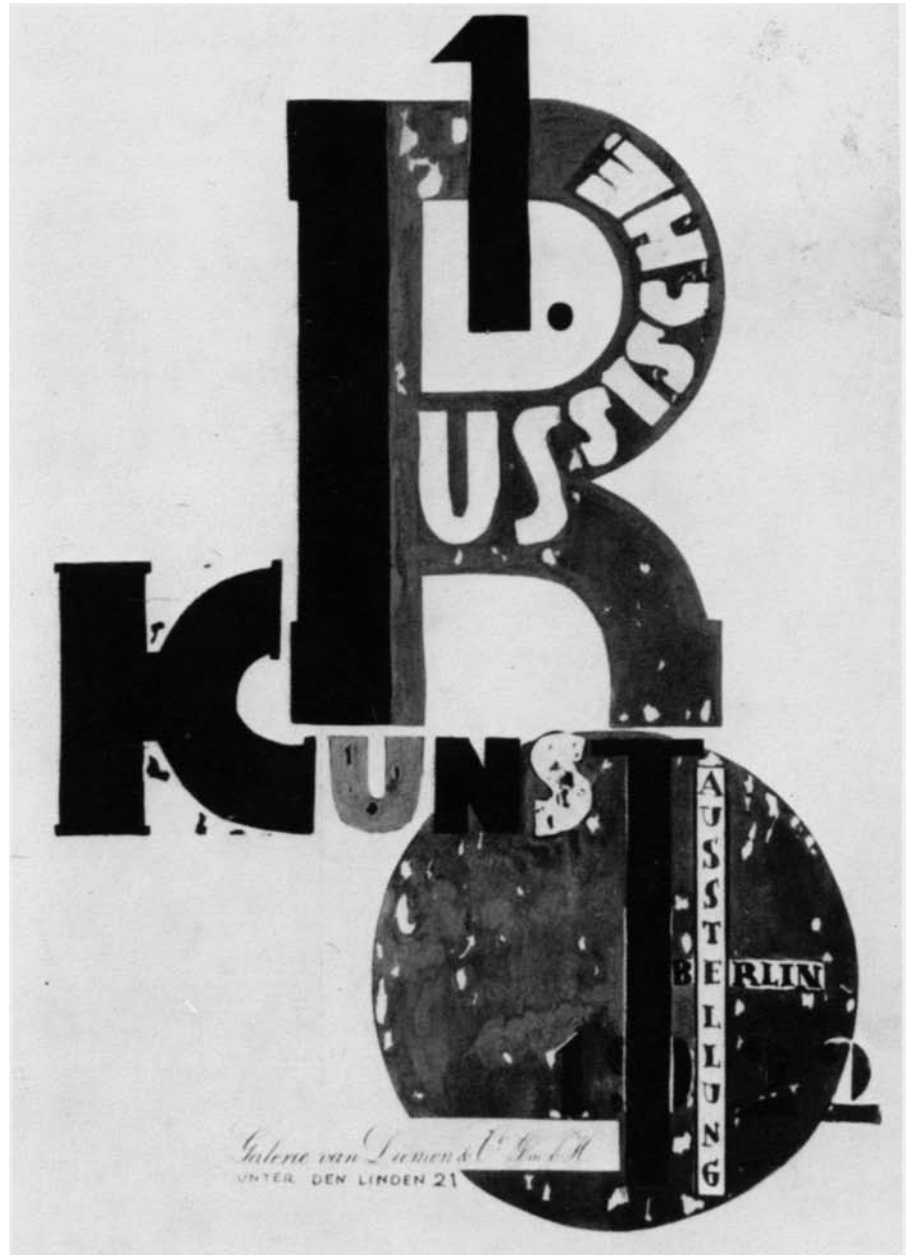


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Editor's Statement: The Russian Avant-Garde

The sociopolitical gap that has divided Soviet Russia and the West during most of this century has inspired much mutual curiosity about artistic—among many other—activities. Owing to greater freedom and flow of information, we in the West have been better able to indulge this curiosity. It is significant that this curiosity seems destined to be continually whetted by exhibitions and publications,¹ but never sated! In particular, the more information we gain about the period of Russian Avant-Garde art (circa 1910–circa 1930)—officially ignored in the Soviet Union since the declaration of Social Realism in the early 1930s—the more we desire to learn about it and to evaluate it in terms of the development of twentieth-century art. This issue of the *Art Journal* is one of many current manifestations of such interest.

The Russian Avant-Garde of artists, architects, writers, and critics was not a stylistic phenomenon (since it encompassed Futurism, Suprematism, and Constructivism, among other styles), nor can it be identified with a single aesthetic. Its artist members—the best known being David Burliuk, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, El Lissitzky, Kasimir Malevich, Liubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, Olga Rozanova, the Stenbergs, Vavara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin—were dedicated to creating new abstract or non-objective art forms that would satisfy both aesthetic and utilitarian criteria. They were allied to the social, economic, and political goals of the 1917 Revolution and sought to match its anti-traditional stance in their art. All mediums were transformed by the Avant-Garde: painting, sculpture, graphics, photography, film, theater sets and costumes, architecture, and industrial and domestic design.

We are pleased to present a wide variety of themes and approaches in this issue, and we are especially proud to include a large number of previously unpublished photographs and much original material, all of which add to our understanding of the art and artists of this unique period.

As a pioneer motivating force behind the American interest in the Russian Avant-Garde, Ingrid Hutton shares with us memories and impressions of her contacts with some of its surviving members and of her search for fine examples of their work.

John Bowl's study of the artists' emigrations during the period in question should clarify many Russians' social, political, and artistic commitments, and their status in the young Soviet Union or in the West. The years under scrutiny were certainly exciting, but they were also painfully confusing because of the radical

social transformation and artistic re-assessment that marked them. The issue of emigration was (as it still is today) an extremely sensitive one.

Alma Law's interview with the last surviving Constructivist, Vladimir Stenberg, provides us with a rare personal view into the art world of the 1920s in Russia; it is insightful and informative, humorous and touching. We are similarly pleased to present Charlotte Douglas's translation from the Russian of an essay on Kasimir Malevich that includes previously unpublished material by Evgenii Kovtun, Curator of Graphics at the State Russian Museum in Leningrad. The participation of these few Soviet scholars and remaining artists of the Avant-Garde is a rare privilege for an American journal and is certainly a welcome addition.

The close relationship between literature and art that characterized the Russian Avant-Garde was represented by numerous publications that resulted from the collaboration of writers and artists. One such projected work was a delightfully silly poem, "Autoanimals," written by Sergei Tretiakov and illustrated by Alexander Rodchenko in 1926. Until this witty translation by Susan Cook Summer, "Autoanimals" was untranslated and unpublished in English. The photo-illustrations are indicative of the artistic innovation and synthesis that marked much Russian art of the 1920s.

We were eager to include some essays by contemporary artists for two reasons. First, artists often have intuitions and insights not necessarily accessible to the historian or critic. Secondly, there has been for the past twenty years or so a consensus that some post-World War II American art shares an affinity with Russian Suprematism and Constructivism. Although we do not seek to demonstrate or to disprove this suggestion and although the artists' statements do not directly address this issue, we consider the interest in the Russian Avant-Garde by a number of contemporary artists to be significant in itself. Donald Judd has written a critical and impressionistic analysis of the Russian Avant-Garde, and George Rickey has shared with us his ideas on this art's context in light of recent artistic developments.

In a sense, each new exhibition and each new publication on the Russian Avant-Garde represents a plea: a plea for more information on this fascinating subject. But the plea is not for facts alone; it is for open channels of communication among both western and Soviet scholars in order to foster careful interpretation of style and content as well as to set high standards for authentication of individual works. The spate of recent fakes and forgeries of Russian Avant-

Garde art—aggravated by occasional (but nevertheless damaging) uninformed published commentary—sends a shudder through the art world today. As a relatively new subject in the field of art history, the Russian Avant-Garde presents not only the joys of discovery and re-interpretation, but also the pitfalls of over-enthusiasm and relative underexposure.

Greater artistic détente is necessary—not only among western and Soviet scholars, but also within less global academic and commercial circles. Broader participation in symposia, exhibitions, and publications is also needed, as is increased access to art works and archives in the Soviet Union.

Today, museums, galleries, collectors, and scholars are more eager than ever to learn about the Russian Avant-Garde. Much recent activity around the world attests to this vital interest, and we believe that it will be a lasting one.

Indeed, the Russian Avant-Garde represents a sociopolitical phenomenon in the twentieth century, but its legacy remains in the art itself: especially in such stylistic and technical developments as dynamic nonobjectivity and bold photomontage and in such revolutionary criteria as utilitarian productivism and utopian aesthetics. The impact of Russian Avant-Garde art, which shared many affinities with contemporaneous western movements (among them Cubism, Futurism, Dada, Bauhaus), has been felt in the West since it was first exhibited abroad at the Galerie van Diemen in Berlin in 1922. That impact has reverberated since then in Europe and the United States as a result of emigrations, exhibitions, and publications. It is to the creative spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde and to the continued worldwide interest in its social and artistic history that this issue is dedicated.² **End**

Notes

1 A listing of these publications and exhibitions appears in the chronologies by Margaret Bridget Betz and myself in the groundbreaking catalog *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1930: New Perspectives*, ed. Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980.

2 The editor wishes to thank Rosalind T. Harrison for her invaluable technical assistance and support during the preparation of this issue.

Gail Harrison Roman is assistant professor of art history at Vassar College. Her book on Tatlin's Tower will be published by the Architectural History Foundation.

The Leonard Hutton Galleries' Involvement with Russian Avant-Garde Art

Ingrid Hutton is co-director with her husband Leonard of the Leonard Hutton Galleries in New York City.

Twenty years ago in the summer of 1961, my husband, Leonard Hutton, was preparing his first exhibition of the work of the German painter Gabriele Münter. While researching her past exhibitions he found one called *Salon Izdebski*, held in Odessa, St. Petersburg, and Kiev in 1909–1910 and another *Bubnowi Wolet* (Bubnowyi Valet), held in Moscow in 1910–1911. At first he assumed that *Bubnowi Wolet* was the name of a gallery or museum where the paintings had been shown. However, when he visited Münter in Murnau that summer and asked her, "What is *Bubnowi Wolet*?" she replied, "That is Russian for *Karo Bube* (Jack of Diamonds), the name of one of the first exhibitions of the Russian Avant-Garde painters, organized by Mikhail Larionov." She then launched into a fantastic description of the group of Russian painters who took part, some of whom Kandinsky invited to participate in the *Blaue Reiter* exhibitions in Munich in 1911 and 1912. Leonard asked Münter which painters were still alive. "Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova are not only alive," she exclaimed, "but they live in Paris."

Leonard visited Natalia Goncharova in Paris that same year. When he told her that he would like to hold an exhibition of works by her and Larionov in New York, she was very enthusiastic and promised to send him all of their paintings which were then on exhibition in Switzerland, plus several others. In 1962 he saw her again, but she was already very frail and died soon thereafter. Unfortunately, our proposed Larionov-Goncharova exhibition was therefore never realized.

That was the beginning of Leonard's involvement with the Russian Avant-Garde. My participation began when Leonard gave me Camilla Gray's book, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922* (published in 1962), where



Fig. 1 Natalia Goncharova, *Fishing*, 1909, oil on canvas, 46 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 41". Private Collection.

for the first time I saw illustrations of work by painters whom I had never before seen or heard of. I immediately felt a strong optimism about the work; the creativity, inventiveness, and dynamism excited me and made me want to know more. Very soon the dog-eared reproductions in the book were not enough—I had to see the work itself.

In the early 1960s the Russian Avant-Garde was one of the few art movements of the twentieth century that had remained virtually untouched by collectors, gallery owners, and art historians alike, particularly in the United States. Many people encouraged me in my pursuit. In particular Alfred Barr, then director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, often visited our gallery from 1964 to 1966 to share his knowledge about the Russian Avant-Garde and to recount his experiences during his travels in Russia in the 1920s. While in

Russia he had met Alexander Rodchenko, whose work he greatly admired. Through a friend Rodchenko later sent drawings and paintings to Barr in the United States for the Museum's collection. Barr also talked of his adventures, for example, of rolling up Kasimir Malevich's paintings in his umbrella to get them out of Germany. But most inspiring to me was his love of the raw energy and genius of these artists.

In the summer of 1964 Leonard attended an auction of Impressionist and Modern paintings at Sotheby's in London. Midway through the sale a 1909 Goncharova painting entitled *Fishing* (Fig. 1) came from behind the curtain. The brilliant colors and bold, simple outlines of the forms captivated him and the next thing he knew he had raised his hand to buy it. Leonard was hooked.

By 1966 Leonard and I had convinced each other that we had to plan a major Russian Avant-Garde exhibition, and we started to collect in earnest. During the next two years we began to see paintings that had been reproduced in Camilla Gray's book come up for auction in London and Paris. As a result we acquired Larionov's *Dancing Soldiers* (Fig. 2), Goncharova's *Moscow Street with House*, and Ivan Puni's *Constructions* (Fig. 3), as well as other works from private collectors and galleries in Europe. In 1968 we bought Liubov Popova's *Early Morning* (Fig. 4) and Puni's *Flight of Forms*. Our collection began to have some substance. However, we put off setting a date for the exhibition to open because we couldn't find a work by Vladimir Tatlin.

I decided to go to Paris and take out an advertisement in the Russian language newspaper asking for Russian Avant-Garde artworks and costume and stage set designs by Goncharova, Larionov, Alexandra Exter, Tatlin, and

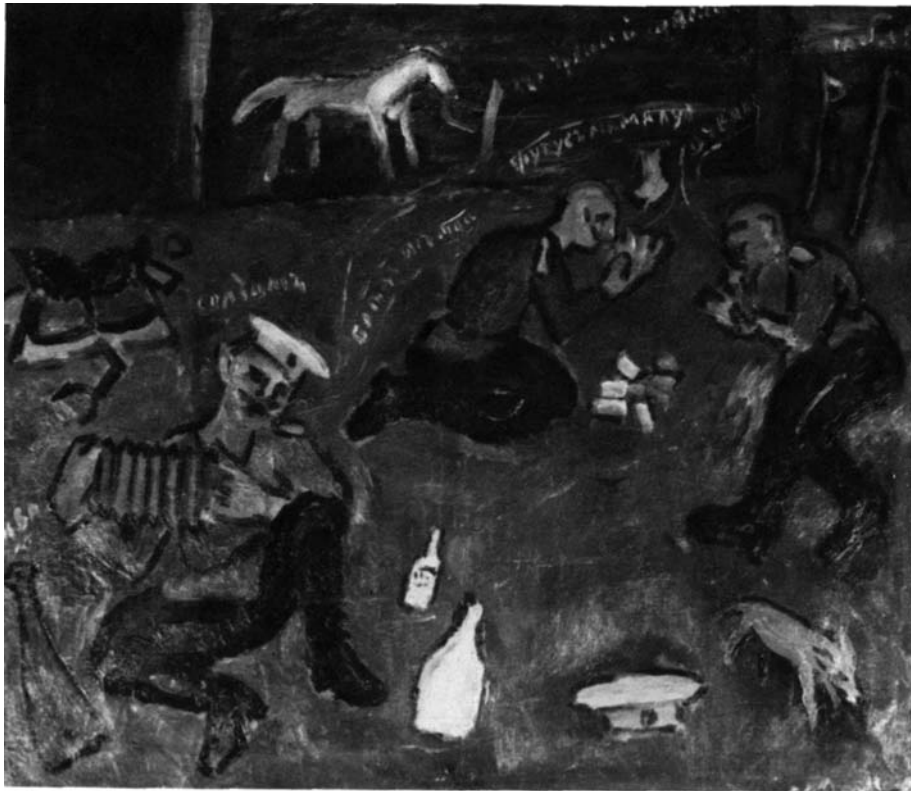


Fig. 2 Mikbail Larinov, *Dancing Soldiers*, 1909/10, oil on canvas, 34^{5/8} x 40^{5/16}". Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Fig. 4 Liubov Popova, *Early Morning*, 1914, oil on canvas, 28 x 35". New York, McCrory Corporation.

so on. For a few weeks I traveled from one end of Paris to the other visiting those who responded to the ads. To my amazement, these people were primarily members of the old Russian aristocracy who lived in Paris in pre-Revolutionary splendor. I spent many afternoons drinking tea served from silver samovars or sipping sherry from exquisite cut-glass crystal

goblets, but saw nothing I was looking for.

As we continued to research and establish provenances for the paintings we had already bought, we learned more about what we needed. From 1965 on, I spent hours poring over photographs and exhibition catalogs both in the archives of Mme Larionov and in libraries in New York, London, and several cities in

Germany. Although I do not read Russian, I was fascinated by the so-called synesthesia of the period, in which one sensation, such as sound, can produce another, such as color. Many of the Russian artists participated in overlapping disciplines—poetry, painting, music, and sculpture. I photocopied pages and pages of poetry and exhibition catalogs in Russian, which I brought back to New York to be translated.

While in Paris I was particularly pleased to meet the son of Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné. Baranoff-Rossiné was a prime example of an artist whose interests successfully spanned a variety of mediums. I discussed with his son, Eugene, the possibility of reproducing his father's notorious *Piano Opto-Pbonique* (Fig. 5) for our show. Originally, the *Opto-Pbonique* consisted of glass discs painted by the artist which were attached to a projector. The discs rotated in opposite directions, throwing colored lights on a screen. Baranoff-Rossiné and his

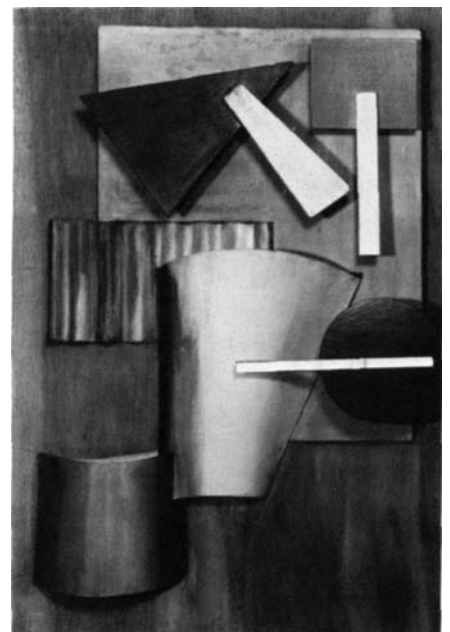


Fig. 3 Ivan Puni, *Suprematist Construction*, 1915, painted wood, metal and cardboard mounted on panel, 27^{1/2} x 18^{7/8}". Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art.

wife simultaneously operated two electric pianos, playing music by Beethoven, Grieg, and Wagner. The original performances took place at the Meyerhold and Bolshoi Theaters in Moscow in 1920 and 1922. Eugene agreed to undertake the reconstruction of this instrument, and this fantastic synthesizer of light, color, and music did perform in our gallery.

A painting that I was particularly eager to borrow for our show was a portrait of Tatlin by Larionov (Fig. 6). The owner of this painting was Michel Seuphor, who lived in Paris but whom I did not know and to whom I had no formal introduction. Not without some trepidation, I telephoned M. Seuphor. I knew he was involved in writing his own volumes on

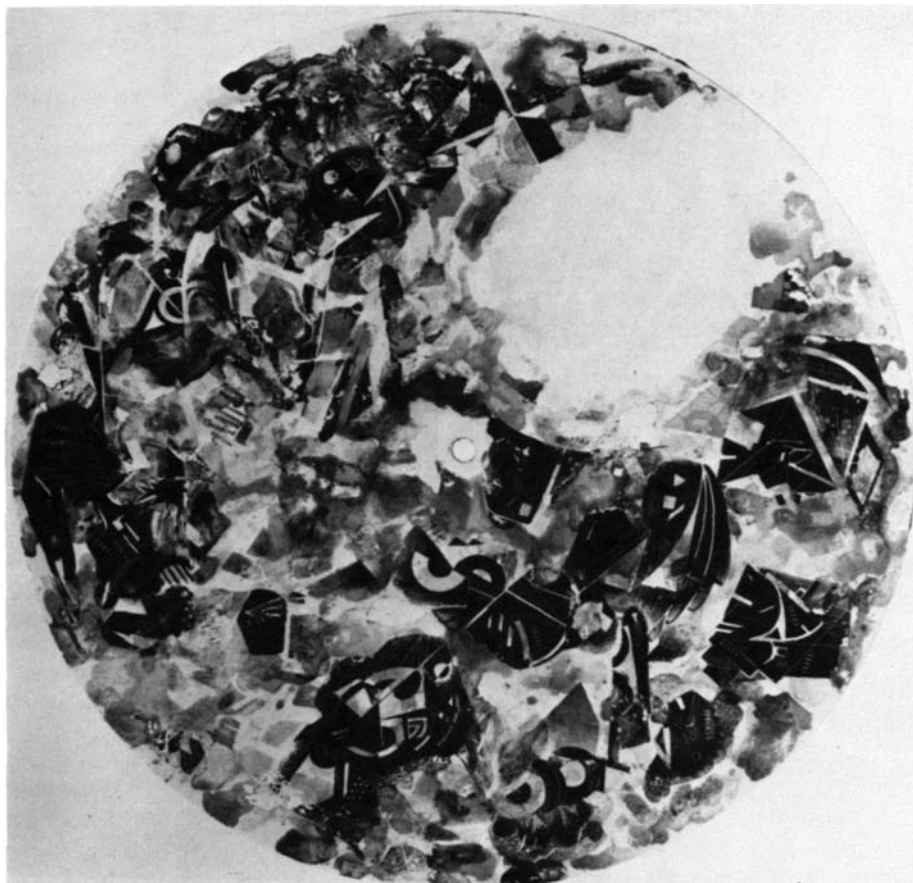


Fig. 5 Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, *Piano Opto-Phonie*, 1914, glass disc.

abstract art, so I asked him if he would meet with me to help me with my research on specific Russian Avant-Garde artists, not mentioning my ulterior motive concerning his painting. He was most generous and understanding and granted me an appointment.

During our meeting I spent about an hour showing him transparencies of the paintings that would be in our exhibition. Then I turned to him and said, "We can't hang the exhibition, however, without your Larionov painting." "My painting is not going to America," he flatly declared. I tried to persuade him to change his mind by pointing out the significance of the portrait in Larionov's development. It signaled the transition from Primitivism to Rayonism through the use of both styles in one work. The head was clearly delineated in a bold, primitive style and rays of light surrounded it and bounced off it into the background in the new manner of Rayonism. M. Seuphor finally consented to lend us the painting, and when I left his apartment that day I felt as if I were walking on air.

Whenever I spend a day visiting galleries in a foreign city, I use the hours when they are closed, between 1:00 P.M. and 3:00 P.M., to browse through bookstores. One time I discovered an Italian periodical called *L'Arte Moderna*, which had published two issues in 1967 totally devoted to Russian Suprematism and Constructivism. In the January issue, I was particularly struck by three paintings by Olga Rozanova, which belonged to a private collec-

tion in Rome. Around this time I also picked up a catalog of a *Larionov/Goncharova/Mansurov* exhibition which had been held in 1966 at Lorenzelli Gallery in Bergamo, Italy. When Leonard next visited Milan in 1968, he telephoned the gallery and explained our idea of putting together a Russian Avant-Garde exhibition in America. Although the gallery had no works for sale, they were very helpful and gave Leonard the address of Italian Futurist artist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's daughters. We knew about Marinetti's connection with the Russian art world through Vladimir Markov's book *Russian Futurism: A History*. Markov mentioned that Marinetti had traveled to Russia in the winter of 1914 and had returned to Rome so full of enthusiasm about the art he had seen that he decided to hold an exhibition which he called *Esposizione Libera Futurista Internazionale*, in the spring of that year. He invited members of the Russian Avant-Garde, including Olga Rozanova, to participate. She sent paintings that had been shown at the 1913–1914 *Union of Youth* exhibition in St. Petersburg. Her work remained in Italy after the exhibition closed, in Marinetti's own collection. When Leonard visited Marinetti's daughters, the paintings were still in their possession. He was able to obtain from them a number of exceptional works by Rozanova, including *The Factory and the Bridge* (Fig. 7), *Man on the Street*, *Dissonance*, and *Port*.

The job of preparing the exhibition was by

no means finished by merely finding and obtaining the works of art. At the gallery we searched painstakingly through the material we had accumulated for references to the paintings, titles, and dates. We learned to question everything written about (or on the back of) a painting. I spent hours looking at one Larionov work called *Blue Rayonism*. I kept turning it on its side, its top, around and around. It haunted me. Something was wrong. All of a sudden, one day, I saw it—an angular head wearing a cap. I rushed to Larionov's 1913 catalog raisonné by Eli Eganbury and found that there was no *Blue Rayonism* listed but there was *Portrait of a Fool* (Fig. 8). I knew this must be the correct title because I had found that Larionov never made a totally abstract painting; there was always an underlying representational element. The thrill of such revelations after hours and hours of detective work was a great reward in itself.

By 1970 we were itching to open our exhi-



Fig. 6 Mikhail Larionov, *Portrait of Vladimir Tatlin*, 1911, oil on canvas, 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Paris, Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Gift of Michel Seuphor.

bition, but as soon as we had chosen a date, we learned that the Cornell University Andrew Dickson White Museum was planning a Russian Avant-Garde exhibition for the same time and wanted to borrow some of our paintings. We agreed to lend the work, so instead in our gallery in the spring of 1970 we held a *Diaghilev Ballet and Theater Design* exhibition, which included works by Larionov, Goncharova, Léon Bakst, Alexander Benois, and Exter, among others. The Cornell show and our own exhibition turned out to be fortunate occurrences, since through them we met three people who would later assist us in the preparation of a catalog for our show: Sarah Bodine, who was coordinating the *Russian Art of the Revolution*



Fig. 7 Olga Rozanova, *The Factory and the Bridge*, 1913, oil on canvas, 32⁵/₈ x 24¹/₄". New York, McCrory Corporation.



Fig. 8 Mikhail Larionov, *Portrait of a Fool*, 1912, oil on canvas, 27¹/₂ x 25¹/₂". Private Collection.

