

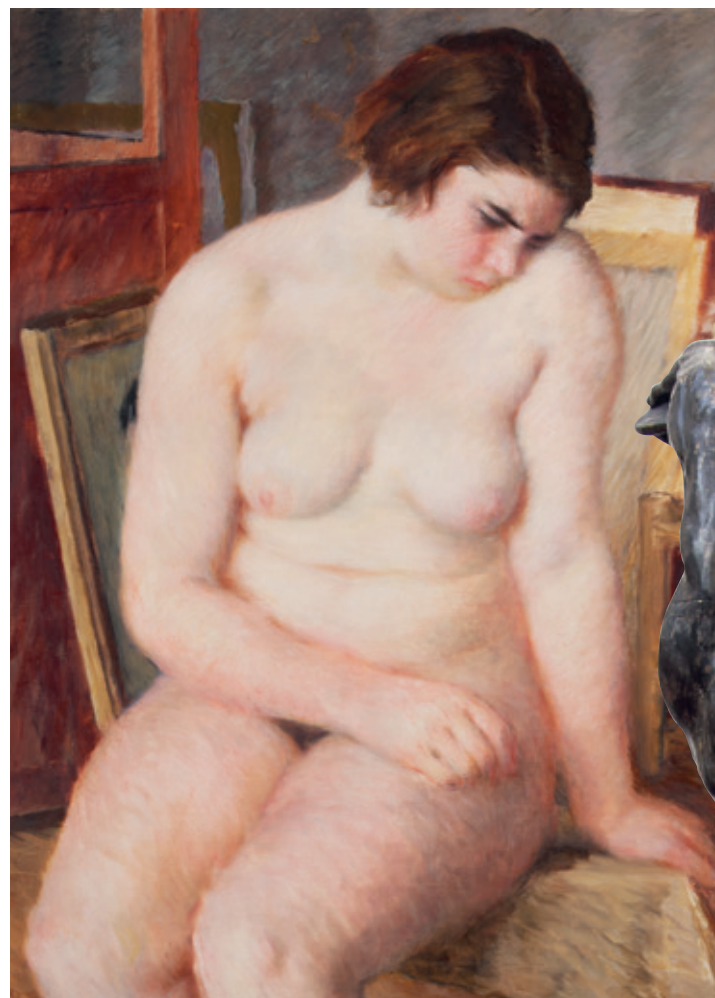


Aleksandr Deyneka,
The Ball Game
(1932)

HEALTHY BODIES, HEALTHY MINDS

The nude is one of art's most prolific subjects. Russian art expert *IVAN LINDSAY* charts its history both before and after the Russian Revolution, just over 100 years ago

PHOTOS: THE STATE TRETYAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW



female sculptures that have survived, such as the Knidian Aphrodite and the Medici Venus, have provided stock figures for artists to copy ever since.

After the ancient period, Christian discomfort with the subject, which only allowed nude subjects from the Bible such as Christ on the cross, the nude went out of fashion until revived during the Renaissance. Artists such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Correggio, Botticelli, Giorgione and Titian all interpreted the nude in their own singular and magnificent way while drawing on the classical tradition. Gothic artists of the North, such as Dürer and Van Eyck, were never as comfortable with the subject and created a different body type that prioritised small shoulders, a plump belly and dumpy legs.

Later artists such as Ingres, Rembrandt, Degas, Cézanne, Rouault, Matisse and Picasso all contributed to the development of the treatment of the nude.

Although Russian artists were well versed in international artistic traditions through the extensive holdings in the Russian museums, and their travels abroad, there was a brief moment just before the 1917 Revolution when artists, and in particular sculptors, tried to draw their inspiration directly from the ancients. Sergei Konenkov's magnificent marble nudes from 1905 to 1920 are among the most classical and sensual in Russian art.

Traditionally it has always been said the southern Europeans were more comfortable with the nude than their northern cousins, but the Russians seem closer in attitude to the southerners. People argue that northern prudishness was due to the colder climate ensuring they were less familiar with the body, however, Russian artists' pragmatism towards the nude seems to contradict this view.

If Sergei Konenkov formed his style before the Revolution, Vera Mukhina only started producing masterpieces afterwards. Mukhina had studied in Paris under Bourdelle and then travelled around Italy with her friend Liubov Popova, studying art and architecture. In her lectures on art, and her book *A Sculptor's Thoughts* of 1953, she revealed she was thoroughly schooled in European architecture, painting and sculpture, Abyssinian and Egyptian art as well as Russian folk art. Her knowledge and intellectual vigour underpinned nude sculptural production throughout the entire Soviet period.

