CHAPTER ONE

DREAMING OF THE CITY:
MIKHAIL LARIONOV’S PROVINCIAL DANDY 1907

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In the State Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow, there is a painting by Mikhail Larionov called Provincial Dandy—a strange title that offers some clues to the work’s meaning (Fig. 1.1). The Dandy, according to Charles Baudelaire’s celebrated essay of 1863, ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, is an urban creature of refined sensibility, at the same time an observer of city life as well as an active participant within it. He is aesthetically sensitive, and in Baudelaire’s case, of course, not only a reporter, but also a poet and essayist.1 Applying Baudelaire’s definition to Larionov’s Provincial Dandy produces revealing results—not least because Baudelaire’s dandy was cosmopolitan, while Larionov’s dandy is provincial.2

Larionov’s Russian title for his painting was Provintsial’nyi frant. The word frant is distinct from dendi (dandy). Although frant is commonly translated as dandy in English, the two words have distinct connotations in Russian. A frant does not have any self-confidence without the ‘correct’ attire and he dresses to impress. A dandy, on the other hand, is naturally elegant and stylish, and considers himself above fashion, which he creates rather than follows. He can pull anything off, while the frant is the ‘poor’ follower of fashion, who must dress well to gain self-respect and move up in society and, therefore, is someone who spends too much time thinking about dress and dressing too well.3 This precisely describes the stocky figure painted by Larionov. He has one hand behind his back, wears a top hat, an elegant necktie, and a coat with only the top buttons fastened.

2 The term provintsiiia (province) in the time of Peter the Great signified ‘a large administrative or territorial area’, but later ‘it serves less as a geographic area than as a qualitative judgment’. See Evgenii Kirichenko and Elena Shcheboleva, Rosskaia provintsiiia (Moscow, 1997), pp. 46–48.
Fig. 1.1  Mikhail Larionov, *Provincial Dandy*, 1907, oil on canvas, 100 × 89 cm., State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow.
He is a man of some pretensions, wearing fairly high-heeled shoes, posing proudly in the street, and standing alone in the painting. Behind him is a shop sign advertising women’s hats. In this painting, Larionov has clearly not depicted a French boulevard scene. This is not a cosmopolitan painting in that sense. It shows a small street with no vehicular traffic. It is probably set in the south of Russia or the Ukraine, near Odessa, or Tiraspol, where Larionov lived, but this is not the capital or a busy city community. In Larionov’s painting the figure is smartly dressed, but this elegance might seem out of place. In Gogol’s words ‘everything seemed to have written on it: No, this is not the provinces, this is a capital, this is Paris itself.’

The same may be said of his companion painting of a single female figure Provincial Female Dandy (Provintsial’naia frantikha, 1907, Tatarstan State Museum of Fine Arts, Kazan). Both of these figures reappear in the horizontal canvas A Walk in a Provincial Town 1907 (Fig. 1.2), which represents several figures walking along a small-town street, which is almost a country lane.

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5 These three works were exhibited together at the Zolotoe Runo (Golden Fleece) exhibition in Moscow in 1908. See Zolotoe runo (Moscow, 1908), pp. 5–6.
pretensions to style and fashion. To the right, the stocky figure reappears, although his top hat has been replaced by a soft hat. Otherwise, his pose is exactly the same. At the far left, as a counterpoint, is a man wearing a frockcoat or long jacket and he now has the top hat. He carries a walking stick under his arm. He is a stylish man, heading off to some social event. In between, two women are going towards the hat shop. At the centre left, is a small café where a figure is preparing food. A small awning shields a table from the bright light. There is a little fence, and a waiter in attendance. This evokes the life of the street, but what is especially startling, and what is certainly not present, for instance, in Édouard Manet’s painting *Musique aux Tuileries* (1862, National Gallery, London) is the fact that there is a pig walking confidently down the road, among these people in their fine clothes. We are in the provinces: there are two men who might be dandies, but their claims to metropolitan sophistication ring false in this setting. This is the sort of place where pigs are at home in the street.