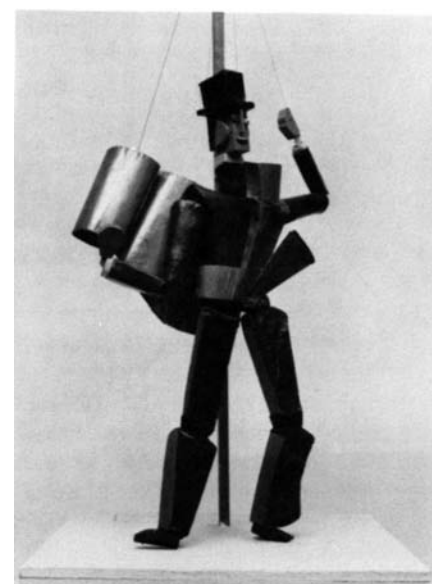


Fig. 9 Alexandra Exter, *Danseur Espagnol*, 1926, marionette: metal, wood, cardboard material, 22" high.

exhibition at the Andrew Dickson White Museum; John Bowl, professor of Slavic Studies at the University of Texas, who attended the Cornell symposium on the Russian Avant-Garde; and Frederick Starr, then professor of History of Russian Culture at Princeton University, who came to the gallery during our theater design exhibition.

We finally set the date for our opening in October of 1971. One day, a few months before the opening, Leonard came over to my desk and said, "We can't open—we have no Udaltsova." We did look for a work by Nadezhda Udaltsova, but in vain. And *Russian Avant-Garde 1908–1922* did open in mid-October 1971 to toasts with Russian champagne.

The purpose of our involvement with the Russian Avant-Garde—particularly in this first exhibition—was to bring to the American public works that had previously been seen only in reproduction. We are still fascinated by these

artists today and find the period one of continual surprises. Over the past ten years, since *Russian Avant-Garde 1908–1922* opened, we have shown Alexandra Exter's marionettes (**Fig. 9**) and held a major Ilya Chashnik exhibition. When a special exhibition is not hanging, we feature Russian Avant-Garde works in the gallery.

Probably our most difficult problem in recent years has been the upsurge of questionable works attributed to various Russian Avant-Garde artists. As we see it, the problem arises from the fact that the work of the Russian artists is so scarce and therefore is difficult to view in the original. Many people who study the period still see most of the work in reproduction. For example, the name of Kasimir Malevich is well known, but you can't go just anywhere to see his work. (Some of it can be seen, however, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.) You can't even go to the source—the Soviet Union

—to see the drawings and paintings in museums, since for the most part they are not shown. Lack of first-hand exposure to work breeds lack of feeling for the artist's use of line, form, proportion, and color. Because of this, questionable works are being bought by unsuspecting dealers and collectors. We ourselves have not been immune. In the future we would like to set up a formal group including gallery owners, art historians, and collectors to acknowledge this situation and discuss how it could be remedied. **End**

Art in Exile: The Russian Avant-Garde and the Emigration

John E. Bowl is professor of Slavic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin and is the founder and director of the Institute of Modern Russian Culture at Blue Lagoon, Texas.

The emigration of Russian artists and writers to the West just after the 1917 Revolution is a complex issue. In spite of impressive factual studies in recent times,¹ the reasons why particular Russian intellectuals chose to move from Russia to Berlin, Paris, New York and other cities have not been clarified. Indeed, histories of modern Russian art give comparatively little attention to the subject of emigration, and tend to cite antagonism towards, or disenchantment with, the new Soviet regime as the key occasion for a given artist's departure. Fortunately, the traditional and vulgar interpretation of events—to the effect that the Bolshevik regime terminated all avant-garde activity as soon as it came to power—has now been rejected, although the new revisionist attitude often exaggerates the alleged liberalism of the Communist Party during the 1920s. Actually, neither disappointment in the proletarian dictatorship, nor alarm at state interference in the arts served as dominant reasons for the mass emigration of artists and writers. Reasons were often much more trivial and more mundane such as the lack of supplies, physical discomfort, personal enmities. But how did the Russian Avant-Garde respond to the question of emigration before and after 1917? Examination of this issue, especially in the context of two leading members of the Russian modern movement, i.e. Marc Chagall and Vasily Kandinsky, might help us to understand more readily the particular development and orientation of the Russian Avant-Garde during the post-Revolutionary period.

As far as Soviet sources are concerned, the emigration of a Russian artist is either ignored (many Soviet biographies of artists of the 1900s–1910s end with a remark such as “In 1924 went abroad”), or is regarded as a fatal mistake that led to commercialization and degradation of the artist's work or to his subsequent fall into oblivion. Both conditions

were true of some émigré artists, but they were not necessarily the immediate result of emigration. In any case, unless they would have been willing to capitulate to the dictates of the Stalin style in the 1930s, such artists would have fared no better in the Soviet Union. The implied question as to how artists such as David Burliuk, Chagall, Naum Gabo, Kandinsky, and Ivan Puni would have evolved had they stayed in Russia is merely academic. It is more important to attempt to understand the ideas that prompted such artists to emigrate from Russia sometimes temporarily, often permanently.

The Russian Avant-Garde

The term, “the Russian Avant-Garde,” has become almost a household word thanks to the unprecedented academic and commercial interest in the work of artists such as Natalia Goncharova, Kandinsky, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich, Liubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, and Vladimir Tatlin. This interest is justified and even deserves to be expanded still further as we come to appreciate the great significance, the prescience, of the theory and practice undertaken by the primary and secondary artists, critics, and patrons in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, and Kharkov during the 1910s and 1920s. However, the rapid rehabilitation of modern Russian art has also stimulated some misleading generalizations, including an inaccurate categorization of all innovative artists as avant-garde: there was no single avant-garde and, in fact, the term avant-garde was never used by those artists whom contemporary art history places in its ranks. Moreover, the term was not favored by its protagonists and antagonists, and the avant-garde became a movement only retrospectively, i.e. when it was rediscovered in the 1960s. Both western and Soviet scholars now use the term as a convenient rubric that accommodates many varied talents. Needless to say, there was no substantial artistic

intercourse between Alexandre Benois and Tatlin, Boris Grigoriev and Malevich, Sergei Chekhonin and Kandinsky, even though such names now appear together at exhibitions and in catalogs dedicated to the Russian Avant-Garde.² Malevich and Tatlin were avowed enemies, Popova and Varvara Stepanova maintained a very uneasy relationship, Ivan Kliun and Malevich, at one time friends, became bitter opponents in the late 1910s. However, while aware of the dangers, I use the term avant-garde in this essay simply because it has become a convenient art historical category which subsumes a vast diversity of artistic talents. As long as we remain aware of the heterogeneity of the Russian Avant-Garde and of its many internal dissensions and factions, we may avoid the crime of oversimplification.

Emphasis on the psychological and emotional differences, the caprices of character as well as the social diversity in the biographies of modern Russian artists helps us to understand how they behaved in every day life and pursued their artistic goals and why they chose to stay in Russia after 1917 or to emigrate. It is wrong to conclude that ideological pressures from the Bolshevik regime suddenly united or disunited a very large group of idiosyncratic, experimental artists. Most of the key members of this group—Kandinsky, Malevich, Popova, Tatlin—were apolitical: they did not extend an enthusiastic welcome to Communism, but they did not renounce it either. If they did acquiesce to the new order in the fall of 1917, they tended to consider it above all as a vehicle for developing and disseminating their own artistic systems—Cubo-Futurism, Suprematism, and Constructivism. Of course, many artists of the avant-garde shared a common dissatisfaction with the old order, and, in their audacious antics and escapades, particularly during the period 1912–16, they did much in order to shock the bourgeoisie. But their behaviour was

oriented against the universal vices of complacency and conservatism and not necessarily against the Czarist social structure as such. It should not be forgotten that many of these young artists fulfilled their patriotic duty for czar and country during the "imperialist" war of 1914–18: Pavel Filonov and Larionov fought on the western front; Petr Miturich and Kliment Redko were pilots in the Imperial Airforce; and Vasilii Chekrygin, Aristarkh Lentulov, Vladimir Maiakovsky, and Malevich designed patriotic posters.

There is little or no evidence to suggest that the leaders of the Russian Avant-Garde were—consciously and actively—supportive of international socialism, that they read Marx and Lenin, or that they were suppressed by the status quo before 1917.³ We should remember that, before the Revolution, the avant-garde published its most vociferous manifestoes without the interference of Czarist censorship, travelled freely in western Europe, held exhibitions that were flagrant breaches of cultural etiquette in the centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg, and paraded through town and countryside in outlandish clothes without being arrested. In other words, with the exception of isolated incidents, the Russian Avant-Garde enjoyed full creative freedom before 1917: they had their own publications and exhibitions, their own societies and clubs, their own patrons and dealers.⁴

Awareness of these conditions undermines the still favored argument that the Russian Avant-Garde was in some way politically conscious, that its leftist art reflected its leftist politics, and that, therefore, it supported the Revolutionary cause. True, most of the primary members of the Russian Avant-Garde did not emigrate, but their acceptance of the Bolshevik regime should not be regarded as an enthusiastic adherence to it. Rather, the fact that so many important artists did not leave Soviet Russia demonstrates both the political inertia and indecisiveness of the Russian Avant-Garde and their constant, deep attachment to Russia. Thanks to their unfailing love of Russia, Filonov, Malevich, and Tatlin never entertained the idea of emigration; and, if they had departed, there is no doubt that they would have become as depressed and as alienated as were Goncharova and Larionov in Paris during the 1930s–1950s. Of course, some artists—particularly Gustav Klutis, Rodchenko, and David Shterenberg—were initially staunch supporters of the Bolshevik government, and their declarations expressed their faith in the new political system. The paradox remains that their ideological commitment did not help them to weather the turbulence of Stalin's rule—Klutis was arrested in 1938 and died in a concentration camp; Rodchenko and Shterenberg were hounded in the press for their formalist leanings; Filonov, a self-proclaimed Communist, did not exhibit between 1934 and 1941; and the two brilliant critics, Nikolai Punin and Alexei Gan, who

tried to marry Communism and Constructivism, were imprisoned for formalism.

Reasons for Emigration

Notwithstanding the political sympathies of Klutis and Rodchenko, most members of the Russian Avant-Garde were not dissatisfied with their lot in pre-Revolutionary Russia and, in many cases, they regretted the passing of the *ancien régime*. Still, one important qualification must be made here—regarding the position of the Jewish artist in Russia before 1917. Because of the Czarist government's restrictions on the mobility, higher education, and employment of Jews and because of the bouts of anti-semitism in Russia (culminating in the Beiliss trial in Kiev in 1913), many Jewish artists took temporary or permanent refuge in Paris and other western cities.⁵ Among those who spent long periods outside Russia before the Revolution were Chagall, Naum Gabo, El Lissitzky, and Shterenberg; there were also many artists who supported more moderate styles, among them Lev Bakst, Nicolas de Staël, and Leopold Survage (Stiurzvage). In any case, just before 1917 Paris was a point of artistic pilgrimage for many avant-garde artists, Jewish and gentile, such as Popova, Tatlin, and Nadezhda Udaltsova. This traditional Franco-Russian association, the lively Russian-Jewish colony in and around La Ruche, and the presence of particular artists such as Goncharova and Larionov served as an added attraction for Russian artists to settle in Paris before and after the Revolution—and to contribute to the formation of a distinctive *école russe de Paris* in the 1920s.⁶

There is no question that fear of Bolshevik reprisal and experience of the licentious behaviour of ignorant Bolshevik plenipotentiaries in 1917–18 resolved some artists and writers to flee Russia. This was particularly true of those who had been part of the Moscow and St. Petersburg cultural bohemia, who had hobnobbed with patrons, dandies and merchants' wives at nightspots such as the Stray Dog and the Comedians' Halt in St. Petersburg, and who had passed nights of pleasure at weekend dachas. These artists included Yurii Annenkov, Grigoriev, and Sergei Sudeikin, whose emigration was motivated by the sudden disappearance of that very class—the bourgeoisie—that had guaranteed the artist his patronage and his wellbeing. Ivan Puni and his wife, the artist Kseniia Boguslavskaja, people of independent means, were simply alarmed by the marauding soldiers and commissars in 1917–18, and, as Boguslavskaja affirmed in a conversation in 1917,⁷ their escape across the frontier in October 1920 was an escape from the violent, piratic aftermath of the Revolution and not from the principles of the Communist doctrine. Gabo implied the same in a conversation in 1972.⁸

The material insolvency of the new regime became manifest immediately. Russian assets were frozen in foreign banks, the operators of

Russia's industrial economy escaped in fear of their lives, production was halted, stores were closed, and even bare necessities became very hard to obtain. Transport and communications broke down, giving rise to a drastic shortage of foodstuffs, and civil war raged on many fronts. The resultant hardships provided the obvious occasion for the emigration between 1917 and circa 1924 of many artists such as Vladimir Baranov-Rossiné, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Nikolai Remizov, Konstantin Somov, Dmitrii Stelletsky, and Alexander Yakovlev. They were suddenly alone, indigent, disoriented. What the critic Andrei Levinson wrote of Somov in 1921 is applicable to many of Somov's colleagues at that time: "As of old, amidst the terrible desert of dead St. Petersburg in the isolation and estrangement of his studio, surrounded only by the porcelain lilliputs of his superb collection, Somov imagines and depicts his harlequins, marquises and cupids."⁹

One result of the diaspora was that groups of Russian artists converged in the most unlikely places as they travelled towards western Europe and America. As he moved through Siberia en route for Tokyo and then New York City, David Burliuk continued to preach his credo of Futurism, establishing a Futurist group called *Tvorchestvo* (Creativity) with Nikolai Aseev, Nikolai Chuzhak, and Sergei Tretiakov in Vladivostok in 1918–19; and during his residence in Japan in 1920–22 Burliuk created a Futurist alliance with the Ukrainian artist Viktor Palmov¹⁰ (Figs. 1 and 2). In 1919 Tiflis (Tbilisi), capital of the still-independent Georgia, also became a bohemian center, maintaining the café culture of St. Petersburg and Moscow. Lado Gudiashvili, David Kakabadze, and Kirill Zdanevich were still resident in Tiflis (although Gudiashvili and Kakabadze left for Paris in October 1919) and they were joined by the painters Savellii Sorin, Vasilii Shukhaev, and Sudeikin and the playwright Nikolai Evreinov.¹¹ Their combined forces inspired the production of plays, designs for café interiors, lectures, and exhibitions. As the Georgian historian René Shmerling writes: "Provocative self-advertisement, sincere rebelliousness and not so sincere, the joy of freedom from all norms and traditions, speculation in the right to know nothing, to be incapable of doing anything coexisted in the art of Georgia at this time, just as it did in the art of Russia and the West."¹² By the end of 1919, however, this remarkable state of affairs terminated since it was clear that Georgia, then in economic and political turmoil, would soon capitulate to the Bolsheviks. (Georgia became part of the Trans-Caucasian Federation of Soviet Republics on 25 February 1921.) For countless Russian, Ukrainian, Armenian, and Georgian artists in Tiflis in 1919–20, Paris beckoned as a secure political and cultural haven, and the mass exodus from Tiflis began in the fall of 1919.



Fig. 1 Photograph taken at the Second Exhibition of the Association of Futurist Artists, Osaka, Japan, November 1921. In the center: David Burliuk.



Fig. 2 Visitors to the Exhibition of Soviet Art, Tokyo, 1927.

Chagall and Kandinsky

Although many artists left Russia because of the harsh material conditions just after 1917 and because of a genuine alarm at Bolshevik atrocities, some, specifically Chagall and Kandinsky, left for much more private reasons that had little to do with the political and social Revolution. Chagall—from the moment he arrived back in Russia in 1917—failed to win the support of the avant-garde. In August 1918 he was appointed director of the Vitebsk Popular Art Institute and at once promoted an art that “would turn abruptly away from the comprehensible,”¹³ arguing that a new, proletarian art did not have to be narrative or even figurative. But despite his advocacy of a more abstract style, Chagall was considered passé by the more radical Malevich, who joined the Institute faculty in September 1919. The immediate result was a sharp division of loyalties within the Institute, some colleagues supporting Chagall, others Malevich, and still others rejecting both. Despite pleas to stay, Chagall resigned his directorship in November 1919 and left for Moscow. He later described that episode:

I shan't be surprised if, after I have been absent for a long time, my town obliterates every trace of me and forgets me and forgets the man who put his own paintbrushes aside, fretted, suffered, and took the trouble to sow the seeds of Art there, who dreamt of transforming ordinary houses into museums and the common man into a creator. And then I understood that no man is a prophet in his own country.¹⁴

The reasons for the severance of relations between Chagall and Malevich were artistic and emotional, not political, and we can conclude that the omission of any reference to Malevich in Chagall's memoirs conceals a deep-seated personal enmity. No doubt, the sudden appearance in Vitebsk of the uncouth, robust Malevich must have pricked the self-esteem of Chagall, then Gubernatorial Plenipotentiary for Art Affairs.¹⁵ Chagall returned to Vitebsk in December 1919, but he left the town finally in May 1920, and left Russia for Lithuania in July of the same year.

Kandinsky's departure from Russia, like Chagall's, was motivated more by hurt artistic pride than by any disenchantment in the force of socialism. Even though Kandinsky was very active in education, research, and museum reform within the organization known as IZO NKP (Visual Arts Section of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment) from 1918 until 1921, he was never close to the extreme trends of the avant-garde (“We took no part in this,” affirms Nina Kandinsky in her book).¹⁶ Symptomatic of Kandinsky's comparative isolation was his uneasy position at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture which opened under his chairmanship in May 1920. Kandinsky compiled an elaborate research plan for the Institute, but most members—and they included all the leading avant-garde artists—rejected Kandinsky's approach, questioning his emphasis on the role of intuition, the subjective element, and the occult sciences. To artists who were already doubting the validity of abstract art and who were tending towards a

utilitarian interpretation, Kandinsky's assertion that a “fundamental concern of the Institute of Artistic Culture must be not only the cultivation of abstract forms, but also the cult of abstract objectives” was highly debatable.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, Kandinsky left the Institute soon after its inception. Of an older generation and a different social environment, never a primary mover of the Moscow and St. Petersburg avant-garde before 1917, Kandinsky was misunderstood and shunned by artists such as Lissitzky, Malevich, Popova, Rodchenko, and Tatlin, and was ignored or condemned by the leftist critics such as Boris Arystov, Gan, and Punin.

How saddened Kandinsky must have been by Punin's review of his book *Tekst khudozhnika* (An Artist's Text) of 1918:

Kandinsky writes seriously and sincerely. . . . But that has absolutely nothing to do with painting. . . . I protest in the strongest terms against Kandinsky's art . . . all his feelings, his colors are lonely, rootless and reminiscent of freaks. No, no! Down with Kandinsky! Down with him!¹⁸

When Kandinsky received the offer of a teaching post at the Bauhaus, he could have had no second thoughts, and he emigrated from Soviet Russia in December 1921. Although the Institute of Artistic Culture and the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences (which Kandinsky helped to establish in 1921) owed much to his planning and foresight, although six Kandinsky paintings remained on view at the Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow until at least 1925, although many young artists spoke of him with esteem, Kandinsky left no school, no disciples, no movement in his homeland. Like Chagall, Kandinsky could not be a prophet in his own country: his fellow artists denied him that.

Berlin—Stepmother of Russian Cities¹⁹

Kandinsky's move to Germany was only one of thousands of such emigrations from Russia in the early 1920s. The Berlin of 1918–23 was like a huge railroad station. Refugees from Russia and from Hungary (the Hungarian Soviet Republic fell in August 1919 after only six months) flocked into Berlin, and by 1922 the Russian population alone was estimated at 100,000. In addition to the permanent émigrés, there was a large number of privileged transients and temporary visitors such as Natan Altman, Iosif Chaikov, Ilia Ehrenburg, Lissitzky, Shterenberg, and Viktor Shklovsky, who travelled on Soviet passports and who did not intend to settle outside the Soviet Union (**Fig. 3**). Consequently, the most diverse personalities, ideas, and events were encountered in Berlin in the early 1920s: Alexei Tolstoi and Andrei Bely, Lev Zak and Puni, the anachronistic *Zhar-ptitsa* (Fire-Bird) (**Fig. 4**) and the Constructivist *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* (**Fig. 5**), the exhibition of Konstantin Korovin at the Galerie Carl Nicolai in 1922 and the one-man

show of Puni at Der Sturm in 1921 (*Fig. 6*), the cabarets such as Der Blaue Vogel (*Fig. 7*), and Alexander Tairov's Chamber Theatre on tour in 1923. As Chagall said of those days:

After the war, Berlin had become a kind of caravansary where everyone travelling between Moscow and the West came together. . . . In the apartments round the Bayrische Platz there were as many samovars and theosophical and Tolstoyan countesses as there had been in Moscow. . . . in my whole life I've never seen so many wonderful rabbis or so many Constructivists as in Berlin in 1922.²⁰

Paradoxically, in spite of the large colony of émigrés, the new Soviet state enjoyed the sympathy of the new Weimar Republic. On both an ideological and a cultural level the two nations shared common ground. For example, both wished to establish a relationship between the

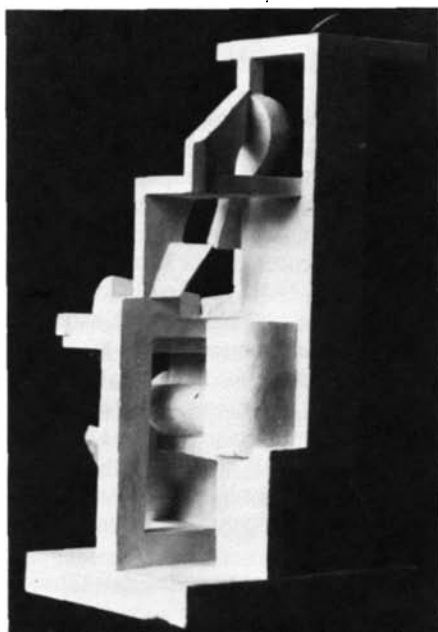


Fig. 3 Iosif Chaikov, *Untitled Construction*, 1922. Present whereabouts unknown.

prise system, German industry and investment moved into Russia: Soviet influence in Berlin was, therefore, of vital economic and political importance. Viewed in this light, the famous exhibition of modern Russian art at the Galerie van Diemen in Berlin in 1922 (*Figs. 9 and 10*) emerges more as a Soviet political gesture than as an altruistic endeavor to disseminate culture. That is why Anatolii Lunacharsky, Soviet Minister of Enlightenment, was very pleased to see that the greatest success of the exhibition (in spite of its low attendance)²¹ was "first and foremost and without any doubt its political success. Even those who are hostile towards it assert—not without much spluttering—that once again the Soviet government has demonstrated its diplomatic capabilities in organizing this exhibition."²² In the same way, Soviet visitors to Berlin, not in the least Ehrenburg and Lissitzky, might be regarded as political emissaries dispatched to gain international goodwill rather than as simple cultural attachés.



Fig. 4 Cover of the first number of journal *Zhar-ptitsa*, Berlin, 1922. Cover design by Sergei Chekhonin.

tion.²³ In April 1922 an entire evening was devoted to a debate concerning the Constructivist journal *Veshch*, at which its editors, Ehrenburg and Lissitzky, were forced to repulse bitter attacks by anti-Constructivists, including their own publisher Alexander Shreider. Among those who attended the evenings at the Haus der Künste were Alexander Archipenko, Bely, Nikolai Berdiaev, Serge Charchoune, Roman Jakobson, Gabo, Puni, Maiakovsky, and Boris Pasternak.

Reference to *Veshch* touches on the complex and often politically ambiguous role that the émigré press played in Russian Berlin. Although *Veshch* was printed in the émigré house Skythen, owned by Shreider, it was not an anti-Bolshevik organ, and the note that appeared on the back pages of both issues ("The Publishing-House Skythen plays no part in the actual compilation of *Veshch*") confirmed the hostility between its anti-Bolshevik printer and its pro-Bolshevik editors. Undoubtedly, it was more than Lissitzky's eulogy of the machine aesthetics and



Fig. 5 Page from journal *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, 1923. Design by El Lissitzky.

working-classes and art and both felt that radical politics and radical art made a reasonable combination. Naturally, there was a difference in styles favored by the two regimes: for IZO NKP "new art" meant Suprematism and Tatlin's reliefs (*Fig. 8*), while for the Arbeitsrat it meant Expressionism. Even so, both regimes, thanks to their belief in imminent universal revolution, thought in terms of an international style, one that would be monumental and synthetic. At the same time, this cultural rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the Weimar Republic disguised other, more pragmatic needs for economic and technological agreements. As soon as Lenin implemented his New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, with the partial return to the free enter-

How did Russian art affect the German public? Where did it manifest itself in Berlin and other cities? Russian artists and writers tended to settle in well-defined areas of Berlin, for the most part near the Nollendorplatz, and there is little evidence for assuming that the German public interacted at all intensively with this new ethnic neighborhood. Still, there were many opportunities for cultural interchange—cafés, theatres, exhibitions, publishing houses, publications, and artists' studios. A favorite meeting place was the Haus der Künste at the Café Léon, a kind of Berlin Café Rotonde at which many memorable events took place in 1922 and 1923. For example, Sergei Esenin gave poetry readings there, and Puni delivered a cycle of lectures on the Van Diemen exhibi-

the international style that caused the writer Bely to describe Lissitzky and Ehrenburg as "masks of the Antichrist" (the Bolsheviks being for many Russians a diabolical force).²⁴

An art journal of a very different order, but also Russian and published concurrently in Berlin, was the elegant *Zhar-ptitsa* (Fire-Bird). If *Veshch* (subtitled "Internationale Rundschau der Kunst der Gegenwart") aspired to develop an international movement, then *Zhar-ptitsa* (subtitled "Russische Monatsschrift für Kunst und Literatur") concerned itself with the national traditions of Old Russia and sought to uphold the concept of good taste. Many of the old World of Art artists such as Bakst and Shukhaev were associated with *Zhar-ptitsa* and the architectural landscapist Georgii Lukomsky (one of

Lissitzky's early influences) was its artistic director. With articles on Bakst, the Russian ballet, Sudeikin, and the poetry of Konstantin Balmont, to mention but a few, *Zhar-ptitsa* was a popular journal and enjoyed financial success. Ironically, its clientele was far more international than that of *Vesbcb*, and during its six years of publication it could be purchased at Wilenkin's in London, at Brentano's in New York, and at Kassian's in Buenos Aires. In its artistic orientation and in its layout, *Zhar-ptitsa* advanced no further than a *fin-de-siècle* magazine, and, for that reason, it appealed to those who yearned for the peaceful Russia of yesteryear.

