Nina Gourianova delivered a lecture for REEEC's New Directions Lecture series called "Reinventing Russia: Modernist Myth-Making and National Self-Identity, 1898-1914" on April 24, 2014. Professor Gourianova, an Associate Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Northwestern University, spoke about the pluralism and innovation of the Russian avant-garde movement before the revolution that was very different from the avant-garde of the era of the Left Front of Art, which was formed during the early years of the Soviet Union.

Artists of the early Russian avant-garde sought to form a new self-identity as they looked at their world as if seeing it for the first time. Their project demanded questioning the Eurocentric tradition that had reigned since Peter the Great, who had imposed it on Russia two centuries before. Early Russian avant-garde artists rediscovered native sources, such as Orthodox liturgical ritual, the tradition of folk entertainers known as skomorokhi, dramatized wedding customs, knights’ tales and folk tales as they gathered material to fashion their own self-identity.

This period saw artists such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Vyacheslav Ivanovich, and Constantin Stanislavski experimenting in approaches to theatrical performance. Sergei Diaghilev's The Seasons embodied the idea of Gesamtkunst or "total art," an idea dear to this generation of Russian artists, and to which ballet was an especially congenial art form. Diaghilev's production was a major quest to create a new type of synthetic theater combining the best of painting, music, and poetry, and aiming to evoke the audience's "theatrical instinct."

In his innovative artistic endeavors, Diaghilev initially invited his friends from the World of Art movement to collaborate; these artists played an important role in helping Diaghilev formulate the new Russian self-identification which, paradoxically, became very popular in the West. Diaghilev extended the role of creation and collaboration to his dancers and designers, rather than treating them merely as intermediaries or craftsmen. One of these artists, Alexander Benois, designed the stage set and costumes for Petrushka, and made use of folk costumes and art, as well as elements of the Russian puppet theater and the open air market.

A few years later, Diaghilev would make a drastic turn and enlist Natalia Larionova and Mikhail Goncharov to collaborate, artists of the new generation whose source material was already eclectic and who added a unique infection of color to Russian art. The experience of working in Diaghilev's productions stimulated Goncharova to cultivate a more nationally flavored art. She immersed herself in Oriental sources to balance the European influence so well established in Russian practice. A favorite source of material and inspiration for Goncharova became Scythian stone sculptures called Stone Women, in a similar way to how African masks became a fascination for Picasso.

Russia's early avant-garde movement intended to break taboos not only in art, where they acknowledged all styles as suitable for artistic expression, but in all areas of everyday life, and art and life became intertwined as never before. Much
thought was given to the workings of the unconscious and the act of creation in an effort to wrest the civilized individual from a numbness that resulted from the loss of the faculties of immediate perception. They called their approach to art “everythingness,” and chose freely from many traditions and sources. Their achronic consciousness led them to artistic exploration, and also to retrospectivism and archaization as they declared themselves free to make any tradition their own. On a visit to Moscow, Filippo Marinetti, the leader of the Italian Futurists, accused his Russian counterparts of devoting themselves to restoring tradition, of living in the past perfect tense, and of lacking sufficient futuristic aspirations. While Diaghilev’s artistic projects displayed nostalgia for mythmaking, the Italian Futurists planned the destruction of museums in order to liberate themselves from their classical past and to sculpt a new identity. The task of Russian avant-garde artists was more complex, however, as they excavated their own history to subvert reigning aesthetic tenets and nurture a national distinctiveness in Russian art. “What is national art?” and “What does it meant to be a Russian artist?” were questions the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-garde attempted to answer. Exploring newfound traditions and behaviors, they set themselves no limits as they worked to redefine their national and cultural identity at the beginning of the new century.

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