK–Russia Year of Culture programme, organised by The British Council, which creates opportunities between the UK and other countries.

Russia has recently been dominating news headlines with the annexation of Crimea and the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. Tensions have risen with the increasingly heated situation in Ukraine; Russian politics is in danger of derailing long-standing cultural projects.

American and EU economic sanctions against Russia and travel restrictions for top officials, could affect sponsorship of the arts projects. Museums are now concerned about loans from Russia and are hoping to avoid a repeat of the



Images: Peasant girls – 1 negative (3 frames); glass, b&w, three-color separation; courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, DC 20540 USA; costume designs © Federal State Budget Institution of Culture 'A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum', Moscow, Russian Avant-garde Theatre: War Revolution and Design runs from 18 October 2014–25 January 2015 at the V&A

difficulties faced by the Royal Academy's *From Russia* show in 2008, when 'immunity from seizure' legislation had to be rushed through Parliament for the exhibition to go ahead.

While the Governments of the UK and Russia have been less than successful in maintaining a positive and cooperative relationship by diplomatic means, the UK–Russia Year of Culture has been doing its part to ameliorate relations.

No-one could have predicted the fraught political situation with Russia today when the idea for a cultural year was first mooted. Paul de Quincey, the Russian Director of the British Council had proposed the programme with his Russian counterpart having seen the successes in France and Italy of their respective cultural years.

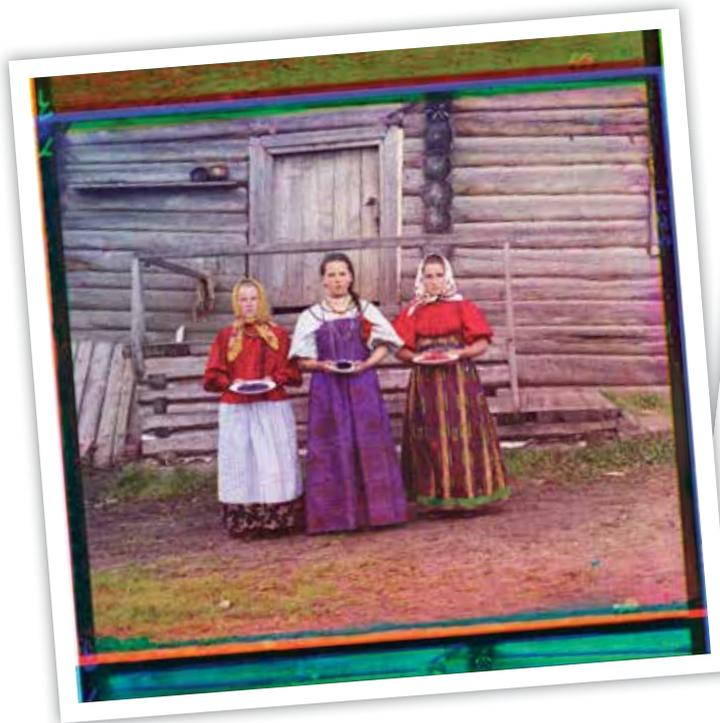
Back in March last year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UK Foreign Secretary William Hague signed a joint statement designating 2014 as the official UK–Russia Year of Culture. Paul explains: "Most events – both in Russia and the UK – will stand on their own as examples of the very best of what each country has to offer; but equally important is what we are able to do together."

Intended as a step in improving relations, the timing of the year has become even more crucial in easing tensions and demonstrates the importance of 'soft power'. Culture can create a platform for dialogue and communication.

The cultural year aims to celebrate the artistic heritage of both nations and to host the biggest ever staging of Russian cultural projects in the UK. Over the next few months we will see major events hosted in cities across the country from London to Oxford, Birmingham to Edinburgh. The varied events on offer include Russian theatre, art, cinema, literature and music.

The Russian programme in the UK kicked off in February with a performance from the Tchaikovsky Philharmonic Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall, which was attended by the Russian Deputy Prime Minister.