**To say "I'm in Paris" is to say
"I'm nowhere"**²⁵

Although Berlin was the primary destination of Russian artists and literati just after the Revolution, it was not the only one. As mentioned above, a number of artists left Russia via Tiflis,

States after it closed. Among these defectors were Sergei Kononkov and Somov.

Although Paris became the major center for the Russian emigration after 1923, it did not especially impress those Russian artists who had been close to the avant-garde. When Altman arrived in Paris in 1928 with Solomon Mikhoels and the State Jewish Theatre, he was shocked to find that French artists were reinterpreting the classical tradition and that even Picasso was reevaluating Ingres. This state of affairs appealed, however, to the many moderate and conservative Russian artists such as Benois, Ivan Bilibin, Chekhonin, and Somov, who took up residence in Paris in the 1920s and harmonized with their cult of *Mir iskusstva* and *Apollon*.²⁷ Their gentle retrospectivism, their restrained elegance expressed itself in the exhibitions such as the *Exposition d'Art Russe* (1932) organized by the Parisian Russians, in their book designs (*Fig. 11*), and in their art journals. Even the most avant-garde of these

should be members of Le Monde Artiste, this was soon modified, so that many Russian artists, previously unconnected with the World of Art, joined the new society. The first exhibition of Le Monde Artiste opened in Paris in June 1921, and, in appearance, reminded visitors of the catholic World of Art shows just before the Great War: Bakst displayed his portraits of Ida Rubinstein and Anna Pavlova, Gudiashvili showed his Georgian miniatures, Larionov his costume designs for *Chout*, Shukhaev his nudes, and Serafim Sudbinin his sculptures. A similar eclecticism was evident at the second and last exhibition of Le Monde Artiste held at Bernheim Jeune, Paris, in 1927. More than anything else, these exhibitions demonstrated that Paris was a center of everything and a city of anonymity—something that prompted several Russian artists to return home to Russia in the 1930s.

Even though the more innovative Russian artists in Paris in the 1920s—such as Altman

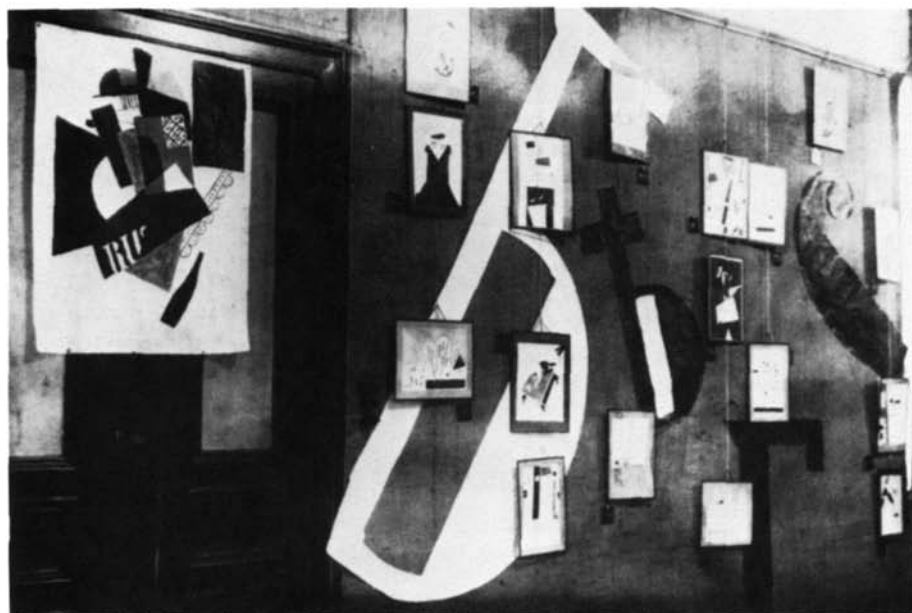


Fig. 6 Ivan Puni Exhibition, *Der Sturm* Gallery, Berlin, February 1921.



Fig. 7 Cover for program of *Der Blaue Vogel*, Berlin, 1922. Designed by Kseniia Bogulavskaia.

proceeding to Constantinople, Sofia, Athens, and then Paris; some artists such as David Burliuk, Varvara Bubnova, and Palmov settled in Japan for longer or shorter periods. However, after the attraction of Berlin waned in the early 1920s, Paris and then New York became the major cities for the Russian emigration. Several important artists converged in New York in 1923–24 either on their own initiative or under the auspices of the grand *Russian Art Exhibition* which the Soviets organized at the Grand Central Palace in 1924.²⁶ This showing of modern Russian art (excluding abstract art), directed by Igor Grabar and Ivan Troianovsky, served as a convenient pretext for certain artists to accompany it from the Soviet Union—and then to remain in the United

journals—Sergei Romov's *Udar* (Blow) of 1922–23—advocated Cubism as the latest artistic development and completely ignored Constructivism and industrial design. Consequently, its aesthetic orientation was typified by its particular concentration on Braque, Derain, and Lhote and by its particular choice of Russian artists, i.e. Jacques Lipchitz (not Gabo), Constantin Terechkovitch (not Kandinsky).

Symptomatic of the more conservative, more academic mood of Parisian cultural life in the 1920s was the fact that, in March 1921, a World of Art society (Le Monde Artiste) was founded there by Prince Alexandre Shervashidze and Lukomsky. Although the initial understanding was that only original World of Art members (i.e. the Diaghilev/Benois group of 1898–1906)

(*Fig. 12*), Robert Falk, and Redko—were dissatisfied with the French return to more conventional artistic values, their own work soon expressed a similar conservatism. In Russia these artists had been associated with the avant-garde, but they soon ceased to experiment and, like their French colleagues, returned to a simpler, figurative art. Perhaps for this very reason, they did not distinguish themselves in French artistic circles—they lost those very qualities of exaggeration, vitality, and energy that the French had come to expect of Russians. In spite of publicity in the French press, in spite of monographs published in Paris,²⁸ artists such as Altman and Redko never integrated with the mainstream of Parisian artistic life. Beckoned by false promises

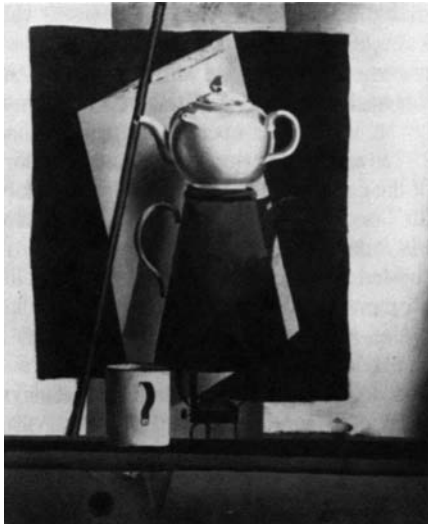


Fig. 8 Ivan Puni, *Still-Life with Coffee Pot*, 1922, oil on canvas. Present whereabouts unknown.



Fig. 10 Photograph of Natan Altman at Die Erste Russische Kunstausstellung, Berlin, 1922.

of cultural freedom and material abundance, Altman, Falk, Gudiashvili, Redko—who had never renounced their Soviet citizenship—returned to Soviet Russia in the mid-1930s. But for them and many like them, this was an irreversible and tragic step towards an even harsher emigration.

Conclusion

In 1927, while curating an exhibition of Russian art in Japan, the critic Punin wrote the following lines to Goncharova: "As far as art is concerned, things are now at a complete standstill in Russia. There's hardly any new strength, and only scorn for the old. Generally speaking, people just aren't up to art."²⁹ Sad to say, Punin's observation remained true of Soviet art for many years. By the time Punin wrote this letter, it was already becoming difficult to emigrate

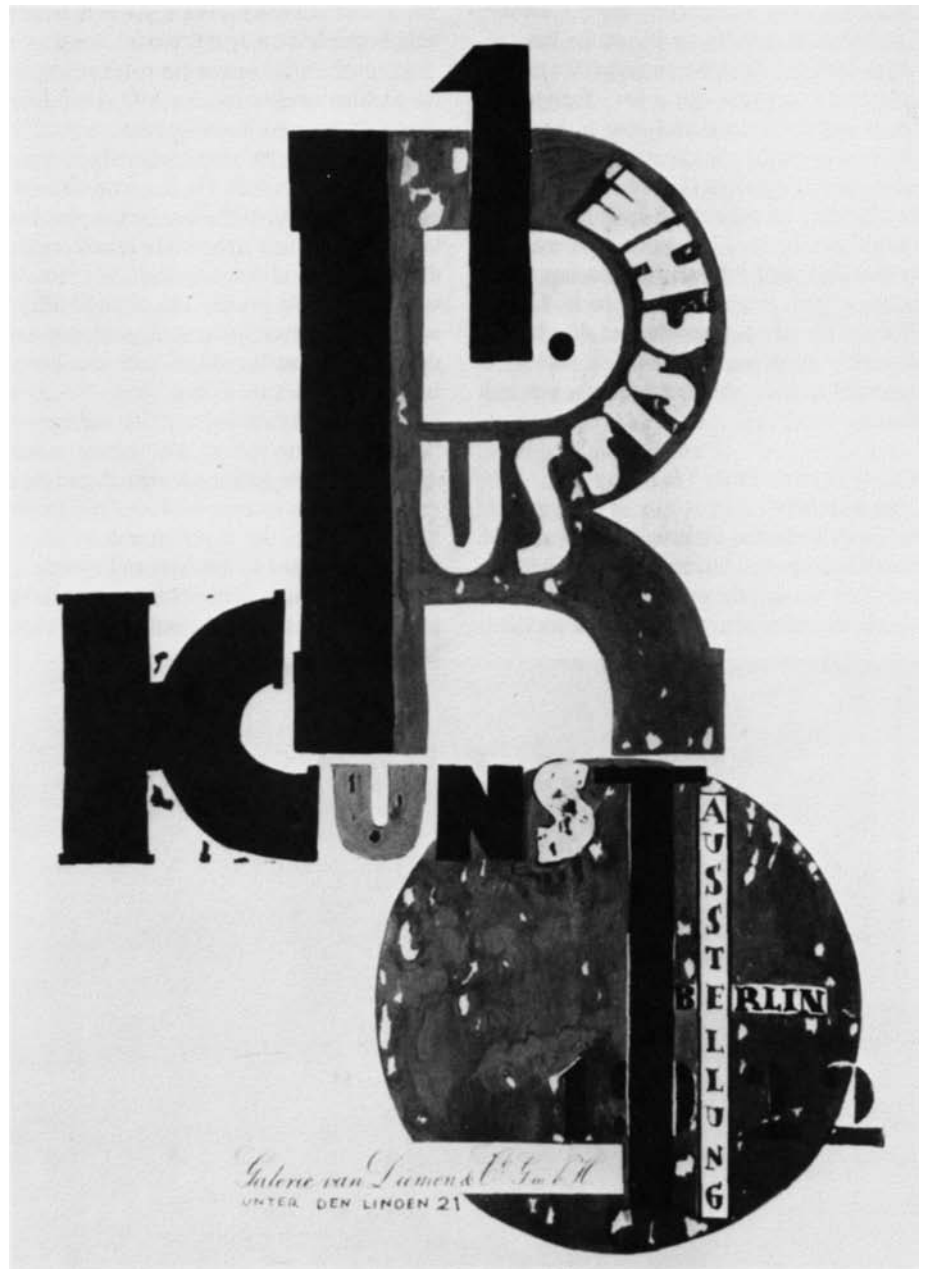


Fig. 9 El Lissitzky, *Design for the cover of the exhibition catalog for Die Erste Russische Kunstausstellung*, watercolor, 23 x 16 cms. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery.

from Soviet Russia, and from 1930 until the 1960s legal emigration was virtually closed.³⁰ Only in exceptional circumstances, as in the case of the writer Evgenii Zamiatin,³¹ were Soviet intellectuals able to leave for the West. During the Stalin regime, many artists, including Alexander Drevin, Falk, Alexander Shevchenko, and Nadezhda Udaltsova were exiled from Moscow and Leningrad (or at least advised to leave) and spent long periods in Soviet Central Asia.³² Now, the third wave of Russian émigrés is building a new culture in Paris, Jerusalem, and New York. Many of these recent émigré artists are disoriented and often feel slighted that the West does not recognize their talent. But let us hope that this new generation of artists—Vagrich Bakhchanian, Vitaly Komar, Alexandr Melamid, Ernst Neizvestny, Lev Nussberg, Yakov Vinkovetsky—will not repeat the

mistake of their predecessors and return, deceived, to the motherland, only to face a crueler exile. **End**

Notes

- 1 Of particular importance is the book by Robert Williams, *Culture in Exile. Russian Emigrés in Germany 1881 — 1941*, Ithaca, 1972.
- 2 Exhibitions of the Russian Avant-Garde of the 1960s and early 1970s were especially prone to such eclecticism. See, for example, the catalog of the exhibition *Avantgarde 1910 — 1930 Osteuropa* at the Akademie der Künste, West Berlin, 1967, and the catalog of the exhibition *Il contributo russo alle avanguardie plastiche* at the Galleria del Levante, Milan, 1964. The concept of the Russian Avant-Garde continues to be used in its broadest sense at auctions of modern Russian art and books at Sotheby



Fig. 11 Ivan Puni, illustration for the children's book *Tsrefen (Pollen)*, 1922.

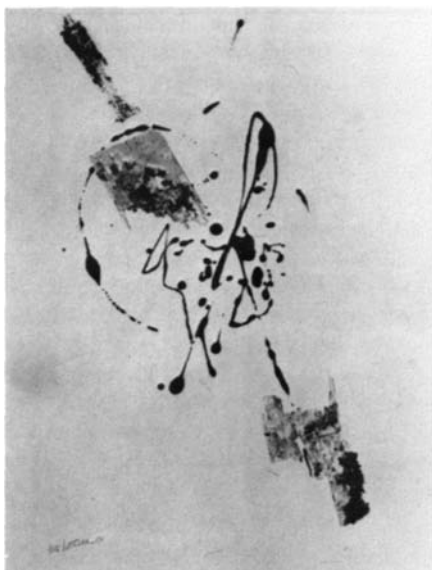


Fig. 12 Natan Altman, Untitled (sometimes called *Varnish*), 1921, varnish and birch bark. Present whereabouts unknown.

Parke Bernet in London and New York.

- 3 The only member of the Russian Avant-Garde who was actively engaged in political agitation before 1917 and who was imprisoned for this was Vladimir Maiakovsky (August 1909 until January 1910).
- 4 Particular mention should be made of Nadezhda Dobychina, whose so-called Art Bureau in St. Petersburg (operative 1912–18) dealt in works by Altman, Puni, and Olga Rozanova.
- 5 For more information on the position of the Jewish artist in Russia just before and after the Revolution see Avram Kampf, "In Quest of the Jewish Style in the Era of the Russian Revolution," *Journal of Jewish Art*, v, 1978, 48–75. See also Igor Golomshtok, "Sovratiteli ili souchastniki?" 22, Tel-Aviv, 1979, No. 6, 160–81.
- 6 For some information on the role of Russian

émigrés in art and literature in Paris of the 1920s see the special issues of *TriQuarterly* entitled "Russian Literature and Culture in the West 1922–1972" (Evanston, Illinois, 1973, Nos. 27 and 28).

- 7 From a conversation conducted with Mme Boguslavskaya by Herman Berninger and John E. Bowlt at her residence outside Paris in the summer of 1971.
- 8 Gabo in a conversation conducted with him by Milka Bliznakov and John E. Bowlt at his residence in Connecticut in the summer 1972.
- 9 A. Levinson, "Somov," *Zhar-ptitsa*, Berlin, 1921, No. 3, 20.
- 10 For information on Burliuk and Palmov in this context see Kazuo Yamawaki, "Burliuk and Palmov—Russian Futurists in Japan," *Pilotis*, Hyogo, 1978, No. 28, 4–5 (in Japanese).
- 11 For some information on Tiflis in 1919 see I.P. Dzutsova and N.A. Elizbarashvili, "S.Yu. Sudeikin v Gruzii," *Muzei*, Moscow, 1980, No. 1, 23–26.
- 12 Quoted in Dzutsova and Elizbarashvili, *ibid.*, 23.
- 13 M. Shagal (Chagall), "O Vitebskom narodnom khudozhestvennom uchilishche," *Sbkola i revoliutsiia*, Vitebsk, 1919, No. 2, 7.
- 14 Marc Chagall, *My Life*, London, 1965, 143.
- 15 This is how Chagall signed himself. See, for example, his declaration "Ot Vitebskogo podotdela Izobrazitelnykh iskusstv," *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Petrograd, 1919, 30 March, 1.
- 16 Nina Kandinsky, *Kandinsky und ich*, Munich, 1976, 88.
- 17 V. Kandinsky, *Institut khudozbestvennoi kul'tury (programma)* (1920). Reprinted in I. Matsa et al., eds., *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, Moscow and Leningrad, 1933, 131.
- 18 N. Punin, "O knigakh," *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 1919, No. 9, 3.
- 19 Many Russian émigrés referred to Berlin as the "stepmother of Russian cities" in the early 1920s.

20 E. Roditi, "Entretien avec Marc Chagall," *Preuves*, Paris, 1958, February, No. 84, 27.

21 Georgii Lukomsky, in his review of the 1922 exhibition, commented that his admission ticket bore the number 1697 when he viewed the exhibition on its fifteenth day: "That's not much. 15,000 people visited the 'World of Art' in Paris within two weeks" (G. Lukomsky, "Russkaia vystavka v Berline," *Argonavty*, Petrograd, 1923, No. 1, 68).

22 A. Lunacharsky, "Russkaia vystavka v Berline" in his collection of articles *Iskusstvo i revoliutsiia*, Moscow, 1924, 177.

23 Puni's lectures formed the basis of his book *Sovremennaia zhivopis* which was published by Frenkel, Berlin in 1923. A French edition, *L'Art Contemporain*, was also published by Frenkel in 1922.

24 This was reported in *Vesbch*, 1922, No. 3, 21 under the title "Krestiny Vesbchi."

25 A. Bely, *Mezhdvu dvukh revoliutsii*, Leningrad, 1934, 140.

26 For information on this exhibition see Marie Turbow Lampard, "Sergei Konenkov and the 'Russian Art Exhibition' of 1924," *Soviet Union*, Arizona State University, vii, Parts 1–2, 1980, 70–88.

27 The reference is to the two art journals—*Mir iskusstva* (World of Art) published under the editorship of Sergei Diaghilev and Alexandre Benois between 1898 and 1904, and *Apollon* (Apollo) published under the editorship of Sergei Makovsky between 1909 and 1917 [1918]. Both journals were published in St. Petersburg.

28 See, for example, Waldemar George and Ilya Ehrenburg, *Natan Altman*, Paris, 1933 (in Yiddish); Maurice Raynal, *Lado Goudiachvili*, Paris, 1925; A. Lounatcharsky and André Salmon, *Redko*, Paris 1930.

29 Letter from N. Punin to N. Goncharova dated 7 June 1927 and postmarked Yokohama, Japan. Collection Institute of Modern Russian Culture at Blue Lagoon, Texas.

30 One of the last of the avant-garde artists to leave Soviet Russia was Pavel Mansurov who emigrated from Leningrad to Italy in 1928.

31 Zamiatin wrote a letter to Stalin in 1931 asking for permission to emigrate. To the surprise of many, Stalin complied with Zamiatin's request.

32 Some idea of the extent of this exile of Russian artists to Central Asia under Stalin can be gained by consulting the biographies in the book *Stareisbie sovetskie khudozhniki o Srednei Azii i Kavkaze* by M.B. Miasina, Moscow, 1973.

A Conversation with Vladimir Stenberg

Alma H. Law, a theater historian and professional translator, has published widely on Russian and Eastern European theatre and stage design.

The conversation below is drawn from a number of talks with Vladimir Stenberg recorded over the past several years. I first went to see him in October 1978. At the time I was gathering material on Meierkhold's production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* and was following up a clue to the effect that Meierkhold had first approached the Stenberg brothers to design the set for the production. Since my first visit, I have returned many times to that extraordinary apartment studio hidden away on the top floor of a building on one of the busiest boulevards in Moscow where Stenberg has lived since the late 1930s. Our conversations have ranged over many topics from childhood memories to Stenberg's ten years of association with Tairov at the Kamerny Theatre.

Today, Stenberg (**Fig. 1**) is eighty-two years old, and the only voice remaining to speak firsthand for that fearless band of avant-garde artists, among them Rodchenko, Tatlin, Popova, Stepanova, and Vesnin, who set out in the years just before and after 1918 to revolutionize Russian art. What comes through more than anything else in talking with him is the sense of enthusiasm and optimism these artists possessed at that time. The world was, indeed, their oyster, and even though many of them were hardly more than youngsters—or perhaps for that very reason—they were fearless in taking on any and all challengers. **A.H.L.**

Alma Law: Let's begin, if you're agreeable, simply with some biographical information.

Vladimir Stenberg: My father was born in Sweden in the town of Norrköping and he finished the Academy in Stockholm with a gold medal. Then he was invited to come here to Moscow to do some kind of work. At that time [1896] there was an exhibition in Yuzovka—now it's called Donetsk—so there in Yuzovka my father worked on an exhibition. Later at the Nizhninogorod fair he did some kind of work. In Moscow he met my mother. They married



Fig. 1 Vladimir Stenberg in his studio, 1978.

and had three children.¹

My father lived and worked in Moscow and I wanted to enter a technical school. I was very fond of technology, mechanics, and so forth.² But conditions were such that I had to enter Stroganov, the art school. My father worked as a painter, and from the time I was six years of age, we had pencils, brushes, and the like in our hands. We began to draw very early. Well, like children, they see their father drawing, and so we drew too. And here's what's interesting about our father. When we were going to school, we would bring home our drawings at the end of the year. My brother, Georgii, and I would play a trick and switch some of the drawings. But my father always knew. We would sit together and draw figures. Everything. And it seemed to us that we had everything the same. But nevertheless our father would still

distinguish the hand of one son's work from the other's.

When we had to do perspective, to study all that, we told the teacher that our father was an artist and he had taught us a little. The teacher gave us a test assignment and we did it. He said, "That isn't the way it's done. The plan should be at the bottom, and at the top, the representation of that perspective." But our father had another method: the plan on top and underneath the representation. Because when you're working, it's more convenient to have at the bottom what is most important. Therefore we had it the other way around. When the teacher asked, "Why do you do it that way?" we answered, "Our father taught us that way." "Well, of course," he said, "with foreigners, they have things the other way around."

Here is another story of our father's method,

how he taught us. In Petrovsky Park, where Dynamo Stadium is now, there was a summer restaurant. Our father did his work there. Housepainters were there painting those windows, and our father sent us there to work for practice. He said, "Go there tomorrow at eight in the morning." But before we went, he showed us what we had to do: "Think about what you have to take with you to do the work." Well, we went. We took big brushes and little ones for where the glass was. We took rags, a scraper, and so forth, so that we could put a rag on the other end of the brush and wipe the window where it was smeared. In short, we worked, we tried hard. About ten or eleven, our father arrived. He looked at us and laughed and then he said, "To hell with such work!" That was the only expression he had of that kind. "To hell," he said, "with such work!"

There was some thick paper lying on the table. He took it, tore off a piece, laid it on the glass—covered the glass with that paper—and with the big brush, did like this: one, two. Then he turned the paper: three, four. "There," he said, "that's how it has to be done. No rags, no little brushes, nothing." He said, "First, you have to think, then do. If you're going to work like that, it'll take six months. This is a summer restaurant. It must be done in two or three days. Like that." So it was clear to us. I mean, before doing, one must . . . We had thought of everything, but we were thinking in the wrong direction as far as neatness went. He had it all neat and good. Like that.³

When we studied at Stroganov, we had a lot on art and on the history of art. Our father also had books on style, on everything. We were already prepared so that for us all that was a repetition of what we'd already done. For example, when we drew the figure of Michelangelo's *David*, or the figure of Apollo, we were no longer interested in the usual poses, that is, there stands the figure, everyone sits and draws it at a great distance. We would sit close to the figure and look at it from below, with a strong *raccourci*. The same if we drew a plaster head. We did the same thing, lighting also from somewhere below. That's how we did all kinds of tricks during our studies. It's true, some of the teachers didn't welcome it, but we were clever. We said there wasn't a seat and we had to sit there, but then they understood that we were being tricky and we were interested in such points.

Parallel with Stroganov School we worked in the theatre. At first we worked in the operetta theatre, then in other theatres. But we didn't go to work as some student-artists, as assistants to the stage designer. We went to the theatre only to execute some assigned work. Take Fedorovsky, or another artist, say, Kazokhin;⁴ all the students dreamed of being his assistant. But we said, "No, we'll go to work in the theatre when they ask us as artists." And we took part in exhibitions, organized exhibitions too.

At that time, Stroganov was the Imperial

Stroganov School. There were professors and teachers. They even had some kind of government rank, and the pupils were like university students. Then came 1917, and in 1918, Stroganov became the Free State Art Studios, without uniforms.⁵ All that was abolished. They organized the school differently. Fedorovsky, Konchalovsky, Yakulov, Tatlin, Osmerkin,⁶ and so forth were masters, and we were the apprentices—their students. Each master in a workshop had about thirty, or let's say, forty to fifty apprentices.

