

# CONTEXT

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## Artistic Flowering

### The Blue Rose, a brief but influential art movement in pre-revolutionary Russia, is the focus of a major exhibition at the New Tretyakov Gallery.

By **Brian Droitcour**  
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The design of "Blue Rose," an exhibition of Symbolist art that opened Wednesday at the New Tretyakov Gallery, departs from the gallery's standard practice. Arrangements of artificial hyacinths and peonies stand in the corners, plastic vines hang between the halls, and Alexander Scriabin's "Poem of Ecstasy" and Igor Stravinsky's "Firebird" pipe through the speakers.

It's a nod to Symbolist aesthetics -- dominant among Russia's cultural elite in the early 20th century -- which championed simultaneous stimulation of all the senses, and it's meant to evoke the original "Blue Rose," an exhibition that opened in Moscow in 1907 with poetry readings by Valery Bryusov and Andrei Bely, recitals of Scriabin's music and vases of fresh, sweet-smelling flowers.

The new "Blue Rose" exhibition -- which comes to Moscow from Brussels, where it was shown as part of the Europalia cultural festival -- is not a reconstruction of its namesake. Rather, it is a survey of Symbolism in Russian art from the 1890s to the 1910s, starting with Mikhail Vrubel's majolica renderings of mythical creatures and ending with paintings of dolls and dancers by Sergei Sudeikin, who worked on ballet sets for Sergei Diaghilev's *Saisons Russes* in Paris.

Though the artists who exhibited together at "Blue Rose" in 1907 later had more shows under the title "Golden Fleece," the name of a Symbolist art and poetry journal, it was the first name that stuck because it neatly pared down the movement's ideals. "A rose is the most beautiful flower in nature; like life, it has both beauty and thorns," Ida Gofman, the curator of "Blue Rose," said at a news conference at the exhibition's opening. "But a blue rose is not found in nature -- it is a symbol of the unreal. The artists were looking not just at nature, but also at the sky."

The Blue Rose artists kept an eye on reality while gazing into the unknown, at least to a greater extent than their Symbolist peers in Western Europe. While Odilon Redon in France and Fernand Khnopff in Belgium were painting nightmarish creatures and fairy-tale damsels, the Russians sought out the mystical in the world around them. One archetypal Symbolist landscape is Pyotr Utkin's "Flood Plain," where golden wheat and turning leaves seem to hover between deep blue sky and water. While the poet Andrei Bely wrote of the mythical golden fleece shimmering on the azure horizon, Utkin found the same colors in the Russian countryside.

The tone for Russian Symbolism was set by Viktor Borisov-Musatov. He died in 1905, before "Blue Rose," but he exerted considerable influence on his pupils, the young artists from Saratov who formed the core of the Blue Rose group. The indistinct lines and wistful moods of paintings like "The Park Sinks Into Shadows," where women in flowing white gowns stroll through a park at twilight, are echoed in the paintings of his followers, such as Sudeikin and Pavel Kuznetsov.

As Russia's bourgeoisie flourished at the turn of the century, they turned to the Symbolists to distinguish their mansions from the estates of the gentry; as a result, Symbolism in Russia became closely related to the decorative arts. Railroad magnate Savva Mamontov sponsored an artist's colony at Abramtsevo with a ceramics studio, where Valentin Serov fired his vase with a devil crawling out the side. Vrubel's "The Flight of Faust and Mephistopheles," painted in pale shades of violet on a wooden panel, decorated the home of tycoon and art collector Savva Morozov. Now both works are on display at the Tretyakov.

Besides interiors, Symbolist artists worked extensively for the theater; the chance to synthesize sets, costumes, text and music in an overall aesthetic experience was a natural draw for them. Such work became an export commodity with Diaghilev's Paris ballets, which employed the services of many Blue Rose artists. In turn, the artists brought theater and ballet into their landscape paintings; in Sudeikin's luminous "Ballet" of 1910, dancers frolic around a moonlit pond.

Although the movement was brief and had only a handful of artists at its core, Blue Rose had a lasting legacy in Russian



Tretyakov Gallery

Many artists in the Blue Rose group were inspired by Viktor Borisov-Musatov, the creator of dreamlike paintings such as "Specters" from 1903.

culture. For many artists who exhibited with the group toward the end of the 1900s, Symbolism was a step away from naturalism and toward abstraction. When those artists evolved further, their fame eclipsed that of Blue Rose.

"Kandinsky, Malevich, Goncharova and Larionov -- all of them went through a Blue Rose phase," said Gofman, the curator. "But while those artists went into outer space, the artists of Blue Rose stayed close to the earth. Above the earth, but still with it in their view."

*"Blue Rose" (Golubaya Roza) runs to April 23 at the New Tretyakov Gallery, located at 10 Krymsky Val. Metro Oktyabrskaya, Park Kultury. Tel. 230-7788, 951-1362.*

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