The posture and apparel of the man in the top hat closely resemble the beautifully painted shop signs of elegant outfitters that were familiar on the streets of St Petersburg and Moscow, in the years before the First World War. A sign advertising F. Kuzmin’s tailor’s shop shows, in a stylised way, smart urban clothing for gentlemen. Despite its remoteness in time and space, this almost universal apparel remains comparable with the clothing worn by the men in Manet’s *Musique aux Tuileries*.

There is an air of pretension about all this, as clothes are sensitive indicators of wealth and status. It also raises the question of the way in which Larionov’s figure can be seen as provincial. Is he simply from the provinces, or does it mean that he is not an urban sophisticate, as Manet’s figures were? It can be shown that Larionov was, indeed, thinking of Manet, as much as he was thinking about shop signs in the streets of big cities, when he devised this composition within a provincial framework.

By the time that he painted *Provincial Dandy* in 1907, Larionov was already an experienced artist, who had produced numerous Impressionist, Symbolist and Post-Impressionist works. He was a young painter, fully aware of these trends in French art, but he was also working in Russia. These fairly early compositions were not academic, but they could

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certainly be seen to be paying a certain kind of homage to Manet, Claude Monet, and very soon to Henri Matisse. What made this possible were the great collections in Moscow, acquired and displayed by the merchants, Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov, who opened their collections to painters on a regular basis. In Moscow, therefore, Russian artists could easily gain access to the latest works, perhaps more easily than they might even have managed in Paris.

Furthermore, in 1906, the year before Larionov painted *Provincial Dandy*, he travelled to Paris with his friend, the painter Pavel Kuznetsov, to assist Sergei Diaghilev with his great display of Russian art at the *Salon d'Automne*, only one year after the French Fauve painters had made their vital impact there, and Matisse had seized the opportunity for notoriety, success and sales. It was the Russian merchants, in fact, who for several years afterwards were Matisse’s most important source of income.

In 1906, therefore, Larionov was in a good position to survey a wide range of Parisian art, and it is not surprising that it should resonate in his own works. But there is another important point to be made here. While the merchants were taking French art home to Moscow, Diaghilev’s project was moving the other way, asserting the importance of Russian art and presenting it in Paris. Larionov was placed at the cusp of this exchange. This was reflected in his paintings, for Larionov did not accept French art uncritically. He transposed and transformed it to make it Russian. This is fundamental to much of Larionov’s painting up to 1913 and also to the work of his partner, Natalia Goncharova.

In *Provincial Dandy*, Larionov deliberately emphasised the crudity of the Russian street, especially when compared with the elegance of the Tuileries Garden in Paris. This context provides an insight into his attitude and his strategy towards Manet. There are some similarities. For example, Larionov makes clear the differences between the masculinity of suits, top hats, frockcoats, and urban outfits, and the contrasting feminine elegance of the women in hats, frills, lace, and a different sense of style. The gender issue at work in this painting contrasts the femininity of fine clothes for women with the military bearing of men in sharp, smart apparel. Hats, fashion and gender are significant. It was precisely this theme of fashion, elegance, and cosmetic beauty that Baudelaire addressed in his essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’. He devoted a whole section to cosmetics, a subject that re-appears in Larionov’s work, for example, in his illustrations for Aleksei Kruchenykh’s collection of poems *Pomada (Cosmetics)*, Moscow, 1913. Baudelaire had argued that cosmetics are a sign of civilisation.
Women, he said, should be praised for their civilising influence, and for their understanding that, for urban beauty, they should adjust their appearance. In broad terms, for Baudelaire, artifice is urban, civilised, and sophisticated, in contrast to what nature itself provides.

The feminine feature of the painting *A Walk in a Provincial Town* centres on the ladies walking along the street, but it also involves the shop sign. The women have come into town to shop. Parisian fashion retains its great status even here, wherever they are, in the South of Russia or Ukraine. This is confirmed by the sign, which has a specific Parisian source.