And Mayakovsky, Kamensky, Khlebnikov, these writers often came to the Free State Art Studios to talk with us, and to read their works. Well, of course, they infected everyone, so to speak, with their method of behavior.⁷

At one time we were living together with Medunetsky.⁸ That was in 1918. I was eighteen, my brother, seventeen, and Medunetsky also seventeen. When we got home after going around to all the workshops to see what was going on, we had to make some kind of response. It was all wrong. At Tatlin's they were making those sculptures out of samovar metal. At Konchalovsky's, everything was like Konchalovsky. At Fedorovsky's, like Fedorovsky. Well, to make it short, we composed a text. Just as Mayakovsky often said, "Me and Pushkin . . ." we had such an opening too. We often changed it, but the meaning was always this: that we three, the most remarkable painters born on the earth's sphere, proclaim . . . Then there would be the text. So here, too, was a proclamation like this: Down with the titans, Picasso, Gauguin, and others of these French artists. All those Impressionists. Further on we wrote an address like this: No more manufacturing! It begins: "No more manufacturing Tatlins Konchalovskys Lentulovs . . ."⁹ And we wrote a full list of all our teachers. No periods or commas, nothing. The signatures: Stenberg Medunetsky Stenberg.

Now, where to hang it? In the school there was a large lobby on the left, and on the right, coatrooms, and straight ahead in the corner, a huge window. On the other wall, a mirror and a landing. A wide, wide staircase to the second floor. That was the only entrance, so all the teachers, all the masters and apprentices had to pass. We got to school early, a half hour before classes, and hung the poster while no one was there. Then we stood and watched what would happen.

The apprentices began to pass and they read, at the very beginning, this: "We three, the most remarkable born on this sphere." All of them, you know were filled—some with envy, some with disdain. Imagine, the three of them! Well there were all sorts, and each reacted in his own way. But the next thing was, "Enough manufacturing!" And what do you know, his favorite teacher, he went to him to learn, and suddenly—enough manufacturing! And, "Down with the titans!" They adored the French, French painting. And now, "Down with the titans! Picasso, Gauguin, and the

others!" What then? This excited them, so there were arguments. Some were for us, some against us. The matter ended with classes being called off on that day. No one studied anything.

All the teachers read the proclamation too and also reacted. They gathered and discussed what kind of prank it was, and what did it mean. At four in the afternoon a meeting was called in the assembly hall. Everyone came, and we had to answer for our prank. The chair called for speakers. Then those activists, young fellows, began to speak, all those very apprentices who had been so upset. And we, too. They gave us the floor. So we explained what it was all about. Then it was the turn of the teacher-masters. One after another they began to speak. "Well, of course," they said, "that opening is very impertinent, and an impertinent text. It should be done, but more politely. It's an art school, after all." So the teachers said, "Well, they're right, after all. How is it possible to copy one's teacher? You'll get thirty Konchalovskys. That means Konchalovskys from Konchalovsky. And further, what then?"

Well, in short, we felt cramped working in that place, in those State Art Studios, and we often went to all sorts of debates, meetings. We spoke, and often organized exhibitions. We'd make several works and then organize an exhibition, somewhere in a lobby, or on a staircase. Always with some kind of proclamation and besides, without permission. We'd make some works, hang them up, then after awhile we'd do it in another place. The thing was, when Mayakovsky, for example, spoke, there was the impression that he spoke not only to the audience, to us, but that his voice and all his gestures flew over our heads, far away, maybe across all Europe to America. He spoke so powerfully, so energetically. We could speak, too, but not as poets, we couldn't read our works. But when we showed our work, we always accompanied it by all those proclamations.

At that time there was a State Purchasing Commission. They bought works from each artist. They would buy one from a sculptor, one from a painter, and so forth. When we showed our work for the first time to the Purchasing Commission and signed it, "Vladimir Stenberg, Georgii Stenberg," they said, "No, only one, we'll take only one. Two are not allowed." But how can it be, one work? After all, there are two of us! We each have an appetite, desires. We began signing our works, on one "V. Stenberg," on another, "G. Stenberg." They'd give thirty thousand for paintings, and for three-dimensional sculpture works they'd give fifty thousand roubles. So we did three-dimensional works too. And something would go through every time for sure. If not one thing, then another. In most cases constructions and also colored things.

There we had to fill in a questionnaire. Who we were, a university student, pupil, or artist. We wrote "artist." We didn't write that we

were students because we didn't bring student work. What the teacher in class set, we drew. But we also did our own compositions, our fantasy—everything our own—so we wrote "artist." And our things were accepted like all the other artists. The price for everything was the same.

Well, our comrades in school saw what we were submitting and they also began to work for the Commission. But we warned them that for students the price was fifteen thousand, not thirty. We warned them not to write that they were studying. Well, some were wary. What if the thing didn't go? It was better to be sure of fifteen thousand. But we, never. We were, in general, very sure somehow. You know, even provocatively sure. But they were afraid and signed themselves as students. And what happened? The Commission bought from half of them, there were about ten, and from half they didn't buy. And they bought them for only fifteen thousand. But we submitted two works each, both sculpture and flat, and they took both. In short, our pockets were full, and in the others' there was nothing. We said, "What's the matter with you? Why didn't you write that you were artists? After all, you created your own works. Those aren't student works that you did in class. You made them specially for this, didn't you?" "Yes." "Well, then, why write student?"

In short, our youth passed very stormily. We began to work early, and early we understood everything. We always had friends, good friends. There were people twenty years older than us who recognized us because of our work. At that time it was somehow different. Now it's considered this way: twenty years—that's a kid. But then, it was different among the artists. They looked at who did what. They judged on the quality of the works. And then, of course, those exhibitions. They gave a person an image, so to speak, who and what he was.

So time passed, and there was an exhibition at the Café of Poets on Gorky Street. Then it was Tverskaya Street. As with all our earlier exhibitions, we accompanied it with a kind of proclamation that we put up just before the opening so that it wouldn't be published earlier. It went like this [VS reads from the catalog]:

Constructivists to the world. Constructivism will bring mankind to possess the maximum achievement of culture with the minimum expenditure of energy. Every man born on this sphere, before returning to its covering, could master the shortest route to the factory where the unique organism of earth is fashioned.

To the factory of creators of the highest trampoline for the leap towards universal human culture. The name of this road is CONSTRUCTIVISM.

The great seducers of the human breed—the aesthetes and artists—have demolished the stern bridges on this road, replac-

ing them with a bundle of mawkish narcotics: art and beauty.

The essence of the earth, man's brain, is being wasted to fertilize the morass of aestheticism.

Weighing the facts on the scales of an honest attitude toward the inhabitants of the earth, the Constructivists declare art and its priests outside the law.¹⁰

And here are the signatures: "K. Medunetsky, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg." The point is the style of that writing. Then there were poets like Kamensky, Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov. Especially there was one, Kruchenykh, whose words were such expressions as: *tyr, pyr, myr*.¹¹ Words, you see, that is sounds that don't mean anything. They could only express some kind of sound. Therefore we wrote in language like that because we were affected, as it were, by that period, the performances by these poets, and so forth.

Now whom did we call aesthetes? Those artists, those non-objectivists, abstractionists who made works for no reason. We called our works "laboratory work." Actually we believed in this, and correctly, I think. Whatever we did further—if you take the theatrical productions, if you take the movie posters—all were built on that same principle,¹² that is, on Constructivism. There was a short period when we made ceramics. All kinds of ware and other things. Nowadays, they make some object and somehow it's not comfortable to take hold of. Look! One finger here, two fingers. . . . You see? Take a teapot. The teapot is hot and the cover is too. Today our contemporary designers make it in this form: here is the lid and there is the whole pot. And when it becomes hot, you can't take it with your fingers. To pick it up with something is impossible too. Or here is another teapot. When you begin to pour, the lid flies off and into the glass.

At that time, Malevich and some other artists worked on ceramics for awhile. But they made it something like this: here are paintings, say some kind of stripes or circles, and what they did was to translate them to a plate or saucer. That somehow didn't take into account the form or anything. And these paintings people were supposed to hang on the wall instead of a landscape. When a portrait hangs, that's understandable. It recalls something, gives emotion to a person. But such completely abstract things are unnecessary for an artist. There were many such things—no reason, no basic principles, nothing. For that you don't even have to think. You can shut your eyes and make it. At that time there were painters who argued that it was necessary. We had arguments. We spoke out sharply. We declared their art, that is, the art of those priests, outside the law.

We knew when we were studying at Stroganov that artists, if they had done well, were rewarded with a trip abroad when they graduated. But when we were finishing, it turned out differently.

There was the war of 1914, so sometimes a person who was finishing his studies wouldn't submit his diploma painting. From 1914 to 1919, there were a lot like that. We called them "eternal students." They didn't submit because of the war. If a student had already received the title "artist," they'd send him to a military school to make camouflage, or to the front. So at the Stroganov School from 1914 to 1919, there were no graduations.

In 1919, a group of artists decided to set up an exhibition. We announced ourselves as artists, printed up posters and invitations, and found a place for ourselves, a large circular hall, a sculpting workshop. There we set up an exhibition and invited all the members of the government, artists, and so forth. There were ten of us, even fewer, and later a viewing was arranged, a kind of closed exhibition, at which Lunacharsky and the Commissar of the Arts, David Petrovich Shterenberg, were present.¹³

So then Lunacharsky recognized us as artists—there was a Commission from Narkompros—and they called us the "First Group of Red Artists." Some artists from those ten were invited to receive diplomas. But we didn't go to get them. An artist doesn't need a diploma because an artist works all his life, exhibiting, and that, so to speak, is his diploma. It's only an engineer who needs a diploma, or somebody like a doctor. We weren't afraid of the civil war because we were already making posters for the front. When we were proclaimed "Red Artists," we were given an exemption. But my brother and I didn't need it since we were Swedish citizens.¹⁴ Besides, we were serving, making posters for the front and for the liquidation of illiteracy, and we did all other kinds of work.

This continued until 1923. There were four exhibitions of Obmokhu.¹⁵ And yes, when we were thinking of a name, someone proposed "Soul Hole." Soul hole? What's that? What's a soul, and a hole to boot? So we were very inventive. Someone said we could call it "the Society of Young Artists." All our institutions at that time used syllables for their names: "Narkompros," for example. So we made "Obmokhu." That was right and good, and at the same time was obscene—the last two letters especially. So that's how Obmokhu got started. We found a place, we proved we had permission, and we all worked well. But in 1923, this society broke up. Everyone went off in his own direction. And we took up theatre.

AL: The Third Obmokhu Exhibition (*Fig. 2*) in 1921, where was it held?

VS: There was a kind of salon café on Bolshaia Dmitrovka Street and Kuznetsky Bridge. That's where the exhibition was, in that hall. It had an all-glass ceiling. When we brought our constructions, Rodchenko and Ioganson's constructions were already there on pedestals, and all were the same height. When they saw our stands, they said, "Listen, why didn't you

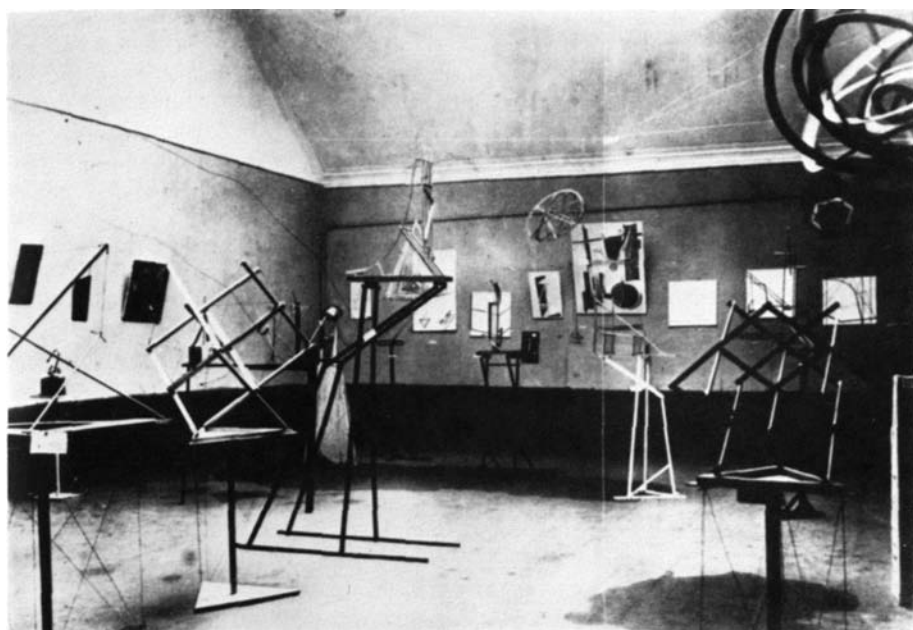


Fig. 2 *The Third Obmokhu Exhibition, May 1921.*

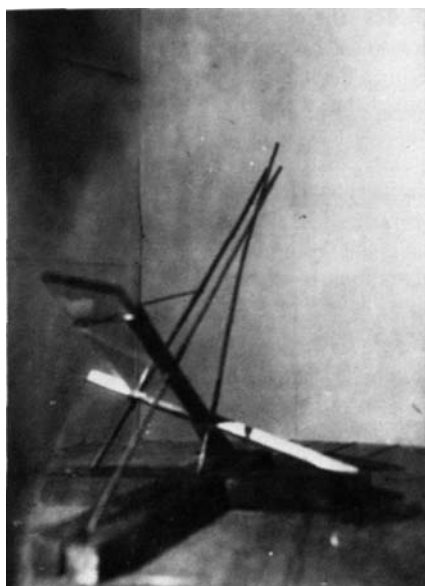


Fig. 3 *Spatial apparatus, 1920–21.*
Photograph taken by Vladimir Stenberg in 1921.

tell us you were making stands like that?" We answered, "What do you mean? A construction like this you have to show at one height, and this one at a different height so, that they can be looked at."¹⁶

The next day or a couple of days later, Ioganson brought new stands and put his constructions on them. He had, you see, a triangle above and below (see Fig. 2). Rodchenko couldn't do that. He stretched wires and hung his constructions on the wires. There were four—circles, hexagons, ellipses, and triangles.

AL: What kinds of works did you exhibit?

VS: We exhibited constructions of spatial apparatus made of various materials (Figs. 3 and 4). We also displayed drafts of constructions

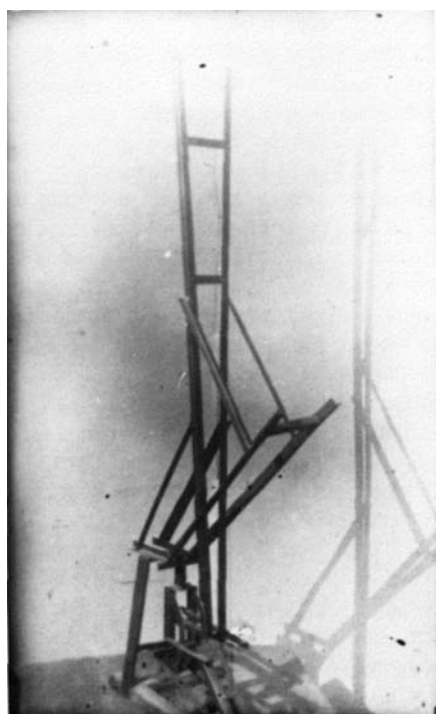


Fig. 4 *Spatial apparatus, probably 1921.*
Photograph taken by Vladimir Stenberg.

built on a large scale. Not, you see, as they usually did then. The other artists made objects of very small dimensions. But since this was an exhibition, we thought it wasn't right to make things like that. You ought to make the dimensions close to natural size.¹⁷

Everything we did was on a large scale. It was always like that. If you make a small object, people gather and they interfere with one another. But if you make a large object, you can look at it from a distance.

AL: So then, there were drafts and color constructions?

VS: Sometimes we worked with texture, made them like a bas-relief. In addition, there were simple color constructions and there were spatial color constructions. They weren't simple color constructions on a flat surface like other artists made. We saw what other artists were doing and then tried to do things differently.

AL: And the bas-reliefs, what were they like?

VS: How can I explain it to you? Well, if we were working on a surface, if we were working with texture, then we would use all kinds of things: grain or something else, some sawdust, and so forth. Also little pieces of veneer, say, pieces of wood, or metal. All this was on a plane. We also made things like this: on a plane and there would be a spiral going into space. And there was a corresponding colored background.

So we had color constructions of four types: one, simple color constructions; two, color constructions involving texture; three, color constructions that were like bas-reliefs; and four, those color constructions that involved perspective, that is, they were spatial. These were all lost in a fire. You see how lucky we were! Even in the Bakhrushin Museum, all our works were there, and all were lost. Only some things were saved in our place, some sketches, you know, preliminary drawings. And we even saved some photos of models so that we could reproduce them. Right now I am working on recreating those works that distinguished us from other artists.

AL: Turning to the theatre, how did it happen that Meierkhold invited you to work?

VS: He was at the exhibition at the Café of Poets and after that he invited us to work. We knew him earlier, but he saw our work at that exhibition, so he invited us to work, to do the production of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

We were supposed to meet with Meierkhold several days after reading the play in order to hear his wishes. But we said, "No, we'd rather first think and work out our own solution, and propose to you our solution." That way we could work more freely. In three days, after we had decided what we would do and how we would do it, we went to him. We didn't have any sketches, but we took a sheet of paper with us and on the paper we showed him what we wanted to do. We made a drawing of that composition and of those elements on which the production should be built. Well, Meierkhold liked it so much, he was so enchanted, and he laughed so. In general, he was like that when I got to know him better. He was an amazingly infectious person. When he laughed, everyone began laughing.

Well, some kind of connection with the theatre had to be worked out officially. There was some administrator there who proposed that we receive a percentage of the box office.

But what kind of per cent could it be when a loaf of bread cost a million roubles at that time? Our wish was to receive three Red Army rations, because the Red Army ration was a stable thing, modest, but it would be fully enough to feed each of us for a month. We asked for it for the full time we were working, beginning when we started. But it was delayed somehow.

Once we met at the movie theatre—the theatre was on Maly Dmitrovka. They showed those hit movies there and we always went to the openings. There at the opening, when the audience was strolling in the lobby waiting for the show to start, we saw Meierkhoid sitting with a student of his on either side. We greeted him from a distance. “Hello, Vsevolod Emilevich!” He asked, “Well, when will we have the maquette?” And Medunetsky made a gesture with his thumb and fingers like this, as if to say, how about the money, the pay, so to speak. Well, several days after that we suddenly received a letter saying that if we didn’t bring the maquette in three days, they would give it to another artist. They gave it to Popova.

At the première all the artists came, including our former teacher, Yakulov. But Yakulov had turned from a teacher into our good friend and we often met and talked with him. He was always interested in us and we told him that Meierkhoid had invited us to work. Yakulov was already working then, doing productions for the Kamerny Theatre.¹⁸ He asked, “And what are you doing?” We answered, “*The Magnanimous Cuckold*,” and told him how we wanted to do it. We even, maybe, sketched it for him, I don’t remember exactly now. Well, and there at the opening, Yakulov suddenly spoke.

At that time in the theatre it was like this: when the performance ended, people didn’t leave as now when everybody runs quickly to the coatroom to get their coats. They stayed in the auditorium to discuss the production. The art historians, artists, sculptors, writers, actors present in the auditorium all spoke out and gave their opinions. And the general audience, too. They would go up on the stage and from the stage give their opinions. Suddenly Yakulov went up to speak. He called Popova a “Soviet young lady,” and said that the set design wasn’t her work, that it was plagiarism, and in general spoke very sharply. Such a fiery Armenian!

At that time we were all members of the Institute for Artistic Culture (INKhUK) in the [Working] Group of Constructivists and were good friends. Suddenly neither Popova nor Vesnin, who was her good friend, would greet us. They shunned us.¹⁹ Then a hearing of our peers was organized. Before the hearing what it was all about came out. It turned out that they had submitted a statement alleging that we had persuaded Yakulov to speak and that he had spoken at our request. That was ridiculous, of course, because after all, he was more than twenty years older than we were. How could we ask him to say that we were offended?

We weren’t even offended. If Popova did it, she did it. At the hearing it turned out that there wasn’t any plagiarism and that Popova was completely innocent. Meierkhoid had been so enchanted by our proposal. Even when he talked to us he had said, “Well, what I had in mind I won’t talk about. I like this very much.” So, he didn’t tell her his preliminary proposal either and he gave her what we had told him. The idea was very simple: a mounting, a set of stairs up, the chute from which the grain runs down, and these wings that rotate. When those wings rotated, then the whole thing was already completely clear. The whole subject and all.²⁰ And she had done all that. So it turned out that Meierkhoid had given her a theme, a task. She carried it out. She also liked it. Well, we would have done it differently, if we had done it. But that’s another matter. Everyone has his own style.²¹

AL: And after the incident with *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, you went to work for Tairov? At the Kamerny Theatre?²²

VS: Then Tairov made us an offer. He told Vesnin to tell us he wanted us to drop by. And Vesnin said to us, “Tairov wants you to make him a new emblem for the theatre.” Well, Tairov was quite a diplomat and he only asked us to make an emblem. We went to see him in the evening during a performance. After the Institute for Artistic Culture, we stopped in a store to buy some wine. When we got to the theatre, we went right into Tairov’s study in our topcoats. He had a wardrobe, with a separate place below for rubbers. We took off our topcoats—it was autumn—hung them up, but we didn’t have any rubbers. And Medunetsky said, “Let’s, instead of the rubbers, put the bottles of wine there.” We put them there, my brother and I. And Tairov saw it, of course, and said, “What kind of behavior is that, putting bottles on the floor?” We told him we didn’t have any rubbers and so they were in place of them. He said, “You shouldn’t put bottles on the floor.” We asked him then if we could put them on the table. “Well, of course,” he said. So we put them on the table and he called and ordered some sandwiches from the buffet.

So we began our talk. Well, it turned out he wanted to have us work for him because in the first ten years or so he had had more than ten artists. Almost twenty.²³ And he told us he wanted for the next ten to twenty years to have one artist in the Kamerny Theatre. We told him there were three of us and that it was either three or no one. He agreed and then he explained about the future, that the theatre was going abroad on tour, and that we, as artists, would go with the theatre. From our group of thirteen artists, only one, Denisovsky, had been abroad. That was with Shterenberg to Germany with the exhibition in 1922.²⁴ So we were ready to give our agreement to Tairov immediately. But we decided to hold off. We were

greenhorn kids, so we had to appear important. We said, “Aleksandr Yakovlevich, we’ll think about it and tell you in three days.” After we’d left we thought maybe we should go right back and tell him immediately.

So we began working for Tairov. In the Institute, all the artists called the Kamerny an academic theatre. In general, we Constructivists didn’t recognize the theatre,²⁵ so we told our comrades that we were going to work in the theatre in order to carry it to the absurd. We had that idea. But there wasn’t any kind of “absurd.” We enjoyed the work. Our first production was *The Yellow Jacket*²⁶ (Fig. 5).

AL: And you went abroad? You were in Paris?

VS: We were in Paris in 1923. That was really some event. Can you imagine? Five artists travelling with the Kamerny Theatre. A troupe of fifty, and five artists.²⁷

AL: And there in Paris you met Picasso.

VS: Yes. There was a rumor in Moscow that Picasso had become a Realist. There was a war between the left and right artists, between the Constructivists and the Realists, that had been going on since 1917. Suddenly in 1922, the rightists, that is the Realists, told us, “Your king and god, Picasso, has become a Realist.”²⁸ Well, of course, all the artists hung their heads, that is the Constructivists, the leftists. And the others took heart. So when the artists found out we were going abroad with the Kamerny Theatre, they asked us to be sure to visit Picasso and verify if this was really so.

When we arrived in Paris, Tairov was already there ahead of us. He had met with Larionov who had earlier worked in the Kamerny Theatre, and Goncharova too, his wife.²⁹ Larionov was interested in who Tairov’s artists were. When Tairov said his artists were the Stenberg brothers, right away Larionov said, “Oh, I’ve seen their work in Berlin.” Because you could travel from Paris to Berlin freely, as between Moscow and Leningrad. Larionov came to the first performance, and after the performance he looked for us in the theatre. He found us and took us around Paris, made us acquainted with other artists, professors, and so forth. Paris at night! We didn’t stay in just one café. We would drink a glass of wine in one, then go on to the next and the next in order to see everything. We met more people that way. When we would tell our names, all the artists would say, “Oh! We’ve seen your work.” Because our works, of course, against the background of others’ paintings and sculpture—our constructions of metal and so forth—stood out.

We very carefully, cautiously told Larionov of our desire to visit Picasso and he said, “I’ll arrange it!” It turned out that Larionov and Goncharova worked for Diaghilev. Picasso also worked for him, and Picasso’s wife, Olga Khokhlova, too. That is, it was all one theatrical

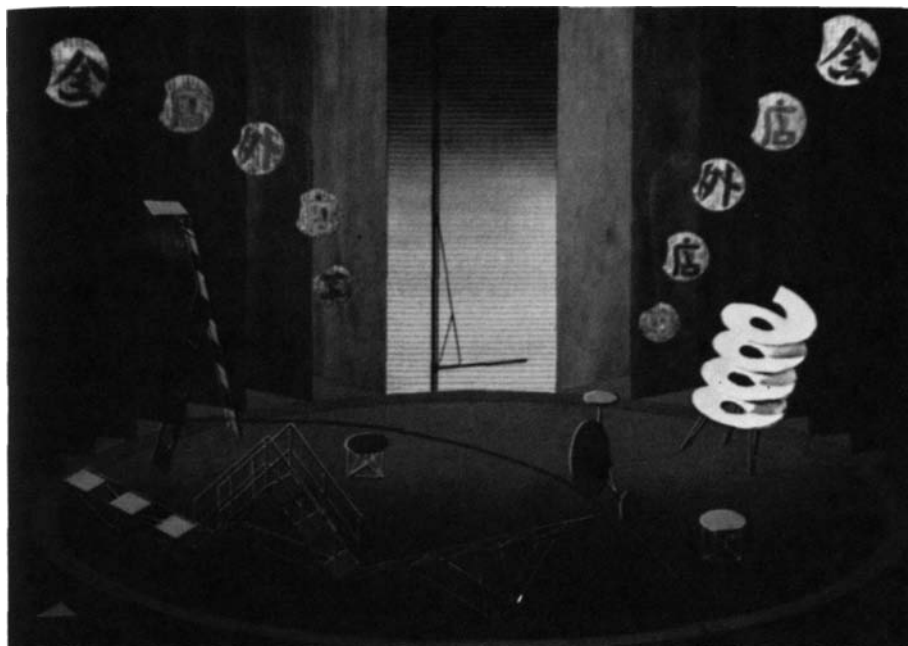


Fig. 5 Set designed by the Stenberg brothers and Medunetsky for the production of *The Yellow Jacket*, 1922. Painting made by Vladimir Stenberg in the 1970s.