Russian musical, ballet and theatre performances, film-screenings and literature festivals will all be gracing our shores throughout the year. But it



Left: Konstantin Vialov, costume design for *Sten'ka-Razin*, 1923–24, at the V&A Museum

Above left: Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii *Peasant girls [Russian Empire]*, 1909, part of *the Close and Far* exhibition at Calvert 22 Gallery

Above right: costume design for *Tarelkin's Death* by Varvara Stepanova, 1922, also at the V&A

is exhibitions that will form the highlight of the rich programme: Russia has produced a number of prolific and distinctive visual artists.

The crowning glory of the arts programme will be the major show of radical artist Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935) at Tate Modern from July 16. "It will be the first comprehensive retrospective of the artist tracing the major developments of his career through to his late production of figurative works," Curator Iria Candera says. "The exhibition offers an unprecedented overview of Malevich's oeuvre, including works from different stylistic periods in a wide range of media, including paintings, drawings, designs and sculptures." This exhibition will be the first of its kind in the UK for 25 years, and will consist of works from collections in Amsterdam, Moscow, New York, and Paris, including his famous painting *Black Square*.

Another major blockbuster exhibition is scheduled to take place at the Victoria and Albert Museum in October. *Russian Avant-Garde Theatre: War, Revolution and Design* will present nearly 200 objects that relate to Russian theatre design, ranging from sketches and costumes, to models and photographs. The exhibition will showcase works from

the Bakhrushin Theatre Museum in Moscow.

At the Science Museum, there is also a Russian slant: the *Cosmonauts* exhibition will focus on Russia's space quest, featuring previously classified artefacts, many of which have never before been seen outside Russia.

Many have also been to space, including the suits worn by dogs Belka and Strelka. The exhibition will also explore how the space quest acted as inspiration for artists with examples of space-themed art.

In June and November, London will once again play host to the major bi-annual fair that is Russian Art Week. The capital's galleries, concert halls and auction houses, centered around Mayfair, will be dominated by a week-long celebration of Russia's artistic heritage. The week combines Russian cultural events such as exhibitions, concerts, theatre and talks with sales of Russian art.

The last event saw a staggering £55m exchanged for masterpieces by the likes of Bakst, Roerich, Falk and Fabergé –the next Russian Art Week looks set to continue the trend.

Russians will see the very best of what the UK has to offer with a reciprocal programme organised by the British Council. Numerous art exhibitions will be presented, ►





including an exciting showcase of Young British Artists, which will be the first major retrospective of the movement in Russia. Examples of Josiah Wedgwood's world famous pottery will also be making their way over to Moscow.

Cinematic greats will be represented at screenings of Hitchcock's films, while the Barbican's *Designing 007: Fifty Years of Bond Style*, will showcase the inside story of the design and style of the world's most iconic film brand.

The success and legacy of the year will ultimately be the number of links built up between Russian and British counterparts. A number of future collaborations are already being planned, including several cultural projects for the centenary of the Russian Revolution in 2017.

There is great hope that this cultural year will improve bilateral relations, result in greater understanding and mutual trust, and ultimately provide a lasting platform for dialogue.

"My hope is that we are not only demonstrating the power of culture to enlighten, engage and inspire, but that we are also underpinning the important political, commercial and diplomatic ties that are being forged," says Paul de Quincey.

With the political and diplomatic situation becoming increasingly tense, culture has an important and unique role to play. The arts can act as a vital bridge between the UK and Russia. It is the cooperation between institutions and individuals that will build lasting relationships and pave the way for future shared projects. ■

Clockwise from above: *Dynamic Suprematism*, 1915 or 1916, Kazimir Malevich at Tate Modern; Alexander Rodchenko, costume design for a *Chansonette*, We, 1920; space suit and ejector couch used by dogs Belka and Strelka, at the Science Museum



WHAT TO SEE

Malevich, July 16–October 26; Tate Modern

Russian Avant-Garde Theatre: War, Revolution and Design, October 18–January 25, 2015; V&A Museum

Cosmonauts: Russia's Space Quest, November 19 for six months; Science Museum

Russian Art Week, May 30–June 6, November 21–29; venues across London

Russian Revolution in Art: 1910-1932, until September 20; St Petersburg Gallery, London

Close and Far, June 18–August 17; *Beyond Zero*, October 8–30; both Calvert 22 Gallery, London

For more information see www.russianartandculture.com; for details about Russian Art Week see www.russianartweek.co.uk