The pig in Larionov's painting is as nature intended—there are no fancy clothes, no make-up, and no elegance. The animal is part of the rural and provincial aspect of this subtle painting. In this way, Larionov introduced doubts and ideas about the issue of Russia as part of Europe, whether Russia should follow the French example, whether its culture should be independent of Paris, or whether, in fact, it should be committed to an immensely intricate cultural exchange.

In *Provincial Dandy*, the pink and black sign is inscribed *shliapy* (hats). In the multi-figure *Walk in a Provincial City*, the lettering is omitted, and the shop sign acts as a painting within the painting. Larionov inserted here a miniature copy of Manet's *La Viennoise: Portrait d’Irma Brenner* (Fig. 1.3), as an indicator of French art and French fashion. He was acknowledging French art, and indicating his determination to respond by transposing it thoroughly into its alien Russian context. Despite the appearance of crudeness, this is a skilful and sophisticated strategic achievement—not least because Larionov had recognised, in the process, Manet's own fascination with femininity, fashion, cosmetics, the street, and urban beauty. Manet has a place in Larionov's painting. Neo-Primitivism is also in there, as are the life of the city and issues of national identity. They are all reference points in Larionov's painting. In the period 1910–13, Larionov and Goncharova did not insist upon a single, consistent style of painting. Alongside their Neo-Primitivist works, they made distinctly Futurist paintings in which the shattered imagery of repeated limbs and wheels asserted that urban life is dynamic, and both artists used frankly Italian Futurist techniques to do this. Yet here, too, lettering and shop signs often appear. In Goncharova's *Cyclist* of 1913 (Russian Museum, St Petersburg), a pointing hand at the top left indicates the way to a bar selling beer, and at

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7 Like Gogol, Larionov wryly characterised human behaviour in the Russian provinces, but he went further: while acknowledging Manet, Larionov adopted a rough and painterly insolence to achieve this, perhaps recalling Manet’s own robust variations on Titian.
right there is another sign for hats, and fragments of the words *shelk* (silk) and *shliapy* (hats), for silk top hats. There are overlapping themes of shop signs and their popular imagery among the actions of the street. As in Larionov’s *Boulevard Venus* (1913, Musée Nationale d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris) and Goncharova’s *Cyclist*, there is a dynamic that is different from that of *Provincial Dandy*. At the same time, it is possible to find other references to Manet and his contemporaries. The cover of Kruchenikh and Larionov’s Futurist book *Pomada* has a sheet of gold leaf to which is attached a small lithograph depicting a very crude image of a woman singing. She has a *décolleté* dress, and her hand is raised as she sings. Larionov has drawn the notes flying like birds from her mouth. This image is directly inspired by Edgar Degas’s *Singer in Green*, (c.1884, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, bequest of Stephen C. Clarke 1960, formerly Riabushinskii Collection), as the Russian art historian Ilia

Fig. 1.3 Édouard Manet, *La Viennoise: Portrait d’Irma Brunner*, 1882, pastel on paper, 53.5 × 44.1 cm., Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
Doronchenkov has observed. The woman in Larionov's lithograph has her hand folded back in a distinctive way, which repeats precisely the pose of Degas's singer. Artificial light, glamour, entertainment, theatre, and the urban vitality of far-off Paris are recalled and transformed by Larionov into something cruder and rougher. Paradoxically, this also reveals that Larionov possessed a sophisticated knowledge of Degas. Larionov's strategy is to translate Degas's individual aesthetic touch into something brutal and crude, so that it might appear incompetent or untutored, when, in fact, it is not. In this respect, it resembles *Provincial Dandy*.