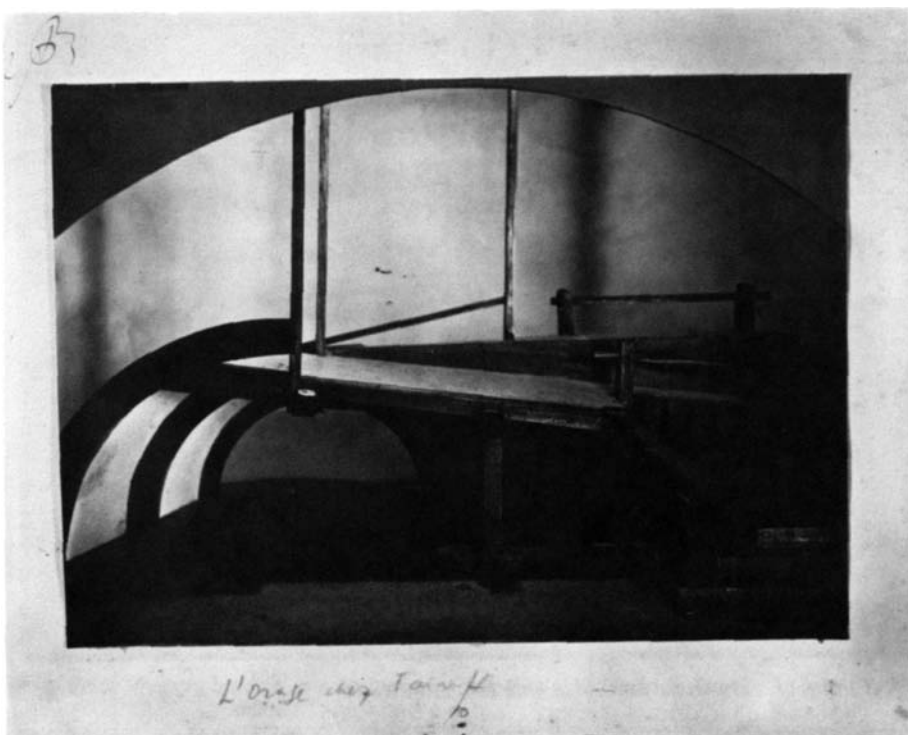


Fig. 6 Maquette designed by the Stenberg brothers and Medunetsky for Tairov's production of Ostrovsky's *The Storm*.

family, so it was very easy for him.

In Paris, an exhibition of the Kamerny Theatre was set up in a gallery.³⁰ This gallery wasn't free until evening. We had to make a curtain, organize the display of the Kamerny Theatre works, and our works too that we had brought along. When we were preparing this exhibition—it was on for just one day—Picasso came. He got interested in the work of Exter, Goncharova, and the other artists. We showed Picasso where things were because it was impossible to display everything. We showed him and he started

looking. We were busy with our work. When we were doing our last corner, he approached and saw this maquette [of *The Yellow Jacket*]. He was terribly interested. There were ten little globes hanging and we showed him how when you would pull at them, the scenery would change. And when you let go, it would go back again. There were four different positions. One thing, for example, would begin to spin around. This [with the wheels], would creep along the track here and out that way (see Fig. 5), and another would rise upwards.

Picasso got very interested and stayed until the opening. At eleven o'clock when the exhibit opened and people started coming in, well, everyone—the people engaged in art—they all greeted him. Everyone knew him. When they came up to greet him, he pointed at our model and demonstrated how you had to pull on it. He was very excitable. This got back to Tairov right away, of course, that Picasso had been explaining and demonstrating to everyone this model and our other works. (Our constructions were exhibited there too, and sketches of costumes.) After this, for a month and a half in Berlin, Tairov wouldn't talk to us at all.

AL: How did you work with Tairov? Did you make proposals to him? Did you read the play and then present him with your ideas, or did you work it out together with him?

VS: Never together. With Tairov, we set the conditions. You understand, we couldn't do it together. Even with Medunetsky, our friendly association didn't last long [they broke up in 1924 following the production of *The Storm* (Fig. 6)], because from childhood my brother and I had grown up together.³¹

AL: You always worked with your brother then?

VS: We always worked together, beginning in 1907. We did everything together. It was this way from childhood, because from the first grade my brother and I studied together. The second year I was kept back because I was sick a lot and when my brother entered school we sat together at the same desk. It was that way until the end. There's nothing surprising in that because we were the same size, brought up in one family, and by the same system. We ate alike and followed the same work routine. If we, for instance, were decorating a square working in bad weather at night and I caught a cold, he caught a cold too. If, by chance, I was going down the street alone and saw something, some shoes I liked, I'd buy two pair. If my brother saw a shirt or something, he'd buy two: one for himself, one for me. There was a time, that was in 1927–28, when we wore *dokbas*. A *dokba* is a long coat with fur on both sides that reaches to the ground. We dressed alike, only with a little difference. At that time there wasn't much choice. You could only buy something by chance. Well, my brother's coat was pony, and mine was deerskin.

When my brother and I were working together, we even made a test. What color should we paint the background? We would do it like this: he would write a note and I would write one. I had no idea what he had written and he didn't know what I had written. So we would write these notes and then look, and they coincided! You think maybe one was giving in to the other? No. We would make one variant, say, look at it, maybe one of our comrades

would come over. We would talk, say something here is very good. And you know, there was no bargaining, nothing.

We worked like this: there was a production, that was *Negro*, at the Kamerny Theatre.³² We had a large board and my brother and I would sit next to each other talking. We told each other a lot of amusing things. There was laughing, and all the while we were drawing something. We just couldn't work out an approach for *Negro*. We sat and sat and then we looked, you know, to see what we had drawn. Well, that we could use for something, and that for something else. Suddenly we found it! That one we could make into *Negro*. It was a tiny, tiny drawing. I can't remember now which one of us drew it, me or my brother.

AL: How long did you work for Tairov?

VS: About ten years. We began in 1922 and broke up in 1931.

AL: Broke up? What was the reason?

VS: What can I tell you? There were a lot of reasons. Whoever went to work at the Kamerny was immediately a slave of that theatre. Nothing outside existed, not family, not anything. The theatre was absolutely everything. But we couldn't be that way. We were working, making posters, decorating the city—we decorated various squares during that time—and that didn't interfere. But in 1928, when we began to decorate Red Square, there was the October Celebration, and the May Day Celebration, then there was MYUD (International Youth Day), and Anti-War Day, on the first of August. That was a month and a half each time. That meant four times a year, six months a year we had to devote ourselves fully and completely to that work. We missed coming to the theatre sometimes, when we had to be there. There was that conflict.

Then when the theatre was being rebuilt, we did the auditorium. The architectural construction didn't allow for even distances to be made from the floor to the first circle, to the second circle, and to the ceiling. Those differences occurred because of the lobby which was already in existence. The lobby was under the protection of the Monuments of Art and Antiquities. But we found a way out of the situation: to make the back wall of the theatre and the whole ceiling in the auditorium all black. When we began, Tairov said, "Why black?" We said, "Aleksandr Yakovlevich, that will be very good because we've done lighting for the circles and it'll be very effective.

Do you know how we persuaded him? When the painters put on the first coat—it was a primer—it turned out such a messy daub. Tairov called us up. "Come immediately." "What's the matter?" "You primed the walls and it's impossible even to look at." We said, "That's right, we did. It's impossible to look at



Fig. 7 A scene from the production of *Line of Fire*, 1931, showing the set construction designed by the Stenberg brothers.



Fig. 8 Mural of Lenin on the wall of Vladimir Stenberg's studio.

the first coat, but when we cover it the second time, then you can look. Then it will be velvety black." But Tairov just wouldn't listen. He demanded, "Come, and that's final. We need another color." We said, "No. It mustn't be another color. If after we've done the whole thing it turns out to be bad (we always argued this way), we'll repaint it at our expense." The next day we talked to the painters. And in two days they had painted everything. After they finished we came. We hadn't come after the first coat to have a look because we knew it would be impossible to look at. We looked, everything was perfect. We went in to Tairov. "Well, were you there?" "Yes, I was, unfortu-

nately." "And so, then?" "I never thought it would turn out so well."

Then, when the theatre was being rebuilt, we had an idea about the under stage area. For *The Line of Fire*,³³ we could take out the entire floor. Here, I have that décor (**Fig. 7**). It starts from beneath the floor, from a floor lower than the auditorium. Here we see the top of the décor. All the actors come out from below. They don't come out on the level of the former stage. But Tairov, out of habit, just the same had some actors come out on the level of the regular floor. Well, that was one thing. The second was that when we were doing the décor, we arranged with the engineer how it

should be done, so that it would be dismantlable. There, in other words, is the floor, and here the girders could move back and forth on rails. But the engineer who was doing it, his name was Trusov and he was a coward like his name. That means he was afraid of everything. He persuaded Tairov to do it so that these girders would be shorter, like this: half of the girders would be here, and the other half here. Tairov agreed to that. But we didn't know anything about it. At that time we were also busy with Red Square. There was a phone call. "Your décor won't go into the hold." "Why won't it go in?" And when we arrived, we saw that there were these girders coming from here, and from there on the other side. And there was a meter difference here, and a meter there. Also, there were two electric transformers—they were decorative—and now they didn't fit. We had to remove one transformer in order to get the girders in. Tairov said, "You gave us the wrong scale, and the décor was made wrong." But everything was correct. It turned out that he had made it his own way. We said,

celebration days. Four times a year.

AL: And you did all the décor for the celebrations?

VS: We did everything beginning in 1928 to 1963. For thirty-five years I decorated Red Square. At first with my brother, then after his death with my sister, Lidiya, and then with my son beginning in 1945. In 1963 I began to lose my sight, then I had to stop.³⁴

AL: And when did you do this mural here on the wall? (*Fig. 8*)

VS: There's a whole story with that mural. An architect was building a new apartment building, not far from the center, on a main thoroughfare, Bakunin Street. He asked us to do a mural. It was included in his project. The building was already built, only the internal finishing was going on. The mural was to be like this: Lenin on the Construction Site. My brother and I did a sketch of the mural. When we had made

without elevators.) "Now on the fifth floor, in the attic, give us a corner there. A studio." He said to the architect, "Listen, can we do that, make a studio?" The architect said, "A studio? Yes." He thought for awhile. "You know what," he said, "we'll use the attic over the whole house and make a fifth floor under the roof. We can put so many people there. Make apartments for that many inhabitants." They were pleased. "Let's go ahead and make the plans right away," the director said. The architect made them and he gave us what we had asked for. Well, we had asked too modestly: one room of thirty-five meters. But they made a room like this for us, and with this room they made a bathroom and a corridor with all the conveniences. In the corridor was a little corner with a stove. Something like a kitchen. Even when all that had been done, we somehow didn't believe it would be so simple.

We settled there and there we lived. And we did the mural. There was this artist who had an invention: special paints that could be painted on plaster. They were advertised at all the construction sites and organizations. We could paint with them and neither rain nor snow—nothing—would affect them. We did the mural in the fall, and in early spring, when everything began to thaw, it dripped, it rained, and the paint flaked off. You know, you could just run your hand over it and only naked plaster remained. Well, we called the organization that made the paint. They tried all sorts of excuses, said they'd give us new paints and all that. But we decided that to risk it. . . . We would have to put the scaffolding up again and do everything over. Well, we began to discuss the matter. Where was the guarantee that the next spring again. . . . Then there was this: during the winter, various defects had already appeared there. So that, well, on such a theme—the figure of Lenin—it was just impossible.

So time passed. In 1930, they asked me and my brother to make for the front page of the newspaper *Izvestia*, "Lenin on the Construction Site." Well, we had that theme already resolved. We had a sketch and we did it. That was published in the newspaper. The work on the façade was lost. And I somehow wanted to restore that work we had done there. But construction is already different, because by that time there were already missiles and sputniks flying. But the right side I decided to leave. You see that brick wall there, and from the left side, there is that border.

AL: When did you begin making film posters (*Fig. 9*)?

VS: The first poster we did was *The Eyes of Love*.³⁵ That was in 1923. On it we wrote "Sten," the first four letters of our last name, because we didn't know if we were going to make more or not. The second poster we signed "Stenberg," and the following ones, "2 Stenberg 2." When we made posters for the movies, everything was



Fig. 9 The Stenberg brothers with a number of their theatre posters in the background.

"How could you do it like that?" If the actors had come out from below, that would have been a new effect. A construction. Here is the line of fire, and all the actors come out from there, and not from the wings, you see. Balletinas run in and out from the wings. But here there is no floor, only the narrow forestage, and further all the action comes out from below. But he didn't use that.

Well, all this piled up. And Tairov had a grudge against us. He thought we should give ourselves over completely to the theatre. But how could we give ourselves to the theatre? To the theatre or to Red Square? For us, it was Red Square. There, a million people passed by on

the sketch, we took it to show him and he liked it a lot.

AL: It was like this one here?

VS: No. Here, Lenin is on an armored vehicle. And in that one, Lenin was against a construction site background. That director liked this sketch. He said, "We are a workers' coöp. We haven't got much money so don't name a large sum. Make it cheap." We said, "Do you want us to do it for nothing?" "How can it be for nothing?" he said. "You must have something in mind." We said, "Yes. The house has four stories." (That's how they built in the twenties, and

in motion because in films, everything moves. Other artists worked in the center, they put something there and around it was an empty margin. But with us, everything seems to be going somewhere (*Figs. 10 and 11*). One time they asked us to make a poster for the movie theatre at the Metropole, an outside advertisement for a movie called *Pat and Patashon*. We made these huge figures, and they spun. They were illuminated from below. It was very effective.

Then there was a film called *To the Virgin Lands*, that is, where earlier nothing was plowed. And we did a book cover advertising it.³⁶ On the cover we showed a peasant against the horizon, with his wooden plow and a skinny nag. When we brought that cover to *Novy Mir*, one of the editors, Tugendkhold, a famous critic of ours and a character, took one look.³⁷ He said, "You know, draw a shadow here from the horse and the plowman." We said, "It wouldn't fit the style. Here there's no shadow, nothing. You can't do that." He gave us a look. "No, draw it," he said. "If you don't do it, then I won't accept your work." We said "Very well, we'll do it. But all the artists will understand that we didn't think it up, that it was your idea. You forced us to do it like that." He said, "Just the same, otherwise I won't take it." He was stubborn like that. We thought, really, they will guess that it isn't ours. We wanted to do the cover because we thought it was very effective.

Tugendkhold had a huge office. There were two tables here and two tables there where other assistants were sitting. And here was his table. When we came, Tugendkhold said, "Well, did you do it?" We answered, "We did it." We gave him the cover. At first he looked at it this way, then he looked at it that way, then he looked at it the other way. "Yes, yes. What's this you've done?" he said. We said, "Well, you told us. You forced us to do it. And we did." "Do you know what?" he said, "Take out the



Fig. 10 Poster for the film *High Society Wager*, 1927.

shadow!" We said, "No! We're not going to take it out. Let the other artists see. They'll understand that you forced us to put in the shadow. We did the shadow. Now everybody is going to laugh. That's why we won't take it out."

Then to spite him we put several artists up to a trick. Friends of ours. "When you're at *Novy Mir*," we said, "drop in on Tugendkhold. Say something about the shadow he forced us to do." "What, what's this? What did the Stenbergs do? That shadow? That's not theirs!" So they went to him and said that. He got so angry that he wrote an article. It was a very loud article. He wrote that the Stenbergs, without considering our streets, made posters with such *sazben*-size heads. (A *sazben*—that's two meters.) He said, "They make two-meter

heads. Not only the passers-by, but even the horses shy away from these posters."

Well, we read that thing, the article of his, my brother and I, and we decided to go and thank him. After several days, we went to see him. When he caught sight of us, he said, "Comrades!" And turning to his assistants, "Help me out. There are two of them, and I'm only one. They came to beat me up. From them, you can expect anything." My brother and I had already agreed what we would do. We both approached him. We went shoulder to shoulder. We approached the desk, called him by his first name and patronymic. "We're very happy. We're very grateful to you for writing an article like that. Thank you very much!" We bowed so, and a long pause. We



Fig. 11 Poster for the Dziga Vertov film *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

stood like that. He looked at us and then said to everybody, "You saw what they did? They came to thank me. That's some kind of trick on their part." Then we straightened up. "No, we sincerely thank you. Write more articles like that." "Why?" he asked. "Because after your article, people don't just walk by our posters. They stop and look to see the name. Who made that poster? The people are interested, and after that, there's always a crowd. Everyone who reads the article goes out on the street to see where those big heads are that the horses shy away from. Write more articles like that." Then he turned to everybody and said, "Well, I did say they were bandits. What can be done with them. You see what they're like."

With Tairov there was also an interesting thing. We noticed that Tairov, like every director, of course, when he looked at a poster, he didn't look at what was portrayed. He only looked to see the size of the letters in Alicia Koonen's name, and what size were the letters of the others' names. Well, we decided to do this kind of a trick. We made a poster on a black background. A little square in the middle. Then in that little square we used different colors and wrote in small letters that on such a date there would be such-and-such a premiere, the name of the play, the director is so-and-so, and the star, Alicia Koonen, and the others too. Everything smaller and smaller. And we brought the poster to show him. He looked and said,

"Well," he said, "you're joking. You're going to put a poster like that up on the street?" We said, "Yes, exactly, on the street. We did it for the street." We'd worked in the cinema and knew this style of publicity. We knew what kind of posters would be pasted up tomorrow and the day after. They had a program for the week. And if tomorrow they hung a poster like this. . . . All the others would be white posters with the text written in black and red letters. A poster like this on a black background would stand out. We knew that. We said it had to be done precisely that way. He said, "What do you want, for the theatre to go broke completely? No one will read it, no one will come." We said we were certain it would be exactly the other way around. But in case it did happen, we would make him a new poster and pay for having it printed. We convinced him. In general, we didn't usually have to convince Tairov. But in this case we had to.

When the poster was put up, the artists, that is the actors, going along the street on the day before the premiere saw a crowd. They went up. What's this? They're standing near that black poster. The actors didn't know what kind of poster there would be. They went up and there was a crowd of people. They went further, and again a crowd of people. Everybody was pushing, they wanted to read it. There on the poster was an announcement that said, "At the Kamerny Theatre, on such-and-such a date, there will be a premiere." They came to the theatre and told Aleksandr Yakovlevich, "Listen, do you know what's happening on the street right now? Everywhere where there's a poster with a black background. . . . We didn't even know that it was the Kamerny Theatre. There's a crowd of people standing. Everyone's pushing, everyone wants to read it." Well, of course, we knew when it was going to be put up and we went too. We got to the theatre. "Well, Aleksandr Yakovlevich? Will we have to make another

poster?" He answered, "How could you do it? You took a risk." We said, "We didn't risk anything. We were certain. And actually, we did tell you what would happen." "Yes," he said, "actually, you're right!" You know, there were many such amusing and interesting episodes like that in my life. **End**

Notes

- 1 Vladimir Avgustovich Stenberg, born 4 April 1899; Georgii Avgustovich, born 20 March 1900. The third child was a sister, Lidiya Avgustovna, born 1902. Additional biographical material on the Stenberg brothers may be found in: A. Abramova, "2 Stenberg 2," *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo*, 9, 1965, 18–25; 2 *Stenberg 2*, exhibition catalog, Galerie Jean Chauvelin, Paris and elsewhere; *The Avant Garde in Russia, 1910–1930*, exhibition catalog, Los Angeles, 1980, 244–45.
- 2 In 1933, when Georgii died (in a motor bike accident), VS considered abandoning art and returning to his first love, engineering. See Abramova, 24.
- 3 They also helped their father paint the ceiling of the Hotel Metropole restaurant in 1912. It is clear from the way VS talks that his father had an enormous influence on the two brothers.
- 4 Fedor Fedorovich Fedorovsky (1883–1955). Also a graduate of the Stroganov Art School, Fedorovsky began his career as a theatre artist in 1907 at the Zimin Opera Theatre in Moscow where he worked for a number of years. In 1921 he became assistant, and later chief set designer at the Bolshoi Theatre. I have no information on Kazokhin.
- 5 All of the state-subsidized art schools were renamed Svomas (Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskie). The Stroganov Art School and the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture were combined to form the Moscow Svomas. In 1920, it was renamed VKhUTE MAS (Higher State Art-Technical Studios) and in 1926, VKhUTEIN (Higher State Art-Technical Institute). Characteristic of the new spirit that prevailed in these art schools at that time was the resolution passed by art students in Petrograd in April 1918 that "art and artists must be absolutely free in every manifestation of their creativity . . . art affairs are the affairs of artists themselves. . . ." (Quoted in John E. Bowlt, ed. and trans., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*, New York, 1976, xxxv.)
- 6 Pyotr Petrovich Konchalovsky (1876–1956), Georgii Bogdanovich Yakulov (1882–1928), Vladimir Evgrafovich Tatlin (1885–1953), Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Osmerkin (1892–1953). For biographical information on these artists (except Osmerkin), see entries in *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1930*.
- 7 All three poets were leading figures in the Russian Futurist movement. The artist Vasili Komardentov (1897–1973) also recalls in his memoirs (*Dni Minusbie*, Moscow, 1972, 53–54) how Mayakovsky would come to the Free

State Art Studios and read his poetry to the students. One of the first artists to support the Bolsheviks, Mayakovsky proclaimed in one of his poems, "The streets are our brushes! The squares—our palettes!"

- 8 Konstantin Konstantinovich Medunetsky (1899–1935). Very little is known about Medunetsky aside from the fact that he was a pupil of Tatlin and the Pevsner brothers and was an active member along with the Stenberg brothers in Obmokhu.
- 9 Aristarkh Vasilevich Lentulov (1882–1934), painter and theatre artist.
- 10 *Konstruktivisty*, exhibition catalog, Moscow, 1921. The cover and page with the text are reproduced in *Von der Fläche zum Raum: Russland 1916–24/From Surface to Space: Russia 1916–24*, exhibition catalog, Cologne, Galerie Gmurzynska, 1974, 29. In the catalog are listed three types of "Constructions": color constructions, projects for spatio-constructural apparatus, and spatial apparatus. Four of the spatial apparatus from this period have been reconstructed. See 2 *Stenberg 2*, 70ff.
- 11 Aleksei (Aleksandr) Eliseevich Kruchenykh (1886–1969). A Cubo-Futurist poet who called his style of writing *zaum* (beyond the mind). Designated by Kruchenykh as the language of the future, *zaum* was intended to communicate directly the internal state of the speaker.
- 12 In connection with their work in the theatre, at a meeting at INKhUK on 19 January 1924, the brothers gave a report titled, "New Principles for the Material Design of Theatrical Stage Space," in which they critically analyzed various traditional forms of scenic design and stated that the basic principle of their work was "the use of all the material resources of the stage exclusively for utilitarian objectives, a striving for the maximum of scenic possibilities with a minimum of construction." From the archives of A.B. Babichev, quoted in Abramova, 22.
- 13 Anatolii Vasilevich Lunacharsky (1875–1933), head of the newly-established Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Enlightenment); David Petrovich Shterenberg (1881–1948). The exhibition referred to here is the first Obmokhu (Society of Young Artists) Exhibition. It was held in May of that year. The group was given the former Fabergé shop on the corner of Kuznetsky Most and Neglinnaya Street as their workshop. Here they installed metal cutting machines and welding equipment and set to work turning out stencils for postcards and badges, constructing travelling libraries and decorating streets and squares for holidays. See Bowlt, xxxvii–xxxviii.
- 14 Vladimir Stenberg became a Soviet citizen in 1933.
- 15 The second Obmokhu Exhibition was held in the group's own workshop in May 1920, the third exhibition a year later (see below) and the final one in 1923. By 1923, the Stenberg brothers were no longer participating in the group's activities.
- 16 See *Von der Fläche zum Raum*, 18, for a

photograph of the invitation to this exhibit. The photograph (**Fig. 2**) is one of two extant photographs of the exhibition, both taken by Rodchenko. Unfortunately, the wall on which many of Vladimir's works were exhibited is not shown in either photograph.

