

# Spent Gypsies and Fallen Venuses: Mikhail Larionov's Modernist Primitivism.

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### **Abstract:**

This essay is an examination of two primitivist paintings by Mikhail Larionov (1881-1964). In *Gypsy of Tiraspol* (1911) and *Katsap Venus* (1912), Larionov, I argue, resists the binary oppositions endemic to Western models of modernist primitivism. Larionov's early primitivist paintings, such as *Gypsy of Tiraspol*, were heavily influenced by Gauguin, Larionov's relations, desires, and identities that Gauguin omitted in the creation of a mythic language. The *Katsap Venus*, like *Olympia*, presents another complex example of how Larionov's home-grown exoticism does not conform to the European modernist primitivism. Larionov's appropriation of Manet's imagery is a claim on the modernist tradition. The conflation of the symbolic attributes of Manet's white prostitute and African servant also implies a reordering of the narrative according to a Russian imperial logic. My article will examine the significance of differing imperial and national identities for understanding Larionov's use of both Western and European modernist icons and primitivist technique in *Gypsy of Tiraspol* and *Katsap Venus*. Although based largely on a close visual comparison, the essay also addresses aesthetic differences with the discourses of the ethnic difference, colonial conquest, and the 'primitive' in the Russian context, in contradistinction to, and in dialogue with, Western models.

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