By 1913, this shift from fine painting to crude work is fundamental to the approach of Larionov, Goncharova, and their followers. Inconsistent styles were encouraged, and one of these was Neo-Primitivism. It signified the independence and vitality of intrinsic Russian art. This does not mean, however, that the dialogue with French painting ceased. As Maria Gough has shown, some of Larionov's soldier paintings with their crude swear words, awkward postures and muddy colour tones undoubtedly refer to the grand Matisse paintings including *La Musique*, which Sergei Shchukin bought for the staircase of his Moscow house. Here we have an interesting dialogue between Russian and French art.

In 1912–13, Larionov became preoccupied with a series of paintings of the seasons, for which he adopted a stylised, deliberately crude painting technique. An associated, but separate, painting of spring was executed almost entirely in black, brown, grey, and white (Fig. 1.4). ‘Spring 1912’ (*Vesna 1912*) is inscribed across the lower part of the face of a large, brutal-looking woman with her hair plastered down, seen against a brown landscape of leafless trees, brown water, and a wandering black pig. The Russian spring is muddy, and this hefty woman is a translation of Sandro Botticelli’s *Primavera* of 1482 (Uffizi Gallery, Florence) into its opposite. This great fat woman has all the confident and frontal assertiveness of a shop-sign, although, if it were a shop-sign, then the dubious, erotic entertainments that it might promote would not be elegant. This work may actually be a reversal of Manet’s deliberately beautiful, fresh and elegant

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8 Mikhail Larionov, *Singer*, 1913, illustration to Aleksei Kruchenykh collection of poems *Pomada (Cosmetics)*, lithograph mounted on gold paper. Professor Ilia Dorontchenkov, of the European University, St Petersburg, raised this issue in an unpublished lecture at The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 26 November 2009.

9 Professor Maria Gough first alerted me to such inverted signs of respect for French art in her unpublished lecture on Larionov and Matisse (‘Encountering Matisse chez Shchukin: Mikhail Larionov and the Defacement of Painting’), at the ‘Journée d’Études Autour des Modernes’, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, 30 January 2010.
portrait of a young woman, which he called *Spring* (*Jeanne de Marcy*) (1881, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). Its inviting freshness is the exact opposite of Larionov’s *Spring*.

*Provincial Dandy* is, therefore, sophisticated in its way, but it is also provincial and inelegant. It acts out the whole issue of how does a well-educated, sensitive, subtle, and above all energetic and vigorous young Russian artist assert his independence of the great city of Paris, far to the West.

This incidentally indicates that the Russian Futurist is not like the Italian Futurist, for whom this provincial quality would be anathema. The Russian Futurist is preoccupied with the past as much as the future, and the dandyism adopted by Larionov, Goncharova and their friends in the Donkey’s Tail group in Russia, is a provocative kind of dandyism. It is as if the dandyism of Oscar Wilde were pushed five steps too far, so that the outrageous flower in the button-hole has become a wooden spoon,
and painting the face has moved from cosmetics to war paint, with artists beginning to paint directly onto each other, while Larionov sported the pigtail of the Don Cossack region. The image of the fat pomaded Spring appears on the shoulder of a woman in the Donkey’s Tail group, and Larionov painted a profile of Goncharova across her own face, as a primitive warrior of a new culture (Fig. 1.5).

In Moscow, Larionov, Goncharova, Ilia Zdanевич, and Mikhail Le-Dantiu, all members of the Donkey’s Tail group, provoked the public with exhibitions and performances in the fashionable street of Kuznetskii Most, in Moscow. The impression created by their elegant clothes was contradicted by their offensive and rowdy behaviour. As in Provincial Dandy and in Walk in a Provincial Town, the women wear lace and large hats, while the men have painted faces and formal suits. Sartorial conventions confront the wildness of the Russian Futurists. Out of this synthesis emerges the Futurist Dandy, who is both provincial and cosmopolitan.