- 17 In the photograph (**Fig. 2**), according to VS, the large work by his brother in the center of the right hand wall was about 1.5 meters in height and the large standing construction in the center about three meters tall.
- 18 Yakulov's productions at the Kamerny Theatre included the Cubo-Futurist baroque setting for E.T.A. Hoffman's *Princess Brambilla* (1920), and the Constructivist set for Lecoc's operetta *Girofle-Girofla* (1922).
- 19 INKhUK was formed in May 1920 as an autonomous group for analyzing and discussing the properties and effects of art. It was originally headed by Kandinsky, but the group soon rejected his psychological approach to art and he left at the end of 1920. The group was then reorganized by Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, the musician Nadezhda Bryusova, and the sculptor Aleksei Babichev who drew up a more rational program based on objective analysis. In early 1921, the Stenberg brothers and Medunetsky joined a number of these artists at INKhUK—Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Ioganson, all of whom were by then rejecting "pure art" for industrial Constructivism—in forming the Working Group of Constructivists. Popova was a part of another faction, "The Working Group of Objectivists," and Vesnin, although a member of INKhUK, was not an active member of either of these groups. However, by the end of 1921, all of these artists were united in heeding the call for INKhUK members to take up "practical work in production" (cf. Bowlt, xxxv–xxxvi). For a more detailed study of these groups see: Christina A. Lodder, *Constructivism: From Fine Art into Design, Russia 1913–1933*, New Haven and London, to be published 1982.
- 20 The play, by Fernand Crommelynck, is about a poet-scribe, Bruno, and his wife, Stella, who live in an abandoned mill. Bruno is so insanely jealous of his wife that he forces her to go to bed with all the men in the village in order to find out which one is her lover. In Meierhold's production, the three wheels and windmill all rotate at different speeds to reflect the intensity of Bruno's jealousy. In the climactic scene, all the village males line up at Stella's door. In assembly-line style, each one enters, exits, and then comes down the "chute" to the stage floor. For a fuller description of Popova's construction and of the production see Alma H. Law, "Le cocu magnifique de Crommelynck," *Les voies de la création théâtrale*, vi, Paris, 1979, 13–43.
- 21 From the available information, the actual genesis of the construction for *Cuckold* is not at all clear. Ivan Aksyonov, who had translated Crommelynck's play from the French, maintained that the planning of the set was worked

- out in open discussion in the Meierkhold Theatre Workshop. He also assigns a key role to Popova for the final conception and execution of it ("Proizkhozhdienie ustanovki 'Velikodushnyi rogonosets,'" *3 Afisha TIM*, 1926, 7 — 11). Meierkhold also takes a similar position in regard to Popova's role in a letter to the editor of *Izvestiia* (9 May 1922). As Christina Lodder points out in her article, "Constructivist Theatre as a Laboratory for an Architectural Aesthetic," Popova's accomplishment isn't diminished by the fact that the original idea of a skeletal apparatus may have come from the Stenberg brothers and Medunetsky (*Architectural Association Quarterly*, II, 2, 1979, 30 — 33). In fact, the works the Stenberg brothers were exhibiting in 1921, and particularly the stands they had constructed for displaying them, are much more suggestive of the design for the *Cuckold* construction than are either Popova's earlier theatre designs in 1920 — 21 at the Kamerny Theatre (which Lodder characterizes as "a complex construction of perspectival confusion and ambiguous planes defined by color") or her "preparatory investigations" in the "5 x 5 = 25" exhibition which had prompted Meierkhold to invite Popova to join his Workshop. For a further discussion of this question, see E. Rakitina, "Liubov Popova, iskusstvo i manifesty," *Khudozhnik, stsena, ekran*, Moscow, 1975, 152 — 167.
- 22 Aleksandr Yakovlevich Tairov (1885 — 1950) formed the Kamerny Theatre in 1914 together with his wife, actress Alicia Koonen, and a group of young performers. The theatre was at 23 Tverskoi Boulevard (where the Pushkin Theatre is now located).
- 23 Among the prominent artists who had worked for the Kamerny Theatre up to that time were: Pavel Kuznetsov, Natalia Goncharova, Sergei Sudeikin, Aristarkh Lentulov, Aleksander Exter, and Boris Ferdinandov. See Abram Efros, *Kamernyi teatr i ego khudozhniki, 1914 — 1934*, Moscow, 1934. The fact that there was no love lost between Meierkhold and Tairov may have had something to do with Tairov's invitation to the Stenbergs and Medunetsky at that time. In a review of Tairov's book, *Notes of a Director*, Meierkhold called the Kamerny Theatre, "imitative and amateurish" (*Pechal' i revoliutsiia*, 1, 1922, 306).
- 24 The *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* at the Galerie van Diemen in Berlin. Three constructions by Georgii Stenberg were in the exhibition (Nos. 563, 564, 565, in the catalog) and one construction (No. 566) and one Technical Apparatus (No. 567) by Vladimir. See *2 Stenberg 2*, 64. Nikolai Fyodorovich Denisovsky (1902 — 1981).
- 25 The only justification the productivist Constructivists saw for working in the theatre was either to hasten its demise (they felt it should go out into the streets and transform itself into useful work such as building houses) or to use it as a laboratory (as Stepanova did with her "furniture" and costumes for Meierkhold's production of *The Death of Tarelkin* in 1922). See Rakitina, 152 — 53. The opposition of the Constructivists to theatre explains why Popova was so reluctant to get openly involved in the design of the *Cuckold* construction until the very last moment.
- 26 A short-lived production staged by the students of the Kamerny Theatre School-Studio, directed by K.G. Svarozhich. Tairov had himself directed a production of this "poetic romance" in the Chinese manner by George C. Hazleton, Jr. (1868 — 1921) and J. Harry Benrimo (1875 — 1942) in 1913 at the Free Theatre in St. Petersburg.
- 27 The theatre left for Paris on 20 February 1923 and spent ten months abroad. In addition to visiting Paris, where they performed at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, they also toured Germany, performing in numerous cities including Berlin and Munich.
- 28 "Picasso's 'realism'" is no doubt a reference to his second Neoclassical period of the early 1920s.
- 29 Mikhail Larionov and Goncharova had designed the décor for Goldoni's *The Fan* in 1915. The two artists settled in Paris in 1917.
- 30 The exhibition was in the Galerie Paul Guillaume on 23 March 1923.
- 31 The trio worked together on only three productions at the Kamerny Theatre: *The Yellow Jacket*, *The Babylonian Lawyer* by Anatoliya Mariengof (1923), and Ostrovsky's *The Storm* (1924).
- 32 *All God's Chillun Got Wings* by Eugene O'Neill (1929). Tairov also staged two other O'Neill plays: *The Hairy Ape* (1926) and *Desire Under the Elms* (1926). The Stenberg brothers designed the sets for both of these productions as well.
- 33 A play about the construction of a hydroelectric station by Nikolai Nikitin (1895 — 1963). It had its première on 6 June 1931, and was the last production the Stenberg brothers did at the Kamerny Theatre.
- 34 An operation for cataracts partially restored VS's eyesight.
- 35 According to Stenberg, he and his brother designed about 300 film posters. Many of them rank, along with those of Rodchenko, Klucis, and Lavinsky, as among the best Soviet posters made in the 1920s.
- 36 This was a popular way to advertise films in the 1920s.
- 37 Yakov Aleksandrovich Tugendkhold (1882 — 1928).

Kazimir Malevich

E.F. Koutun

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is currently writing about the works of
Velimir Khlebnikov.

In recent years a rather extensive literature about Kazimir Malevich has accumulated, and it continues to grow. And the work itself has turned out to be much more varied than it appeared to scholars only a few years ago. In the short time between 1903 and 1913 Malevich went from Impressionism to the varying forms of Russian Fauvism (Primitivism and further) to Cubism and Suprematism. But the objectless canvases—his *Black Square* (Fig. 1)—were not the last phase in Malevich's creative development. The present essay includes a discussion of the later, almost unknown works by Malevich, done beginning in the late 1920s. In these canvases Malevich returns to a figurative style, but one that has memories of Suprematism. This last period is perhaps his greatest.

The decades that were passed in France in the renewal of art (beginning with Impressionism) were consolidated in Russia into ten or fifteen years. Malevich's growth as an artist was similarly compressed. From the first, features inherent in the personality of the artist appeared in his work: a rigorous energy, a striving for a specific end, and finally, a genuine passion for painting. Malevich once said to a pupil about his youth, "I once worked as a draftsman, . . . as soon as work ended I would rush straight to a sketch, to my paints. You just grab them and rush to the sketches. And this feeling for painting can be extremely, unbelievably strong. A person could simply explode."¹

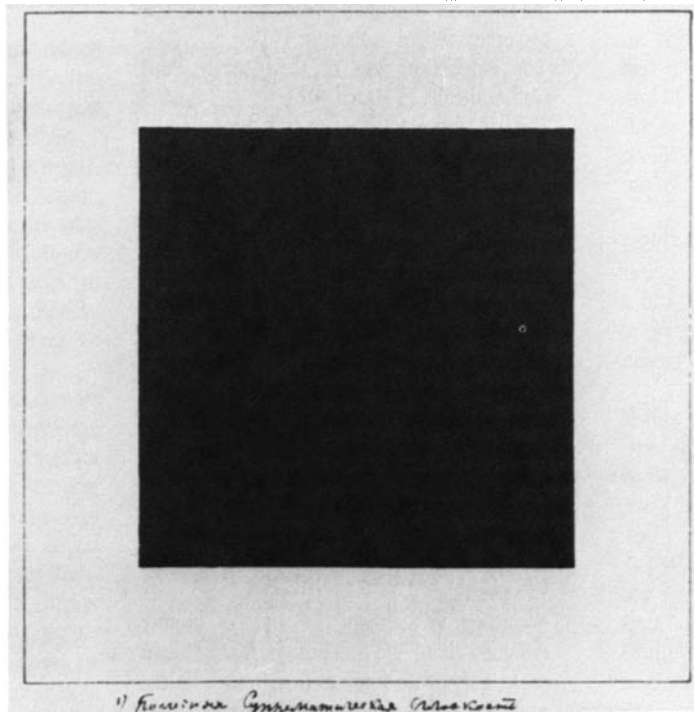


Fig. 1 Malevich, *Black Square*, 1913, oil on canvas. Leningrad, State Russian Museum.

Beyond-the-Mind Realism

From the beginning of the 1910s, Malevich's work was a kind of proving ground in which painting tested and perfected new possibilities. Explorations were carried out in various directions. Malevich was attracted to Cubism and Futurism, but his principal achievement in these years was a cycle of pictures which he termed "Alogism," or "Beyond-the-Mind Realism": *Cow and Violin*, *Aviator*, *Englishman in Moscow*, *Portrait of Ivan Kliun*. These presented a new method of spatial organization in the picture, unknown in French Cubism. In Alogism Malevich attempted to move beyond the boundaries of the common

sense which establishes connections between superficial phenomena. Russian painting, especially Malevich's experiments, attempted to achieve a deeper knowledge of the world through intuition, to master intuition as a creative method. Similar aspirations may be discerned in the poetic work of V.V. Khlebnikov, A.E. Kruchenykh, E.G. Guro, and others. That which was closed to the usual reason had to become clear in the intuition, whose working ought to be forced and come out of the unconscious. "The new creative intuitive reason, by replacing unconscious intuition," M.V. Matiushin wrote, "will give to the artist all the strength of its knowledge."²

Malevich's *Cow and Violin* of 1911 (Fig. 2) was the earliest manifesto of Alogism. On the reverse of this canvas Malevich

wrote: "An alogical confrontation of the two forms—a cow and a violin—as a moment of struggle with logic, with naturalness, with Philistine sense and prejudice. K. Malevich." The combination of cow and violin, absurd from the point of view of common sense, proclaimed a universal connection of phenomena in the world. Intuition reveals "remote links in the world," which the usual logic sometimes perceives as absurd. To realize that any particular event is included in a universal system, to see and embody the invisible which is revealed to spiritual sight—this is the essence of post-Cubist explorations in Russian painting. It is most keenly expressed in the works of Malevich. For him the transrational is not the irrational; it has its own logic

but of a high order. In 1913 Malevich wrote to Matiushin: "We have come as far as the rejection of reason but we rejected reason so that another kind of reason could grow in us, which in comparison to what we have rejected, can be called beyond-reason, which also has law and construction and sense, and only by knowing this will we have work based on the law of the truly new, the beyond-reason.³ It was not by chance, therefore, that even as he withdrew even further from visual reality, Malevich persisted in using the word realism to define his styles: Cubo-Futurist Realism, Beyond-the-Mind Realism; even the Suprematist manifesto bore the subtitle *The New Realism in Painting*.

A Beyond-the-Mind Realist picture entered into a new relationship with the surrounding world. It still had an up and down, but it lacked weight, as if its plastic structure were suspended in universal space. The absence of gravity as an organizing structural principle is especially keenly felt in *Aviator*, in which the figure seems to rise up or soar in its weightlessness.

Victory over the Sun

The idea for futurist performances arose after the joining, in March 1913, of the Union of Youth artists⁴ with Hylea, a literary group which included Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Elena Guro, Alexei Kruchenykh, Vladimir and Nikolai Burlin, and Benedikt Livshits. At Matiushin's summer house in Uusikirkko (Karelsky Isthmus), Finland, in the summer of 1913, the First All-Russian Congress of Futurists was held. Malevich and Kruchenykh attended. The Congress participants issued a manifesto, in which they announced the creation of a theater for Future-People and coming performances.⁵ Work on the opera *Victory over the Sun* began right there at the summer house. The poets Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh,⁶ the composer Mikhail Matiushin, and the artist Malevich joined forces for the production of the opera; it played on 3 and 5 December 1913 at the Luna Park Theater in St. Petersburg.

Malevich's sketches for the costumes were Cubist, but inclined towards objectlessness. The drawings *Futurist Strongman*, *Grave Digger*, and *A Certain Evil Intender*,⁷ have colored planes and black squares and rectangles. Malevich's reorientation towards Suprematism is felt even more clearly in the sketches for the curtain and backdrops; the Suprematist square is the basis of their composition. A similar drawing was published on the cover of the publication *Victory over the Sun* (December 1913). But the artist himself had still not recognized these important changes in his work. This is evident from his letters to Matiushin, who intended to publish a new edition of *Victory over the Sun* in 1915. "I would be very grateful if you would include a drawing of mine for the curtain in the act where the victory took place. . . . That drawing

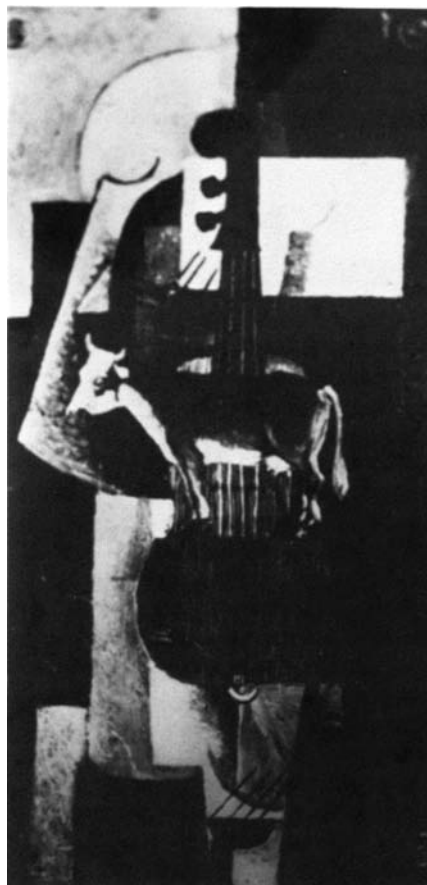


Fig 2 Malevich. *Cow and Violin*, 1911, oil on wood. Leningrad, State Russian Museum.

will have great significance in painting. That which was done unconsciously, now bears extraordinary fruit."⁸ Enclosing the drawing in a following letter, Malevich added: "The curtain depicts a black square, the embryo of all possibilities; in its development it acquires a terrible strength. It is the ancestor of the cube and the sphere; its disintegration brings an amazing standard in painting."⁹ Here, in drawings for *Victory over the Sun*, the final transition to Suprematism was accomplished.

The "Last Futurist" Exhibition

The new direction in Russian painting, even after it appeared, remained without a name for quite some time. Until the fall of 1915 no one but Malevich knew what was happening in his studio. Only in the middle of 1915, when at least thirty objectless paintings had been finished (**Fig. 3**), did Malevich give the name Suprematism to his work. The Moscow artists during 1915 were preparing a final exhibition of Cubo-Futurism, but in it Malevich intended to exhibit and affirm his new style. Ivan Kliun and Mikhail Menkov exhibited with him, the first artists to adopt the Suprematist idea. The other participants in the exhibition, however, objected to calling Malevich's work Suprematism in the catalog. The artist had to acquiesce, but the brochure about Suprematism which he had prepared was available at the opening of the exhibition.¹⁰ In addition, the artist hung up

a sign saying "Suprematism in Painting. K. Malevich."

The Last Futurist Exhibition 0,10 (Zero-Ten) opened at N.E. Dobychna's Petrograd Art Bureau on Mar's Field on 17 December 1915. No scholar has yet considered the odd numerical ending of the exhibition's name. Apparently, it has been taken as the ordinary capriciousness of the Futurists. One contemporary critic commented that the name of the exhibition was "mathematically illiterate." Actually, "0,10"—that is, "one tenth"—does not correspond at all to the translation in the parentheses, "zero-ten." Malevich's letters, however, illuminate the problem. On 29 May 1915 he wrote, "We are undertaking the publication of a journal and are beginning to discuss how and what. In view of the fact that in it we intend to reduce everything to zero, we have decided to call it *Zero*. We ourselves will then go beyond zero."¹¹ The idea of reducing the forms of all objects to zero and progressing beyond zero into objectlessness belonged to Malevich. In the brochure that was sold at the exhibition the artist announced his complete break with the forms of objects. He wrote: "I have turned myself into the null of forms and have gone out beyond 0-1."¹² The nine other participants in the exhibition also aspired to go beyond zero. This is the source of the zero-ten in the parentheses. A letter from Ivan Puni to Malevich from July 1915 corroborates this interpretation of the exhibition's title: "We have to paint a lot now. The space is very large and if we, ten people,¹³ paint twenty-five pictures apiece, then it will be only just enough."¹⁴

Suprematism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many major artists and poets—Malevich, Pavel Filonov, Khlebnikov, and others—recognized or guessed intuitively that a person is like a small universe, and that a work of art is an independent world which has its own, essentially spiritual essence. In the art of early twentieth-century artists this autonomous world, which, of course, a genuine work of art has always been, acquired special features. It was organized like the universe, correlated with it, rather than with the earth and its particular laws; it joined the universe as an equal.

Malevich's Suprematist canvases were like that. Their artistic structure, as distinct from that of the Alogist period, did not correlate at all with the direction of earthly gravity, and so not only the impression of heaviness and weight disappeared, but also even the notion of up and down often was lost. Yet the objectlessness of Suprematism was not an absence of reality, it was an exit from the world of objects, a new aspect of reality, which nature, space, and reality had revealed to the artist.

Malevich's thought, his attitude as an artist towards the world, was imbued with the inspiration of space, just as the idea of time runs all-absorbing throughout the works of Khleb-

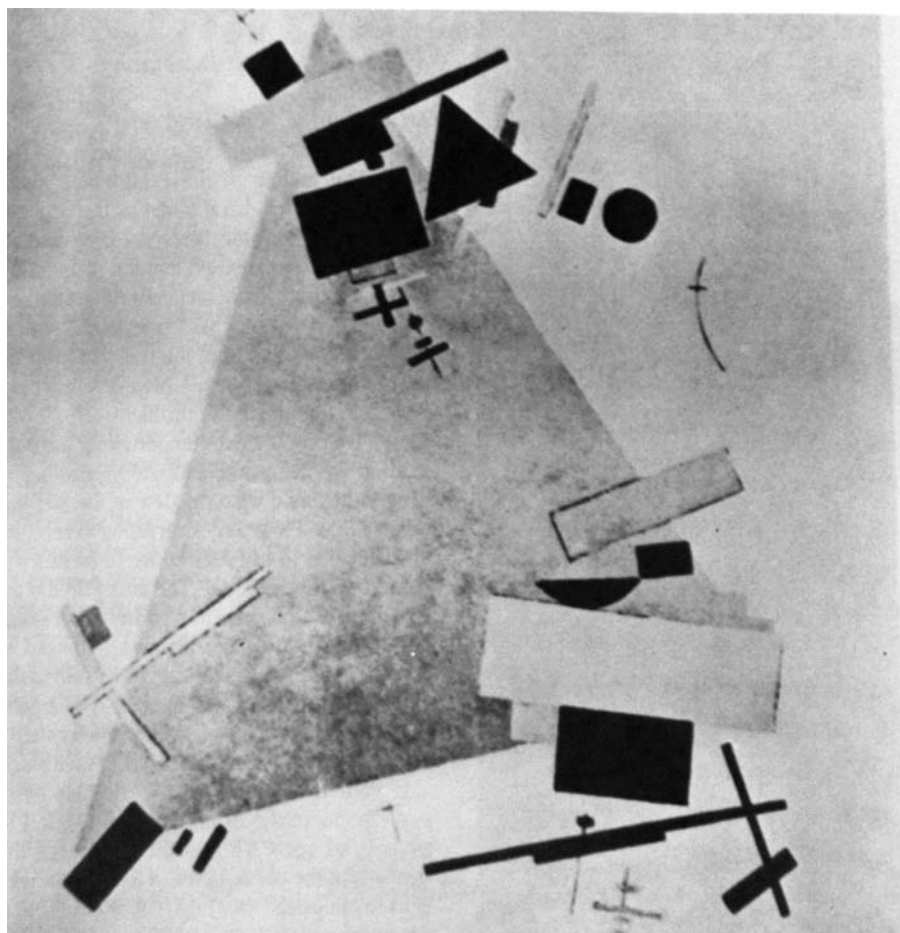


Fig. 3 Malevich, *Dynamic Suprematism*, 1916, oil on canvas. Moscow, State Tretyakov Gallery.

nikov. In the summer of 1917 Malevich even called himself the “president of space.”¹⁵ When he moved away from his former understanding of space in art, Malevich observed that in Futurism and Cubism, “space is cultivated almost exclusively; form because it is connected with objectness does not convey even an inkling of the presence of universal space. This space is limited to the space which separates things from one another on the earth.”¹⁶ Space in Malevich’s Suprematist pictures is a model and an analog of cosmic space. His painting is cramped on the earth, it yearns for the heavens. “My new painting,” he wrote, “does not belong exclusively to the earth. . . . And in fact, in man, in his consciousness, there is a striving towards space, a yearning to ‘take off from the earth’.”¹⁷ By assimilating the space of the picture to cosmic space, where the motion of planetary systems are unified, Malevich reduces the structural formation of pictorial space to relationships in which “weight is distributed into systems of weightlessness.”¹⁸

The theme of overcoming gravity and entering into the cosmos attracted many artists and poets early in the twentieth century. In *Victory over the Sun*, one of the characters (the Reader) declares: “Free of the weight of universal gravity, we arrange our things fancifully, as if a rich kingdom were settling in.”¹⁹ Resistance to gravity is expressed by the spherical perspective

in the works of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin. “To overcome gravity is to sense planetariness with one’s whole organism,” wrote the artist.²⁰ Khlebnikov’s prognostic excerpt *A Cliff from the Future* (1921–1922) describes human life in Flying Cities, in a gravity-free environment: “People walk along a path, weightless, as if they were on an invisible bridge. On both sides a precipice drops off into an abyss; a terrestrial black boundary marks the road. Like a snake swimming through the sea, raising its head high, breast first through the air, swims a building—a reversed ‘L’. A flying building snake.”²¹

In the development of his ideas about space in art, Malevich was the first Russian artist to arrive at analogous futurological conclusions. As early as 1913 he dreamt of the time “when large cities and the studios of modern artists will be supported by huge zeppelins.”²² In a brochure published in 1920,²³ he set down the possibility of interplanetary flight, orbiting earth satellites, and interplanetary satellite stations which would enable man to develop cosmic space. Some of these futurological projects are called “Planits for Earthlings” (*Fig. 4*). Possibly the philosophy of N.F. Fedorov, a thinker highly valued by the Futurists, influenced these “cosmic enthusiasms.”²⁴ But it is also important to emphasize something else: Malevich’s plans and ideas were not the fruit

of mere fantasy; they originated in the development of a certain concept of artistic space.

From the beginning Suprematism exerted substantial influence on the work of many artists, at first in Russia and later abroad. Such major artists as Kliun, Puni, Olga Rozanova, Nadezhda Udaltsova, Varvara Stepanova, Liubov Popova, and Alexander Rodchenko followed Malevich; Suprematism became the banner of the time. From the beginning of the 1920s, it moved beyond the confines of easel painting. In 1915, at the *Last Futurist Exhibition*, Kliun exhibited several volumetric Suprematist constructions. They were essentially the first of the architectons (*arkhitektomy*), on which Malevich would begin to work in the 1920s. The architectons substantiated Malevich’s pictorial space, the Suprematist structures entered into real volume and became a prototype for contemporary architecture. Also in the 1920s, Malevich and his pupils Nikolai Suetin and Ilya Chashnik worked a great deal in the production of porcelain, textiles, typography, and other forms of applied art.

The Revolutionary Years—UNOVIS

In the years of the Revolution, which Malevich—like Mayakovsky—welcomed, the artist’s creative work and his social activity reached the highest intensity. He directed the art section of the Moscow Council, was a member of the board of IZO Narkompros (the Visual Art Section of the Commissariat of Education), was a major artist of the First State Free Studios in Moscow, and was a professor at the transformed Academy of Arts. He published programmatic articles in the newspaper *Art of the Commune* and the journal *Visual Art*, and he participated in public debates. The announcement for one such debate reads: “First State Free Art Studios (formerly, the Stroganov School). Open studios. Meeting about ‘The New art and Soviet Power.’ Speakers: D.P. Shterenberg, V.V. Mayakovsky, K.S. Malevich, Rodchenko, and students.”²⁵ At the same time Malevich did not cease his creative work. In the fall of 1918 Mayakovsky’s *Mystery-Bouffe*, with décor by Malevich, premiered in Petrograd. And in 1919, Malevich’s first one-man show opened in Moscow.

Malevich left Petrograd for Vitebsk in the fall of 1919. At the beginning of the Revolution this quiet, provincial city was transformed into a major artistic center. Vitebsk was unusually lucky then; the art school was organized by Marc Chagall, and besides himself, in the course of two or three years such major figures as Malevich, Puni, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Ksenia Boguslavskaya, Robert Falk, Vera Ermolaeva, and Alexander Kuprin taught there. With Malevich’s arrival at the Vitebsk school its artistic life acquired a special intensity. His advocacy of the new art fired the students, who were attracted by his unflagging energy, his belief in his ideas, his uncompromising courage in the search for new directions.