Although other sculptors (such as Matvey Manizer, Elena Yanson-Manizer, Sara Lebedeva, Ekaterina Belashova and Aleksandr Matveyev) all attempted the nude, with considerable success, we know more about Mukhina's thinking because



The nude is the most fundamental and important subject in art. At different times it has been used to depict beauty, energy, pathos, shame, pity, harmony, hate, ecstasy and humility. Whereas naked merely implies a human body without clothes, nude necessitates a study of ideal form.

To understand Russian depictions of the nude it is first critical to take a look at the history of the subject in Western art, with which Russian artists were familiar, and from which they drew their inspiration.

In the 4th century BC the Ancient Greeks started to make 'idealised' nude sculptures of their gods. The Greeks approached the subject mathematically, breaking down the proportions of the human body into the perfect geometric forms of the circle and the square. Because they were more familiar with the male nude, due to male athletes performing without clothing, and with women having to remain clothed at all times, the majority of nude Greek sculpture is male. The Greeks perfected encasing their female gods in thin diaphanous clothing that allowed them to hint at the body beneath. The rare nude



fundamental to their nature to abandon and numerous nudes were produced by all the leading artists of the Soviet period. These paintings and sculptures are well represented in Russian museums, showing that museum curators continued to commission and acquire the works. Only a few artists, such as Mukhina, whose success as a Soviet sculptress protected her, openly voiced their displeasure with the Soviet prudish attitude towards nudes. Mukhina wrote, 'The current strange "veto" on portraying the nude body is apparently a philistine hangover, for it does not fit in with our conception

she wrote it down. About the nude she said, 'The problem of the nude is of the utmost importance in decorative sculpture. It is not difficult to understand why sculptors have always been fascinated by the human body: as human beings are the main theme in sculpture, and since the only way to express man's inner being is by means of gestures and the interplay of muscles, the nude therefore becomes an endless source of inspiration and expression for the sculptor.'

After the Revolution the Avant Garde painters gave up easel painting and the Soviet government introduced the Socialist Realist style in a series of decrees in the early 1930s. Despite erotic art being on the list of forbidden subjects, and eroticism being an essential part of every successful nude, artists continued to study the nude form in the art schools which, modelled on the French Academy, made a priority of life drawing with both male and female models. Except for art school studies and naked male athletes, male nudes are rare in Soviet art and the majority of nude studies, in both sculpture and painting, are female.

Although artists were wary of attempting subject matter disapproved of by the authorities, such as nudes, it seems that nude studies were too

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Vladimir Vasilevich Lebedev, *Girl with a Towel* (1937); Matvey Genrikhovich Manizer, *Discus Thrower* (1927); Alexander Nikolayevich Samokhvalov, *At the Stadium* (1934-35)

of a new person of deep spiritual and physical beauty. There is a great difference between "naked" and "nude".'

In the later Soviet period, such as in the post-war paintings of Arkady Plastov, Vladimir Gavrilov, Geli Korzhev, Andrei Mylnikov, Tair Salakhov and the sculptures of Ekaterina Belashova and Sara Lebedeva, the nude became a more openly produced subject. Pre-war artists such as Matvey Manizer, Aleksandr Deyneka and Aleksandr Samokhvalov sometimes turned their nudes into athletes to confuse the authorities into thinking they were tackling acceptable subject matter. A visitor strolling around the Tretyakov or Russian Museum will encounter numerous nude sculptures of athletes holding javelins, disci and shotputs.

There were moments during the Soviet era when the directives of the Soviet state overpowered artists' instinctive ability to find beauty in the nude. However, through the sensuous marbles of Sergei Konenkov, the classical male athletes of Matvey Manizer, the sweetness of Yuri Pimenov and Andrei Mylnikov's fresh-faced girls and the vitality of Deyneka's powerful athletes, the subject of the nude has produced some of the finest artworks of the Soviet period. ■



The Art of the Soviet Union: Nudes (Soviet Art) by Ivan Lindsay and Rena Lavery is out now (Unicorn Publishing Group, £30)

PHOTOS: THE STATE RUSSIAN MUSEUM, ST PETERSBURG