Goncharova’s painting Linen (1913, Fig. 1.6) subtly embodies this depiction of gender issues. It effectively portrays Larionov and Goncharova in terms of their evening wear. In Linen, the laundry is being ironed. There is a flatiron and ironed dress shirts, carefully folded. Detachable collars and sleeves characteristic of the period are on the left of the painting, displayed as if in a shop window. To the right is female attire with lace and a collar, carefully prepared for the evening out—perhaps to Kuznetskii Most, an outrageous evening in a café, visit to the theatre, or a stroll in the street. The female clothes belong to Goncharova, whose initials ‘NG’ appear in Cyrillic on the flatiron. We see Larionov’s smart male clothes and Goncharova’s dress, so this canvas can be seen as a double portrait—but with Goncharova’s additional assertion that she is his equal as an artist, although she is also doing the ironing. This makes an interesting and intelligent comment on the way that Larionov and Goncharova worked together. She is every bit his equal, and here she is making it clear. She was wearing these or similar clothes in a photograph taken at the Donkey’s Tail exhibition of 1912. The photograph itself has a posed quality, which recalls Henri Fantin-Latour’s Homage to Delacroix (1864, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) depicting Baudelaire, Manet, James Abbott McNeill Whistler and other brilliant dandies. In the Donkey’s Tail exhibition photograph, there are the same references to dandyism, but pushed further by the Futurists. These elegant people also paint pigs in the provinces. Face painting led to modified clothes, which became increasingly exotic. The painter-poet David Burliuk, for instance, would wear a top
Fig. 1.5 Natalia Goncharova with painted face and profile, Moscow 1913. This photograph was first reproduced in the journal *Teatr v karikaturakh* (Moscow), no. 3 (9 September 1913), p. 9. Photograph courtesy of *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2002), p. 104.

Fig. 1.6 Natalia Goncharova, *Linen*, 1913, oil on canvas, 89 × 70 cm., Tate, London.
hat, an elaborate and colourful waistcoat, and would often paint a little bird on his face, while sporting a wooden spoon in his button-hole, touches of make-up on his face, and a Cossack earring. He always looked serious—with all of the self-confidence and disdain that James Abbott McNeill Whistler, for example, could conjure up when recognised in the street.

In Moscow, the top hat and formal dress of the dandy found a new lease of life in the years before the First World War. David Burliuk’s clothes are conventional, but his dandyism is taken to extremes. This anonymous uniform was radically individualised. This urban figure signified a wrecker of cultural conventions. The painter-poet Vladimir Mayakovsky joined the Futurists at this point, wearing his yellow waistcoat. These Futurists assumed the dignity and respectability of solicitors or doctors, but behaved wildly.

In 1913, Goncharova announced that Russian art should look to the East and Asia to revive Russian culture, but this, too, was always part of a dialogue within the splintering groups of Russian Futurists between 1910 and the First World War.10 In fact, in 1915, Goncharova moved to the West to join Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in Switzerland, later moving to Paris.

Before the First World War, it seemed that spring in Russia was different, that Futurists in Russia might define themselves as ‘savages’, that an interest in cosmetics led to painted faces, that fine linen was used in events to outrage the public. By making a scene, these Futurists were bringing theatre into the street, and blending art and life in anarchic events in St Petersburg and Moscow. In December 1913, Velimir Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Mikhail Matiushin and Kazimir Malevich collaborated on the staging of the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, which was twinned with Mayakovsky’s autobiographical play *Mayakovsky—A Tragedy*, for which Pavel Filonov and Iosif Shkolnik produced extraordinary costumes. The Russian Futurist dandy was central to these events.

Photographs of the time document various Futurist groups combining, splintering and changing as Mayakovsky posed with David Burliuk and Kruchenykh, or Malevich with Kruchenykh and Filonov. Other artists

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belonged to these Futurist circles, including Olga Rozanova, whose poster for *Victory over the Sun* and *Mayakovský—A Tragedy* is a colourful and menacing lithograph, depicting a top-hatted ferocious face and a great belly with ‘Futurist theatre’ scrawled across it, thrust close to the viewer.\(^{11}\) This is clearly David Burliuk, the embodiment of the Futurist dandy, determined to launch into the future, and yet encompassing ancient time. The Russian Futurists were not preoccupied with the machinery of the modern age, but had their own distinctive interests.