In January 1920 the group POSNOVIS (an

appointed to organize the Museum. On 3 April 1921 the Division of Painting, which showed works of the new art, was opened to visitors. Later, the divisions of drawings, icons, and crafts opened. The Museum of Artistic Culture thus became the first state museum of modern art. On 9 June 1923 at a museum conference in Petrograd Filonov introduced a proposal in the name of a "group of left artists" to transform the Museum of Artistic Culture into an "institute for research in modern art."²⁹ In the same year, on 15 August, Malevich was selected as director of the Museum and on 1 October research divisions of the Museum were opened. In October of 1924 the Museum was reorganized into the Institute of Artistic Culture with Malevich as director and Nikolai Punin, deputy director. In addition to them, Vladimir Tatlin, Pavel Mansurov, and Matiushin served on the Advisory Board. On 17 March 1925 the Institute was affirmed by the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) as a state institution.

The Institute became a major center of theoretical research in art. Its divisions were headed by Malevich, Tatlin, Matiushin, Mansurov, and Punin. The research program of the Institute and all of its divisions derived from post-Cubist concepts in Russian art, which differed considerably from the theoretical positions of the leading European schools. The Italian Futurists and the French Purists based their art (painting and architecture) on the form and likeness of the machine, the highest achievement of twentieth-century technical civilization. But the machine is something secondary, i.e. it is a *product* of civilization. The GINKhUK artists strove for an art in which the spatial structure would arise according to the principles of natural generation of form, that is, on a primary base. The mode of formation and construction in art must arise out of experience of nature. The research inspiration of GINKhUK may be defined as organics, as opposed to mechanics, to a machine civilization. Tatlin, a Constructivist, rejecting the logic of the right angle usual for Constructivists, designed his *Monument to the Third International* (1920) on the basis of an inclined structure and a spiral. The model of Tatlin's Tower shown at the 1925 Paris Exposition was created in GINKhUK. Filonov's method of analytic art tried to make the picture grow and take on form in a way similar to the development of a natural organism. Even in 1912, in his unpublished article "Canon and Law," Filonov spoke out against "Cubo-Futurism which has reached an impasse due to its mechanical and geometric bases."³⁰ Matiushin, whose work was based upon very attentive study of the laws of nature, developed the concept of a widened viewing, and expressed most directly the problems of an organic art. His division in the Institute was called the Division of Organic Culture. Finally, Mansurov in his Experimental Division was also concerned with the problems of an organicist. He studied the influence of natural struc-

tures on the generation of form in art. The theoretical studies of the Institute on principles of formation anticipated to a certain extent the ideas of bionics which became current ten years later.

The most outstanding section of the Institute was the Formal-Theoretical Division headed by Malevich. It housed researchers, graduate students, and trade workers. Many well-known Leningrad artists went through Malevich's division: Suetin, Chashnik, Khidekel, Anna Leporskaya, K.I. Rozhdvestvensky, Yuri Vasnetsov, V.I. Kurdov, Vladimir Stergilov, and others. Two laboratories were created within the division: Color and Form, headed by Ermolaeva and Lev Yudin. Malevich's collective began a thorough study of the five major systems of the new art: Impressionism, Cézannism, Futurism, Cubism, and Suprematism. The results of this work served as the basis of the theory of the additional element in painting which Malevich developed.

In addition to his talent for painting, Malevich always had the heart of a researcher who tried to understand the reasons that impelled new forms in the world and in art and the logic of their development. There were even periods (the early 1920s) when, carried away by his researches, he abandoned the brush for the pen. In Suprematism, Malevich saw the next consecutive step in the development of a universal artistic culture, in spite of its apparent break with tradition. In May of 1916, he wrote to Alexander Benois in defense of Suprematism: "And I am happy that the face of my square cannot merge either with an artist or a time. Isn't that so? I have not listened to the fathers and I am not like them. I am a step." And further on: "In art there is an obligation to fulfill its necessary forms. Apart from whether I like them or not. Art doesn't ask you whether you like it or not, just as no one inquired when the stars were set in the sky."³¹ From these words it is apparent that Malevich considered Suprematism a stage of development in a universal art. The transmutation of artistic forms and structures, the artist believed, was not arbitrary, but rather had an internal logic. The lawfulness detected in the past defines a vector toward the future. For Malevich, Suprematism was a continuation of Futurism and Cubism: "I affirm: Futurism, via an Academism of forms, moves towards dynamism in painting. Cubism, via the annihilation of the thing, moves towards pure painting. And both efforts in essence aspire to Suprematism of painting."³² Malevich saw the interconnection of all five basic systems of the new art, he noticed the development of one artistic form or structure from another, but he had not yet discovered the reasons for and the mechanics of such changes.

It is difficult to say exactly when, on the basis of these thoughts, the concept of the additional element occurred to Malevich, but in Vitebsk—by his own account—he had already seen it. Here he had encountered young people obsessed with art but in whose work

the most varied influences from the latest trends collided. "Before me was the opportunity to do various experiments to study the action of additional elements," the artist remembered. "I began to adapt the Vitebsk Institute for this analysis and it let me conduct my work full speed ahead. I divided the painters into several typical types which, so far as was possible, I grouped according to one or another additional element. I was determined to confirm in nature some of my theoretical conclusions about the action of additional elements."³³ With the establishment of GINKhUK, working out the theory of the additional element became the principal task of Malevich's division. By 1925, the artist had written the first general text, *An Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting*. An expanded version was published by the Bauhaus in 1927.³⁴

By an "additional element" Malevich understood a new structural formative principle which arises in the process of artistic development. Its introduction into a plastic system that is taking shape reorganizes that system. A structural analysis of a multitude of works of the new art revealed such additional elements as Cézanne's filamentous curve, the Cubist sickle-line, and Suprematism's straight line. The additional elements are defined both by color and by form for each system. The introduction of the Cubist sickle-shaped curve into a Cézannist structure, for example, can change the picture being painted into a Cubist painting. Malevich's theory of the additional element is an original experiment in the structural analysis of a work of art; it revealed active elements, or signs, which defined the organism of a work in each style. The merit of this system of signs was its ability clearly to explain the development of plastic form and establish a mechanism for the transformation of one form into another.

The Berlin Exhibition

Malevich had long-standing connections with German art. At the 1912 Munich exhibition organized by the Blue Rider Society, the artist had exhibited his *Peasant Head*. In 1922 a large Russian exhibition arranged by IZO Narkompros opened in Berlin. Malevich showed five works at this exhibition, four Suprematist canvases—among them *White on White*—and a Futurist canvas from 1911—*Knife Grinder: Principle of Flashing*. Also, during the Vitebsk period there had been meetings with German artists. On 20 November 1920, UNOVIS announced that "the transportation of UNOVIS materials to Germany had been sent" (Vitebsk Art Committee List). Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to establish what that "transportation" was.

In 1927 Malevich made a trip to Berlin. He took with him, besides paintings and drawings of architectons, explanatory theoretical charts showing the main tenets of the theory of the additional element, drawings, and a number of Matiushin's charts. A major portion of this material is now kept in Amsterdam. On his way

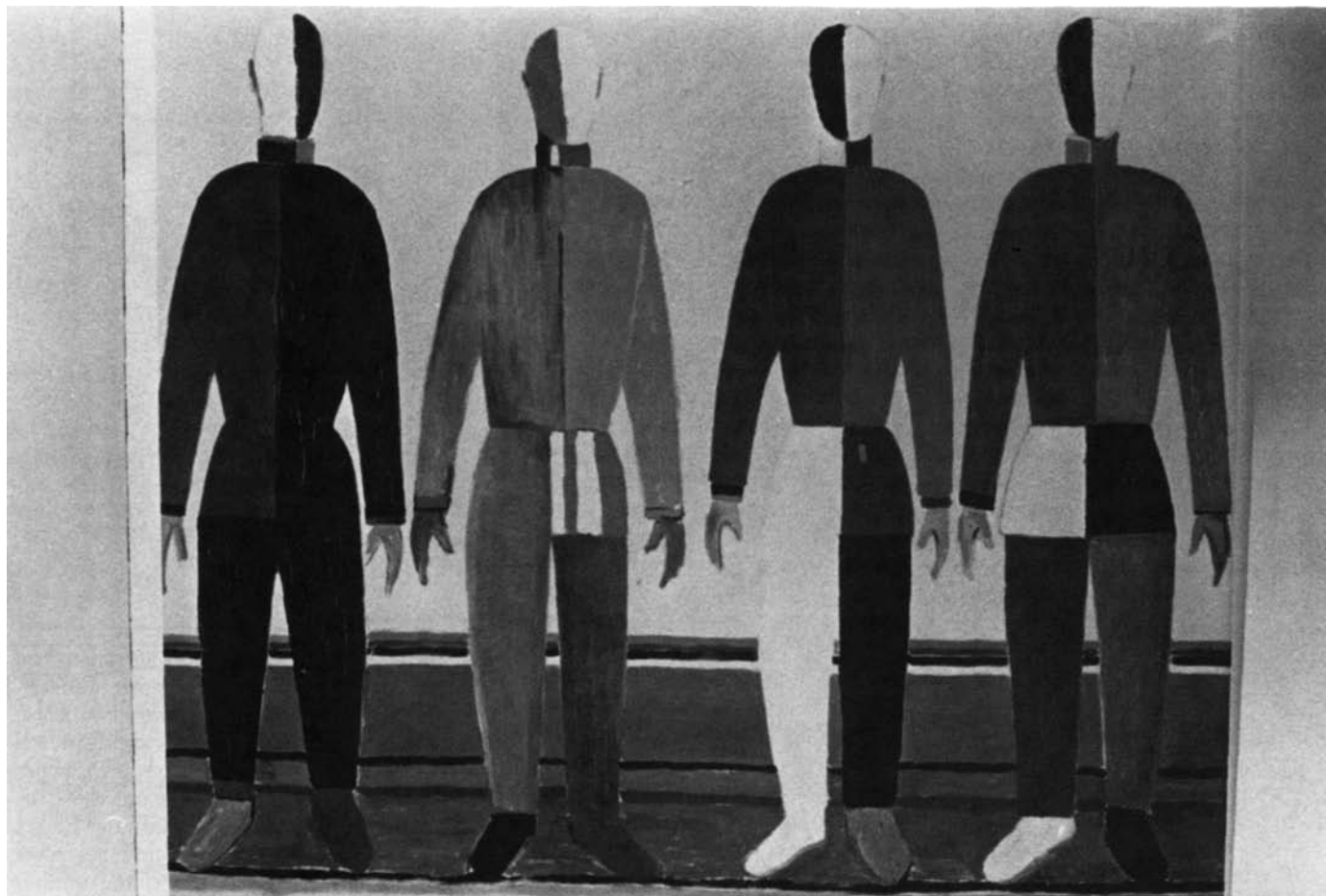


Fig. 5 Malevich, *Sportsmen*, c. 1928–32, oil on canvas. Leningrad, State Russian Museum.

to Germany Malevich stopped in Warsaw, where he was known but where his work had never been seen. His exhibition opened in a section of the Polonia on 20 March. The Polish avant-garde received Malevich warmly and the exhibition enjoyed great success. In a note from Warsaw Malevich wrote to Matiushin: "Dear Misha, I showed your charts together with mine; both created great interest. Oh, this relationship is remarkable. Glory pours down like rain."³⁵ Malevich delivered a lecture to the Polish artists on the theoretical research at GINKhUK on 25 March. Also in March, he arrived in Berlin, where he would remain until 5 June. His one-man show formed part of the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung* and was open from 7 May until 30 September. When he visited the exhibition, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar of Education, wrote: "In his genre Malevich has achieved remarkable results and great skill. I do not know whether such canvases will be painted after him, but I am sure that his style, which has already been applied as a decorative device—for example by the late Popova—may in this respect have a rich future."³⁶

The Bauhaus published Malevich's book *Die gegenstandslose Welt* in the same year, 1927, and his article "Suprematistische Architektur" appeared at about the same time.³⁷ The last time while Malevich was alive that his painting was shown in Germany was at the *Soujetmalerei*

exhibition in July, 1930. In June of 1927, before the closing of his show, Malevich left Berlin. His work remained in Germany until after the war, when a major portion of it went to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

After Suprematism

Malevich's last period of unusual creative activity began soon after his return from Berlin. In three or four years he made more than a hundred paintings and a large number of draw. Some of this work, done between 1928 and 1932, was dated in the 1910s by the artist. How can one understand this disparity?

On 15 December 1920, as he was completing the brochure *Suprematism. 34 Drawings*, Malevich wrote: "I have established the definitive plans of the Suprematist system. Further development into architectural Suprematism I leave to young architects, in the wide sense of the word, for I see the epoch of the new architecture only in this. I myself have moved into an area of thought new to me and, as I can, I will set out what I see within the endless space of the human cranium."³⁸ And, indeed, paintings by Malevich from the period of Vitebsk UNOVIS and Leningrad GINKhUK are almost unknown. There were mainly old works at 1920s exhibitions. During these years Malevich created a large portion of his architectons and worked intensely on his theoretical research. After quite a long painting silence, the artist,

making up for omissions, attempted to realize some of the ideas he had had in the pre-Suprematist period. This explains, possibly, the artist's notes on the reverse of certain late canvases: "motif of 1903," "motif of 1910."

Malevich's one-man show of sixty works at the Tretiakov Gallery was held in 1929. A booklet containing an article by A. Fedorov-Davydov was published but not a catalog of the works.³⁹ In a list of works exhibited which has been located,⁴⁰ several of the titles allow us to conclude that canvases from a late peasant cycle were actually shown. But these works were first recorded in the catalog for the exhibition *Artists of the RSFSR after XV Years*, which took place in the Russian Museum in 1932. Here were shown *Color Composition*, *Three Figures*, *Sportsmen*, *Red House*, and other late canvases (*Figs. 5 and 6*). We can judge that Malevich's white faces appeared late from similar personages and decisions in the work of his followers. Only after the 1932 exhibition can they be seen in the work of Suetin, Ermolaeva, Leporskaya, Stergilov, and E.M.Krimmer.

The artist's late work elucidates his unique creative evolution. In the 1910s, he came to objectlessness, to the *Black Square*, which was a rejection of painting in the usual sense. It would seem that there could be no return to the forms of objects in art. And in fact, in the twentieth century, it is hardly possible to find an artist who, like Malevich, would be able to

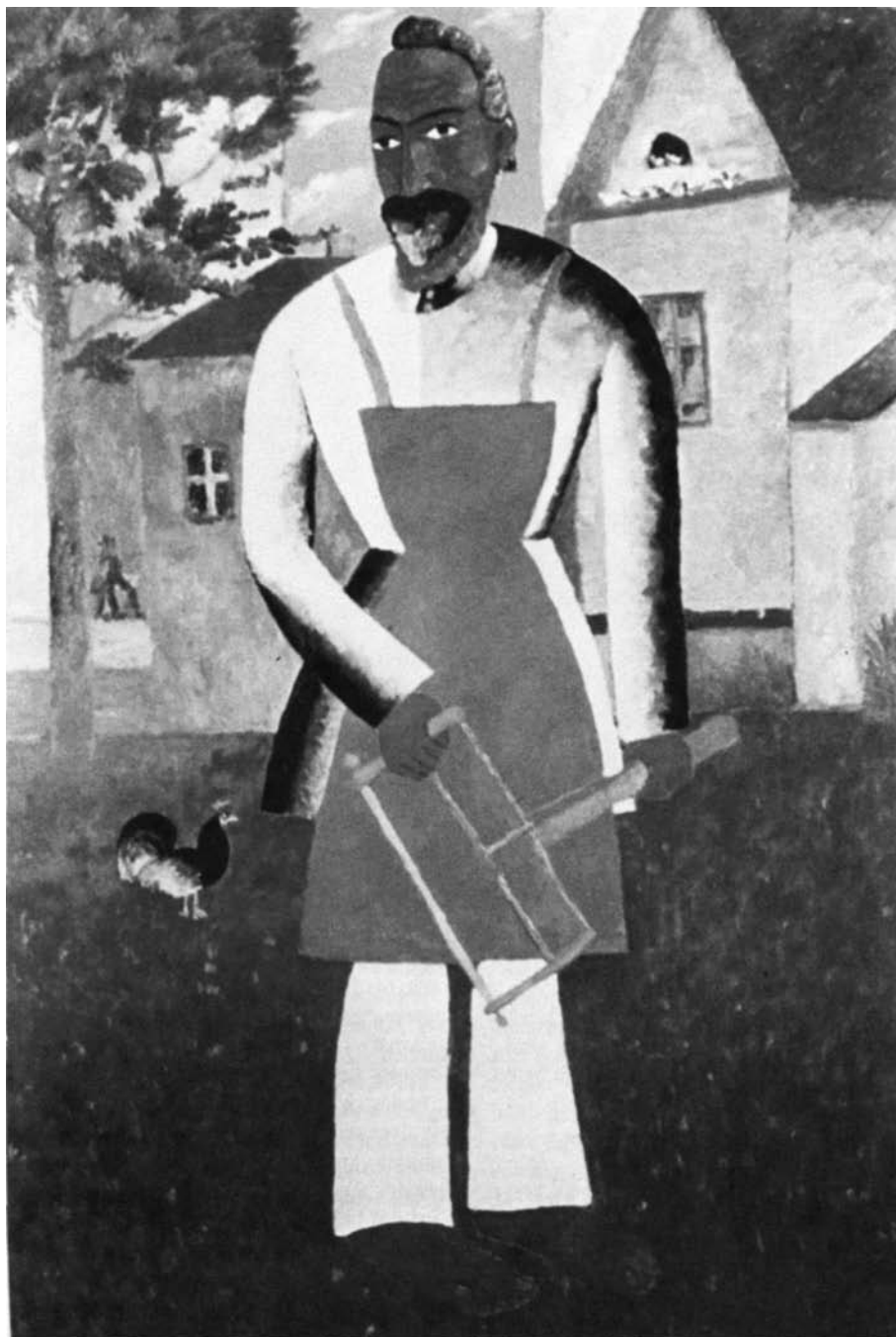


Fig. 6 Malevich, *Man with a Saw*, date unknown, oil on wood. Leningrad, State Russian Museum.

return from objectlessness to figurative painting. And not only to return, but to create splendid works. The last works of Malevich bear witness to a new flowering of his painting talent. He returned to figurativeness, but a figurativeness enriched by the achievements of Suprematism which made itself felt in a previously unknown sensation of color and form—clean, disciplined, and possessed of a pervasive brevity of line. In the faces and figures of the peasants who stand against backgrounds of colored fields there is an indirect, more moderate connection with Old Russian art than was present in the earlier peasant heads. The economy of plastic means and a kind of depictive reticence create a special graphic keenness to which Malevich consciously aspired. “The

objectless and the half-formed works (like my peasants),” he said to Yudin, “have the most significance at this time. They act most keenly of all.”⁴¹

Peasant images appear throughout Malevich’s entire work. From 1908 to 1912 his paintings depicted work in the fields, and heads close in their fervor to those of Russian icons. Even in the early period of Suprematism the artist tried to preserve a connection with these images. Thus, for example, the well-known *Red Square* (similar to *Black Square*) was entitled in the 1915 *0,10* catalog *Painted Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*. When he spoke about his youth, Malevich in his autobiography (published only in 1976) kept emphasizing his interest in the peasant way of life and

in folk art. “The whole peasant life attracted me strongly.”⁴² The attraction was part of an anti-urbanism which the artist retained his whole life. In the vast Ukrainian fields where Malevich spent his youth, there were sown the impulses towards the color of his future canvases. “The peasants, large and small, worked on the [sugar] plantations, and I, the future artist, fell in love with the fields and with the ‘colorful’ workers who weeded and cut the beets. Throngs of girls in colorful clothing moved in rows across the whole field.”⁴³ Malevich’s second peasant cycle, done in 1928–1932, is significantly different from the first. The characteristics of everyday life are absent, there are no reapers or mowers, in all we see peasants standing against backgrounds of colored fields. They are always frontal; an air of solemnity, of monumentality and significance of origin is elicited by every work, although the paintings are completely without narrative action. It seems as if the *Peasant (with a Black Face)* and other personages of this cycle have entered organically into Malevich’s Suprematist universe, which had, up until then, been unpopulated. Created after Suprematism, the cycle preserves in a number of its works (*Girls in a Field*, *Sportsmen*) the cosmic feeling which Malevich’s objectless works convey so strongly.

These last pictures by Malevich have become one of the clearest and most original phenomena of twentieth-century painting. Malevich died more than forty years ago, but throughout the world interest in his work continues to grow and his aesthetic ideas have retained their value. The past decades have left no doubt that Malevich belongs among those few artists whose work alters the art of an entire epoch. **End**

Notes

- 1 L.A. Yudin, Diary, entry for 27 October 1934. Archive of the artist's family, Leningrad.
- 2 M. Matiushin, "On the Exhibition of 'The Last Futurists,'" *Ocharovannyi strannik*, Petrograd, 1916, 18.
- 3 K.S. Malevich, letter to M.V. Matiushin, June 1913. Manuscript Division of the State Tretiakovsky Gallery, f. 25, d.9, 1.8.
- 4 The organizers of the society Union of Youth (1910–14) were M.V. Matiushin and E.G. Guro. Members included P.N. Filonov, O.V. Rozanova, I.S. Shkolnik, and V.I. Matvei. On 3 January 1913 the Muscovites K.S. Malevich, V.E. Tatlin, and D.D. Burliuk were elected members. M.F. Larionov and N.S. Goncharova were constant participants in the Union's exhibitions.
- 5 M. Matiushin, A. Kruchenykh, and K. Malevich, "The First All-Russian Congress of Singers of the Future (Poet-Futurists)," *Za sem'dnei*, 15 August 1913.
- 6 V. Khlebnikov wrote the "Prologue" to the opera, which was played on stage by A. Kruchenykh.
- 7 These drawings along with seventeen more are in the Leningrad State Theatrical Museum.
- 8 Letter to M.V. Matiushin from K.S. Malevich, 27 May 1915, in E.F. Kovtun, "Letters to Matiushin," *Ezhegodnik rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo doma na 1974 god*, Leningrad, 1976, 185–86.
- 9 Letter to M.V. Matiushin, late May 1913, *Ezhegodnik*, 180.
- 10 See the note by A. Rostislavov, *Apollon*, 1, 1916, 37.
- 11 K.S. Malevich, letter to M.V. Matiushin, 29 May 1915, *Ezhegodnik*, 186.
- 12 K. Malevich, *From Cubism to Suprematism. The New Realism in Painting*, Petrograd, 1916, 14.
- 13 These ten people were K.L. Boguslavskaya, I.V. Kliun, K.S. Malevich, M.I. Menkov, V.E. Pestel, L.S. Popova, I.A. Puni, O.V. Rozanova, V.E. Tatlin, N.A. Udaltsova. To them were added N.I. Altman, M.I. Vasileva, V.V. Kamensky, and A.M. Kirillova.
- 14 Manuscript Division of Pushkin House, f. 172, N. 971.
- 15 K.S. Malevich, letter to M.V. Matiushin, *Ezhegodnik*, 182.
- 16 K.S. Malevich, letter to M.V. Matiushin, *Ezhegodnik*, 192.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 K. Malevich, *God is not Cast Down*, Vitebsk, 1922, 15.
- 19 *Victory over the Sun*, opera by A. Kruchenykh, music by M. Matiushin, St. Petersburg, 1913, 18.
- 20 K.S. Petrov-Vodkin, lecture theses, 1920s. Manuscript Division of the State Russian Museum, f. 105, ed. Khr. 15, 1.28.
- 21 Velimir Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, IV, Leningrad, 1930, 296.
- 22 K.S. Malevich, letter to M.V. Matiushin, 9 May 1913. Manuscript Division of the State Tretiakov Gallery, f.25, d. 9, 1.2.
- 23 K. Malevich, *Suprematism. 34 Drawings*, Vitebsk, 1920.
- 24 Nikovai Fedorovich Fedorov (1828–1903), a librarian at the Rumiantsev Museum in Moscow and a mentor of K.E. Tsiolkovsky.
- 25 *Iskusstvo. Vestnik otdela IZO NKP*, N. 8, 1919.
- 26 S.I. Dymshits-Tolstaia, Memoirs. Manuscript Division of the State Russian Museum, f.100, ed. khr. 249, 1.67.
- 27 K.S. Malevich, "On the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting," paper given in GINKhUK, 16 June 1926. State Archive of the October Revolution and Socialist Construction (GAORSS), Leningrad, f.2555, op. 1, d. 1018.
- 28 P. Filonov, "Declaration of 'World Flowering,'" *Zhizn' iskusstva*, 20, 1923.
- 29 Archive of the Filonov family, Leningrad.
- 30 Manuscript Division of Pushkin House, f. 656.
- 31 K.S. Malevich, letter to A. Benois, May 1915. Manuscript Division of the State Russian Museum, f. 137, ed. khr. 1186.
- 32 K. Malevich, *From Cubism to Suprematism. The New Realism in Painting*, Petrograd, 1916, 9–10.
- 33 K. Malevich, "Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting," 1925 (Printer's proofs). Private archive, Leningrad.
- 34 Kasimir Malevich, *Die gegenstandslose Welt*, Munich, 1927.
- 35 K.S. Malevich, letter to M.V. Matiushin, 20 March. Manuscript Division of the State Tretiakov Gallery, f.25, d. 9, 1.24.
- 36 A. Lunacharsky, "Russian Artists in Berlin," *Ogonek*, 30, 1927.
- 37 *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, x, 1927.
- 38 K.S. Malevich, *Suprematism. 34 Drawings*, Vitebsk, 1920, 4.
- 39 *Exhibition of the Works of K.S. Malevich*, State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow, 1929.
- 40 Manuscript Division of the State Tretiakov Gallery, f.8.11, d. 286, 1.31.
- 41 L.A. Yudin, Diary entry for 21 September 1934. Archive of the artist's family, Leningrad.
- 42 K.S. Malevich, "Chapters from the Autobiography of an Artist," N. Khardzhiev, K. Malevich, M. Matiushin, *K istorii russkogo avangarda*, Stockholm, 1976, 107.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 103.

