



FLORA'S SMILE
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“The Germans and the great Bode have found a way to acquire and enjoy the treasures of Christian art of all sorts and kinds,” wrote Russian art historian and collector Ivan Tsvetaev to his Moscow correspondent in July 1910 after visiting the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum. Tsvetaev could not conceal his admiration. “Take, for example, the cabinet of Leonardo da Vinci with his sensational Flora, for which Bode paid 180,000 marks and which many other critics consider a forgery. [...] There are different opinions about whether this is his [Leonardo’s] Flora or not, but there is no doubt that Flora’s face and her smile, the shape of her mouth are Leonard’ish.” Amazed by the fineness and grace of Flora’s facial features, Tsvetaev ordered a plaster copy of the wax bust in the size of the “original” for the collection of the new Moscow Museum of Fine Arts. “Perhaps our

descendants will be luckier in a final solution of this interesting riddle,” wrote Tsvetaev, although he was not very interested in establishing Flora’s authenticity. The collection of the Moscow Museum consisted predominantly of plaster copies of world-famous sculptures and included several artful imitations and fakes.

I visited the Bode Museum in 2023, and Flora was still standing there, smiling mysteriously. She had been ousted from the magnificent Italian floor that houses the masterpieces of Donatello and Verrocchio to the special exhibition on the ground floor. Showcased in a glass box with her back mercilessly open to reveal the entrails, Flora appears now as a historical curiosity rather than a piece of art; her smile no longer charms and mesmerizes. The computer tomographic image of Flora’s head testifies to the attempts to solve the mystery of Flora’s provenance. Yet the museum’s attribution label still betrays the indecisiveness: “Flora, in the style of Leonardo da Vinci, 16th or 19th century.” Perhaps Tsvetaev would be pleased to see that Flora keeps her secret. Looking at her bust, I thought that Flora’s fate illustrated our attempts to balance beauty and truth, belief, and the pursuit of objectivity, storytelling, and analysis.

I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg in the fall of 2022 with the immodest intention to write a book about authenticity and truth. My project analyzes Russia’s fin-de-siècle epistemological culture and the debates about truth in jurisprudence, historiography, art history, and theater. Wiko offered an ideal environment for my research, encouraging me to probe new analytical languages and borrow methods from other disciplines. I enjoyed listening to the stories of dogs, insects, flowers, and genes punctuated by scientifically mined data, graphs, and tables that illustrated the results of laboratory experiments. I learned much about the contemporary epistemology of social, cultural, and anthropological research. Wiko Fellows strike an ideal balance between applying strict methods and relying on intuition, showing nature’s beauty, and revealing its inner mechanisms. Science is impossible without imagination, and the temporary suspension of rules is necessary for seeing and creating a bigger picture of natural and social phenomena. However, it is essential to remain mindful of this suspension, to watch and show the reader (or the observer) the gap between facts and stories.

Thinking about scientific analysis and research methods helped me find the nerve of the Russian debates about truth. In my Tuesday Colloquium, I talked about Ivan Tsvetaev’s contemporaries – theater directors Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and their project of the Moscow Art Theater that, in many ways, paralleled the story of the Fine Arts Museum. Like Tsvetaev’s museum that boasted

the “scientific authenticity” of the copies of art, the Moscow Art Theater famously tried to achieve perfection in showing historical and psychological truth on stage. The MAT’s directors experimented with various methods and techniques, creating new regimes that distanced themselves from conventional “representation” of reality. “Representing means lying,” thought Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko. The only way to achieve truthfulness was to re-live events and emotions on stage as if in real time, recreating the material and physical environment of human actions and experiences. A new sensation of truth on stage enthralled the audience, yet many critics pointed out that MAT deceived its spectators by camouflaging the gap between illusion and reality. As Stanislavsky’s critics wrote, the truth consisted of trusting the audience and allowing it to decide what is truthful and what is not. The “unnecessary” truth was sometimes disturbing and unwelcome. Not only Stanislavsky experienced the temptation of absolute truthfulness, erasing the boundaries between illusion and reality. Ivan Tsvetaev, an admirer of fake Flora, in his pursuits of exactness and what he called the “mathematical precision” of his plaster collection, also fell into this trap when he reconstructed the lost elements of classical sculptures and concealed the additions. Tsvetaev worshiped the beauty of form instead of historical authenticity. Yet such was the hazard of the pursuit of objectivity: while Tsvetaev’s endeavor had many admirers, museum visitors often complained about the deathly aura of plaster figures amassed in great numbers in the magnificent halls.

Coincidentally or not, the stories of the Moscow Art Theater and the Museum of Fine Art intersected in Berlin. Berlin was the first European city that saw MAT’s performances in 1906. It was also the capital of plaster casting. The famous Gipsformerei opened in 1819 in Charlottenburg served as a source of inspiration for the Moscow Fine Arts Museum, and Tsvetaev visited it multiple times. Tsvetaev was particularly impressed by the techniques of coloring the casts that made plaster look like terracotta, wood, bronze, or marble. The Gipsformerei’s “Hausmaler [Franz] Schroeder” prepared several colored replicas for the Moscow museum. In the summer of 1907, Tsvetaev’s daughters – the poetess Marina Tsvetaeva and her sister Anastasia, both teenagers – came along. Marina later wrote about their adventure at the Gipsformerei – how they played in a “forest” of angels, hiding sticky lollypops in the open mouths of white sculptures.

I was putting off my visit to the Gipsformerei until the last weeks of my stay at Wiko. Finally, we – my friend Maria Stepanova, a poetess and Wiko Co-Fellow, and I – walked into the old building with brick walls and tall windows. Outsiders, we were not let inside the workshop, left to observe the rows of plaster figures for sale in glass showcases with

price tags. Colored casts cost more than white ones; I immediately thought that Tsvetaev's critics argued especially ardently against painting white plaster and erasing the distinction between the fake and the real. These arguments echoed the criticism of Stanislavsky's excessive and eerie truth. We looked at the plaster cast of Franz Liszt's right hand and the death mask of Friedrich II. Death mask making was a big deal in Russia: the facial features of most famous writers (Alexander Pushkin, Lev Tolstoy, Fedor Dostoyevsky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, etc.) and political figures were sealed in plaster, providing material for scores of sculptural portraits and monuments, multiplied and distributed across the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. Pursuing authenticity, objectivity, and truth has its benefits and hazards: documents and casts are the crutches of memory, yet they inadvertently destroy the subtle truth that cannot be documented, molded, or shown on stage.

Russian intellectuals, artists, and scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century argued endlessly if truth could be "wrong" and if there could be any virtue in deception. These questions surprisingly resonated with many debates in Wiko this year: is true scholarship possible without imagination? Can science exist without storytelling? Is the propensity to lie unique to human beings? No one could answer these questions with certainty, leaving them for the future cohorts of Wiko's Fellows. The wax Flora keeps smiling, symbolizing the persistence of doubt that upholds creativity and academic research.