Malevich’s mysterious and celebrated painting *The Englishman in Moscow* (1914, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam) probably depicts Burliuk. The title may refer to English tailoring visible in many European capitals. The painting also includes military references (the sabre and bayonet), street signs, and religious images (the small church, the fish, and candle). These images, which suggest the coming war, follow one upon another, sometimes overlapping, like a sequence of visual stimuli experienced by the Futurist as he walks through the street, with a red spoon in his pocket. This extends the image of the dandy—though he is a part of the urban environment, he is increasingly caught up in the atmosphere of war.

The costumes that Malevich designed for the opera *Victory over the Sun* include figures who bury the sun to liberate planet Earth from the sun’s daily demands, and so make the Earth a vehicle in time and space. These funeral directors have square black tunics and black top hats. A drawing for one of these figures has one eye covered, as does the painting *The Englishman in Moscow*, and David Burliuk himself had only one eye.

The Italian futurist poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti visited St Petersburg and Moscow in 1914 to perform and to try to recruit the Russian Futurists for an international Futurist project. Some were sympathetic, but others were not. Burliuk, Mayakovský, and the poet Vasilii Kamenskii deliberately set off South on a long tour of performances, spreading their message, and demonstrating, too, that they did not need the Italian Futurist’s advice.

The figure in *The Englishman in Moscow* is still a dandy, and still tenuously linked to Baudelaire’s man of the crowd, but he is also now a funereal,

\(^{11}\) Olga Rozanova, *Union of Youth: World’s First Productions of the Theatre of the Futurists*, 2,3,4,5 December 1913, 1913, colour lithographic poster, 91 × 65.5 cm., Collection Nina and Nikita Lobanov-Rostovský.
political activist. Futurist events marked a disjuncture in urban life—a shock in the city street. While the whole story of *Victory over the Sun* has its visionary and mystical side, it could also be seen as a kind of burlesque, or puppet show. This whole linking of painting, music, theatre, and life has something of the country fair about it, in addition to all these other connotations.

The February and October Revolutions of 1917 first encouraged inventive and even anarchic individuality, but soon creativity had to be appropriate to the new regime. The vast array of inventive new techniques devised by the Suprematists, Constructivists, and others, after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, show how these anarchic groups of Futurists survived. It is just possible to trace at least one revolutionary dandy through all this.

When Malevich moved to Vitebsk in 1919, he became a key figure in turning the local People’s Art School (Narodnaia khudozhestvennaia shkola) into a centre of Suprematist painting. It was here that he worked with El Lissitzky, who had been a close follower of Marc Chagall. Once Lissitzky adopted and developed this geometric technique of painting, new Futurist possibilities emerged, including a revival of *Victory over the Sun* as a puppet show. This strange opera was re-staged with a new meaning in Vitebsk after the Revolution. Lissitzky, observing this, designed his own puppet figures for the opera, including the *Futurist Gravediggers* who stand on the edge of a black circle where the sun has been captured, as sentinels who have locked up the past. Only through them can the new dispensation be revealed. Lissitzky’s *Poet or Announcer*, in these designs, is now the Futurist Mayakovsky who looks out across time and space to the dynamic *New Man* who emerges fully formed with a red square at his heart and a red star in his head.¹²

The outbreak of war on 1 August 1914 stranded some Futurists in the West, while others left Russia after the Bolshevik takeover of 1917. Those who remained had to demonstrate their political commitment. Malevich maintained a degree of ambiguity, but Lissitzky was assertively partisan. It was David Burliuk, one of the inventors of Russian Futurism, who remained a dandy to the end (Fig. 1.7). Having fled eastwards from the Revolution, he formed a Futurist group in Vladivostok, before moving to

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Japan, and finally to the United States, settling on Long Island, New York, where he launched Radio Futurism. Photographs show him with the same earring, top hat, and fancy clothes, maintaining the mysterious and theatrical persona of the dandy to the end of his life.