Autoanimals (*Samozveri*)

Autoanimals

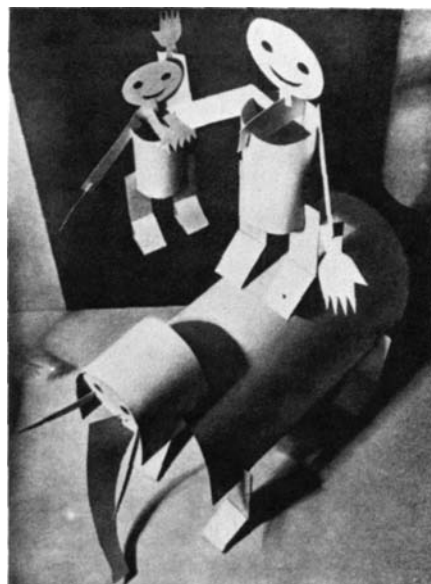
By Sergei Mikhailovich Tretiakov
Translated by Susan Cook Summer

Have I fallen from the moon?
Elephants are a walk in the room.
I see a kangaroo does bound
Behind the kennel of the hound.
With the cuttlefish goes the seal,
Along the hall I see them steal.
The kitchen door stands ajar—
A pair of turtles crawls quite far.
Ah!

Help!
Against the door I throw my bulk,
Crushed beneath the elephant's hulk.
With my head against a beam
Suddenly there comes a scream:
There—coward!
Ah! How silly can I be,
Surely they will not eat me
These animals—autoanimals.

Busy with affairs quite important,
Carrying a burden is the elephant.
He has a collected character
As he pumps water and hauls lumber.
The elephant's life is very long,
For three hundred years he goes on strong.
Go ahead, try and see
If the elephant with his knee
Picks
his
trunk.

He has been brought up and has been coached
Not like people—but almost.
Yasha, Gavrik along with Petya
Have their very own Africa.
For the tusk—a log, for the trunk—pants,
And a blanket for the skin.
Citizens! Look this way!



*Figs. 1–6 Alexander Rodchenko,
photo-illustration for Autoanimals, 1926.
Private Collection.*

See what they can portray!
In a knot his tail is bound,
And through the house he walks round and
round.
Heavily his steps do sag
As he must his trunk to drag.
He lives in an apartment chalice
And frightens all with his cry of malice.
But he cannot be called real
For he walks around in heels.

The courtyard is sown with someone.
It is the tortoise, trying to run.
From the fence to the vase,
Two vershoks an hour his pace.
The tortoise never bears a scowl,
And if a dog begins to howl,
The tortoise answers with a squeal

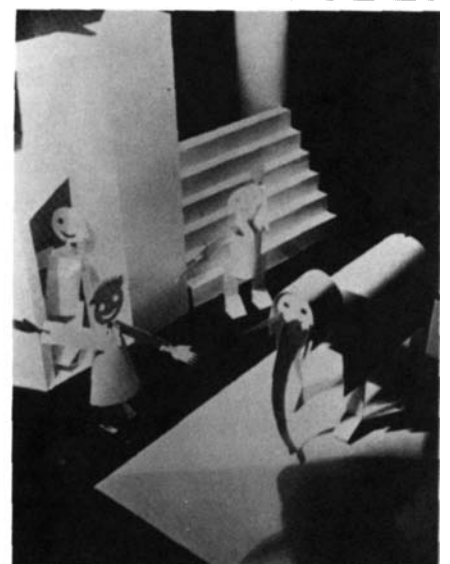
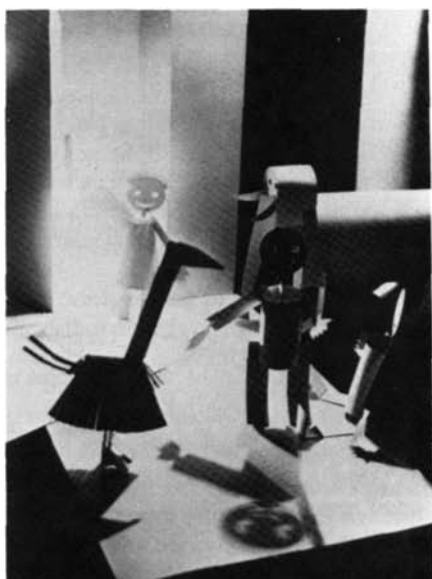


Fig 2

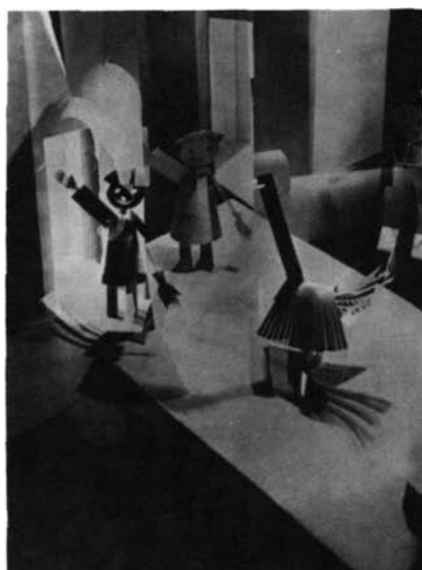
And leaves protected by his shield.
Fedya crawls down on the sly
To be a tortoise he can on the washtub rely.
A hand—to Fedya. The tub falls with a fuss.
But is he worse off than the tortoise?

Make a note, all of you fellows,
In the south the ostrich grows,
It runs all day amongst the heathers
Covered up in ostrich feathers.
Greater than wind velocity,
At 100 miles an hour he's quite speedy.
The ostrich would not eat anyone,
He eats but grass and nails: bong, bong.
But when he feels the need to hide,
This dumb bird lifts his arm up wide.
Underneath he puts his head
And thinks he will be neglected.

**Fig. 3**

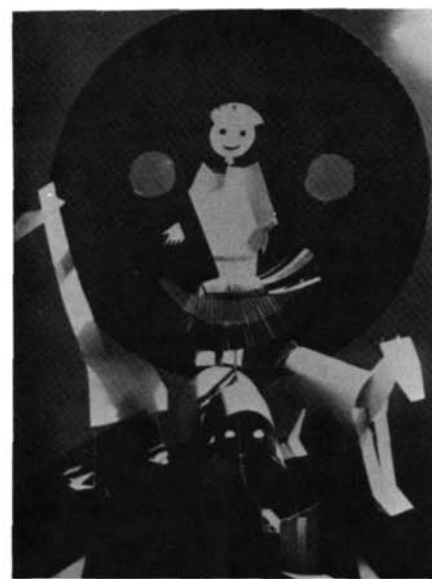
Right into his back Matvei
Pokes in branches in a special way.
All he really has to do
Is create a head on the count of two.
With a ball on the end of a stick
He makes a head that looks quite slick.
But if anyone tries to catch this one,
The head under his arm, off he will run.
Crossing bridge and river on his way,
It is the head that he will mislay.

There on the ice slick and smooth
Sleeps the seal, too lazy to move.
Just like an oar is his hand-like fin,
And his layers of fat warm him under the skin.
Near the poles lamps are not needed,
The sun stays aloft, quite unheeded.
To meet the sun the fish does swim,

**Fig. 4**

And waking the seal says "thanks" to him.
The seal's not too lazy to eat the beast,
And grabs him quickly with his teeth.
While looking at the sky and mooring,
He eats the fish without even salting.
It takes quite little to become a seal,
Just wrap up in a blanket and start to reel.
Lie on the floor and try to swim,
While catching fish with your hand-like fin.

Eating all the leaves with ease,
The giraffe lives amongst the trees.
With a neck that almost never ends,
He eats and ever prettier tends.
He could hardly be a house dweller
With nose in the chimney and feet in the cellar.
When it comes to the apartment's heat
The giraffe requires a truly great feat.

**Fig. 5**

Lyolka and Kolka, noses in air,
Try to copy the giraffe's manner and flair.
But as they are walking they are quite blind,
Eventually they will probably be fined.
When their giraffe walks it can't see ahead,
With eyes on the chest and not in the head.

Out there where the waves rush and swish
Lives and nests the cuttlefish.
Its body looks like a small cupola
And from it protrude two antenna.
About safety not to have to think,
It carries around a sack of black ink.
There she is, there is the crayfish,
Go ahead, enemy, if you so wish.
But
 don't
 fight.

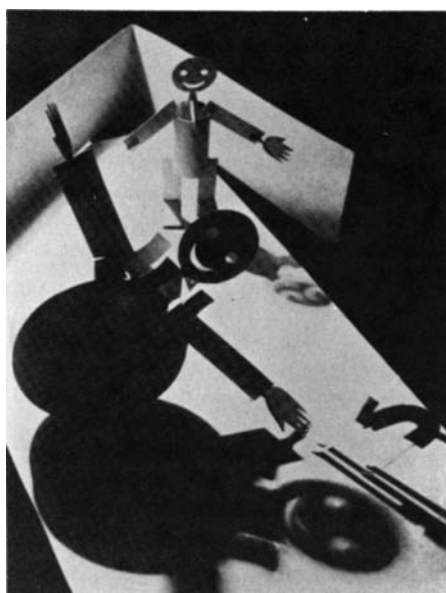


Fig. 6

The one who will fight
With all his m-i-g-h-t
Is the cu-tt-le-fi-sh.
And into the water with a great big rush,
All is black—complete darkness.

The enemy's eyes
Are blinded by surprise
As the cuttlefish
Quickly glides

back
back
back

Home.
In a tiny corner moving back
Katya's cuttlefish peers out of a sack.
And as she peers at the enemy through a crack
Suddenly
The enemy

Jumps!
And they meet
Prfff?
And they meet
Chuff!
A jump-a meow-a great big blitz
Exults and rejoices the cuttlefish.
Don't you want to appreciate
How the victors jubilate?

Out in Australia where it's hot day and night
Lives the kangaroo with a jump so light.
She knows how, as with a piece of rail,
To help her jump using her tail.
She is fashioned quite conveniently
With a bag built on to her belly.
This bag which is on her stomach hung
Is there for the little ones.
And there in the bag squeezed together like glue
There are five merry little kangaroos.
And to a jump filled with frenzy
They gaze about whistling continuously.
Vanechka is busy with a game:
Like the kangaroo, he jumps the same.
Vanechka has quite a speed,
Though his tail he must always heed.
And to Vanechka's lively dance
Two pups in his schoolbag sob and prance.

Twenty versts in half an hour
Rushes by the Orlov trotter.
The ones who can lift five tons
Are the furry legged perchurons.
In a horsecloth decorated to surplus
A tiny pony walks in the circus.
For what the brave cavalry need
Are racers who have really top speed.
Who carries us, do you want to know?
Who plows the field, carries the heavy load?
The horse with spots from end to end,
The dark gray horse, the Bay—our eternal
friend.

There's a real horse, just look at him,
If you touch your spur against his skin
He will gallop off from the place,
Leaving his rider in a total daze.
But over a question quite trivial
The head of this horse breaks from the tail.
It was a disgrace, all this fret and fray
And each horse-half ran off in a different way.
The front
To the corridor
The behind
To the yard
And the rider sat where he was with a scream:
"BUT WHAT CAN THIS ALL MEAN?"

*Susan Cook Summer is a specialist in
Russian ballet history and a freelance
translator of Russian and French
cultural and literary texts.*

Notes on Autoanimals

The author: A journalist, novelist, and documentary photographer specializing in the Orient, Sergei Mikhailovich Tretiakov (1892–1939) received his first recognition as a member of the Siberian Futurist organization *Tvorchestvo* (Creativity), active from 1919 to 1921. In 1923, he was a founding member of *LEF* (Left Front of the Arts), the Moscow journal of literature, criticism and art, whose editorial staff included the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the critic Osip Brik. *LEF* was published from 1923 to 1925 and published as *Novyi LEF* (New LEF) in 1927 and 1928. Tretiakov took over the position of editor-in-chief of *Novyi LEF* from Mayakovsky for the last five numbers issued in 1928.

Tretiakov's most important works include *Listen, Moscow!*, an agit-play produced in 1923 by the cinematographer Sergei Eisenstein; *Roar, China*, a propagandistic play of 1926; and *China Testament: The Autobiography of Tan Shih-hua* of 1934. Also, in 1929 he contributed seven essays to the *Literature of Fact*, edited by Vladimir Chuzhak, which hailed the death of fiction and advocated literature that would express Marxist-Leninist theories as the cornerstone of the new (Soviet) society.

Tretiakov was purged and apparently executed during the late 1930s. His works were "rehabilitated" in the Soviet Union in 1956.

The background of the poem: Whereas the earlier *LEF* was more insistently devoted to agitational propaganda ("agit-prop")—including optimistic manifestoes and excited rallying cries ("For Innovation!")—the later *Novyi LEF* placed greater emphasis on straightforward factography and advocated a platform of utilitarian arts. Tretiakov's unpublished text for *Autoanimals* dates from 1926, a year in which the *LEF* presses lay dormant. This poem seems to represent for the author a breathing period between the stringent ideological demands of *LEF* and *Novyi LEF*. Perhaps Tretiakov was indulging some personal whim, seeking creative expression in a work not necessarily motivated by external sociopolitical conditions.

Unlike much Soviet children's literature of this period, *Autoanimals* is not propagandistic. It retains the whimsy of Old Russian fairy tales and some of the fantasy of Nikolai Leskov's 1873 novel *The Enchanted Wanderer*. The poem is unusual in Tretiakov's oeuvre, which is more generally of a documentary nature, but it stands—along with Alexander Rodchenko's photo-illustrations—as a splendid example of Soviet children's literature. (The works of Samuel Marshak are also called to mind in this regard.)

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**Susan Cook Summer and
Gail Harrison Roman**

Cinematic Whimsy: Rodchenko's Photo- Illustrations for Autoanimals

In 1926, Sergei Mikhailovich Tretiakov (1892–1939) commissioned the artist Alexander Mikhailovich Rodchenko (1891–1956) to design illustrations for a projected (but unrealized) book of his poem *Autoanimals* (*Samozveri*).¹ In 1921, Rodchenko had turned from easel painting and sculpture to utilitarian, "productivist" art: domestic design (furniture, clothing); typography (posters, publications); and photography (photomontage, film titles). Throughout the 1920s, Rodchenko increasingly devoted his efforts to books, journals, posters, photography, and film titles. Above all, his book designs² represent the dynamism and optimism inspired by the social, political, and cultural hopes of the young Soviet Union. Experimental book design³ in Russia dates from as early as 1910, but post-Revolutionary activity in the arts especially encouraged innovation and production.

Rodchenko's book designs are both political and artistic. As chief designer for the avant-garde journals *LEF* and *Novyi LEF*, he produced covers, title pages, illustrations, and layouts, all of which show his enthusiasm for vanguard art forms as a manifestation of the new social and artistic organization of Soviet life.⁴

From his earliest association with *LEF*, Rodchenko had experimented extensively with photography.⁵ He introduced photomontage to the Soviet Union, and created film titles for the cinematographer Dziga Vertov (1896–1954). Tretiakov—himself a photographer—appreciated Rodchenko's photographic talents and chose him as the illustrator of *Autoanimals*.

For his projected illustrations, Rodchenko—along with his wife Varvara Stepanova—photographed cardboard cut-out figures that he had constructed in the form of the animals and children mentioned in the text (*Figs. 1–6*). It seems highly possible that Rodchenko intended such pop-up figures to be the final illustrations for *Autoanimals* but that he was

forced by economic stringencies to use photographic illustrations instead. Such actual, three-dimensional designs would have accomplished Rodchenko's artistic goals of presenting the multiple viewpoints and heightened realism that are best achieved in cinematic art. The photographic medium provided him with an excellent alternative for achieving these goals.

The reason for employing cut-out models instead of creating two-dimensional designs was to exploit the stark tonal effects resulting from the shadow reflections of the figures photographed in bright light. The sculptural, angular forms of the characters boldly challenge the two-dimensional quality of the book. The play of the shadows energizes the background and extends the book-page into a stage-like space. Furthermore, these works suggest cinematic motion and dynamism as actual and silhouetted forms are relieved through tonal and dimensional contrasts with the background space. It was undoubtedly his experience with film design (titles, posters, books) that inspired Rodchenko to create such highly animated figures. The shadows of the animals and children echo their actual forms, thus suggesting their extension, or "movement," from the two-dimensional page to a potential three-dimensional portrayal.

The elimination of unnecessary details and the use of silhouetted forms emphasize the elegant, simple geometry of the animals and children as their shadows form patterns on the background of the pages. Perhaps the excited animation described in the text motivated Rodchenko to create these mechanically whimsical figures. Unlike Tretiakov, for whom *Autoanimals* seems to represent a psychological and artistic respite from straightforward documentary works, Rodchenko employs for this project the same artistic devices that can be observed in his more agitational, productivist work in both typography and photography; he even adapted certain stylistic tendencies of his pre-utilitarian paintings and sculpture in these designs.

The bold planar juxtapositions of the geometric forms—circles, cylinders, rectangles; curvilinear and straight-edged shapes—are drawn from the geometric abstraction that characterized Rodchenko's art during the pre-*LEF* years. The dynamic rhythm of his Compass-and-Ruler works and his experimental sculpture⁶ reappear in the illustrations to "Autoanimals." The marvelous combination of geometric precision in the cut-out forms and the fantasy-shapes of the figures represent the whimsical abstraction developed by Rodchenko earlier in the 1920s in film titles, advertising posters, and commercial logos.⁷ For example, in the logo for "News" reproduced here (*Fig. 7*), the precise, colored geometric shapes are relieved from their background surface by hard-edged contour and complementary relationships (red-green). The geometric precision is repeated in the cut-out forms of the "Autoanimals," and the chromatic

Notes on Autoanimals

The author: A journalist, novelist, and documentary photographer specializing in the Orient, Sergei Mikhailovich Tretiakov (1892–1939) received his first recognition as a member of the Siberian Futurist organization *Tvorchestvo* (Creativity), active from 1919 to 1921. In 1923, he was a founding member of *LEF* (Left Front of the Arts), the Moscow journal of literature, criticism and art, whose editorial staff included the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the critic Osip Brik. *LEF* was published from 1923 to 1925 and published as *Novyi LEF* (New LEF) in 1927 and 1928. Tretiakov took over the position of editor-in-chief of *Novyi LEF* from Mayakovsky for the last five numbers issued in 1928.

Tretiakov's most important works include *Listen, Moscow!*, an agit-play produced in 1923 by the cinematographer Sergei Eisenstein; *Roar, China*, a propagandistic play of 1926; and *China Testament: The Autobiography of Tan Shih-hua* of 1934. Also, in 1929 he contributed seven essays to the *Literature of Fact*, edited by Vladimir Chuzhak, which hailed the death of fiction and advocated literature that would express Marxist-Leninist theories as the cornerstone of the new (Soviet) society.

Tretiakov was purged and apparently executed during the late 1930s. His works were "rehabilitated" in the Soviet Union in 1956.

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effects are analogous to the tonal contrasts—drawn also from black-and-white films—of *Autoanimals*. We wait anxiously for these charming figures to move as if they were made of sheet metal and hinged at the edges of each geometric section. Although it is only our mind that casts them into “animated narration,” the cinematic effect is achieved. Finally, the varied planar perspectives, unusual viewpoints and dramatic *chiaroscuro* heighten our appreciation of the forms themselves as well as of their narrative function. These effects also appear in Rodchenko’s photographs⁸ (Figs. 8 and 9), and they represent in large measure the artist’s attempts to re-form the spectator’s visual experience. In 1927 he wrote:

... one circles an object, a building, or a person and thinks: “How should I take this—this way, or that way or this way?” It’s all outmoded. We have been educated, raised for thousands of years on a variety



Fig. 7 Alexander Rodchenko, title for News logo, 1924.

of paintings, to see everything according to the compositional rules of our grandmothers. But we must revolutionize people by making them see from all vantage points and in all lights.⁹

The photo-pictures designed by Rodchenko for *Autoanimals* both highlight and complement Tretiakov’s text. Rodchenko’s “camera eye” animates the characters both emotionally and dynamically. These ingenious figures enhance the whimsical nature and the entertainment value of the poem. The organic link between content and form in illustrated literature dates back to Symbolism in Russia, as elsewhere. Rodchenko felt a special affinity for the works of Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) and Mikhail Vrubel (1856–1911), and the transformational effects of images and shadows in *Autoanimals* may well remind us of the works of these two Symbolist artists. Ultimately, Rodchenko’s extension of the traditional boundaries of art into a synthetic representation of two-dimensional photo-illustrations and three-dimensional cinematic effects has transformed *en page* the characters of *Autoanimals* into visionary emotive shapes that represent, among other things: the purposeful stride of the elephant, the graceful silliness of the giraffe, and the gleeful imitations by the children.

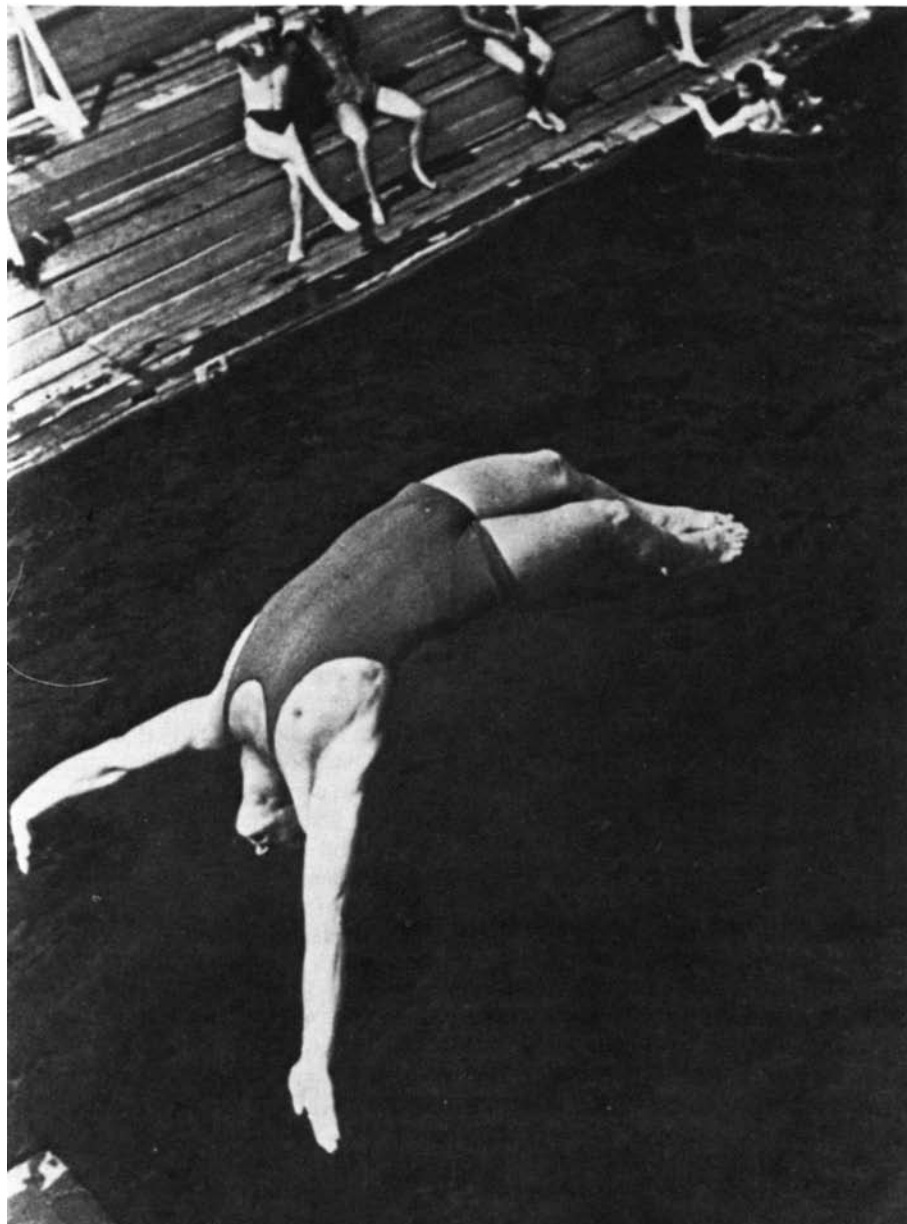


Fig. 8 Alexander Rodchenko, Diving, photograph, 1936. Private Collection.

Notes

- 1 A German translation has recently been published as *Selbst Gemachte Tiere*, ed. Werner Fütterer and Hubertus Gassner, Cologne, 1980. I am not in complete agreement with the format or the commentary of this edition.
- 2 On Rodchenko’s book designs, see my essay “Graphic Commitment,” *Rodchenko*, ed. David Elliott, Oxford, Museum of Modern Art, 1979; L. Volkov-Lannit, *Alexander Rodchenko: Rîsuet, Fotografiruet, Sport* (Draughtsman, Photographer, Sportsman), Moscow, 1968.
- 3 On Russian experimental book design, see: Szymon Bojko, *New Graphic Design in Revolutionary Russia*, New York, 1972; Arthur A. Cohen, “Futurism and Constructivism: Russian and Other,” *Print Collectors’ Newsletter*, vii, no. 1, 1976, 2–4; Susan Compton, *The World Backwards: Russian Futurist Books, 1912–1916*, London, 1978; Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History*, London, 1969; Gail Har-

ison Roman, “The Ins and Outs of Russian Avant-Garde Books: A History, 1910–1932,” *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1932: New Perspectives*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980.

- 4 On *LEF*, see: Robert Sherwood, “Introduction to *LEF*,” *Form*, x, October, 1969, 29ff; *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann, New York, 1974, 79ff; *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*, ed. John E. Bowlt, New York, 1977, 199ff. Rodchenko’s cover designs for *LEF* and *Novyi LEF* are illustrated in Elliott, ed., *Rodchenko*, 20–23.

- 5 Rodchenko was accused, apparently unjustly, by some critics of plagiarizing the works of foreign photographers, most notably Moholy-Nagy. This controversy can be followed in part in the polemical essays and letters by Rodchenko himself and the critic Boris Kushner in the pages of *Novyi LEF*.

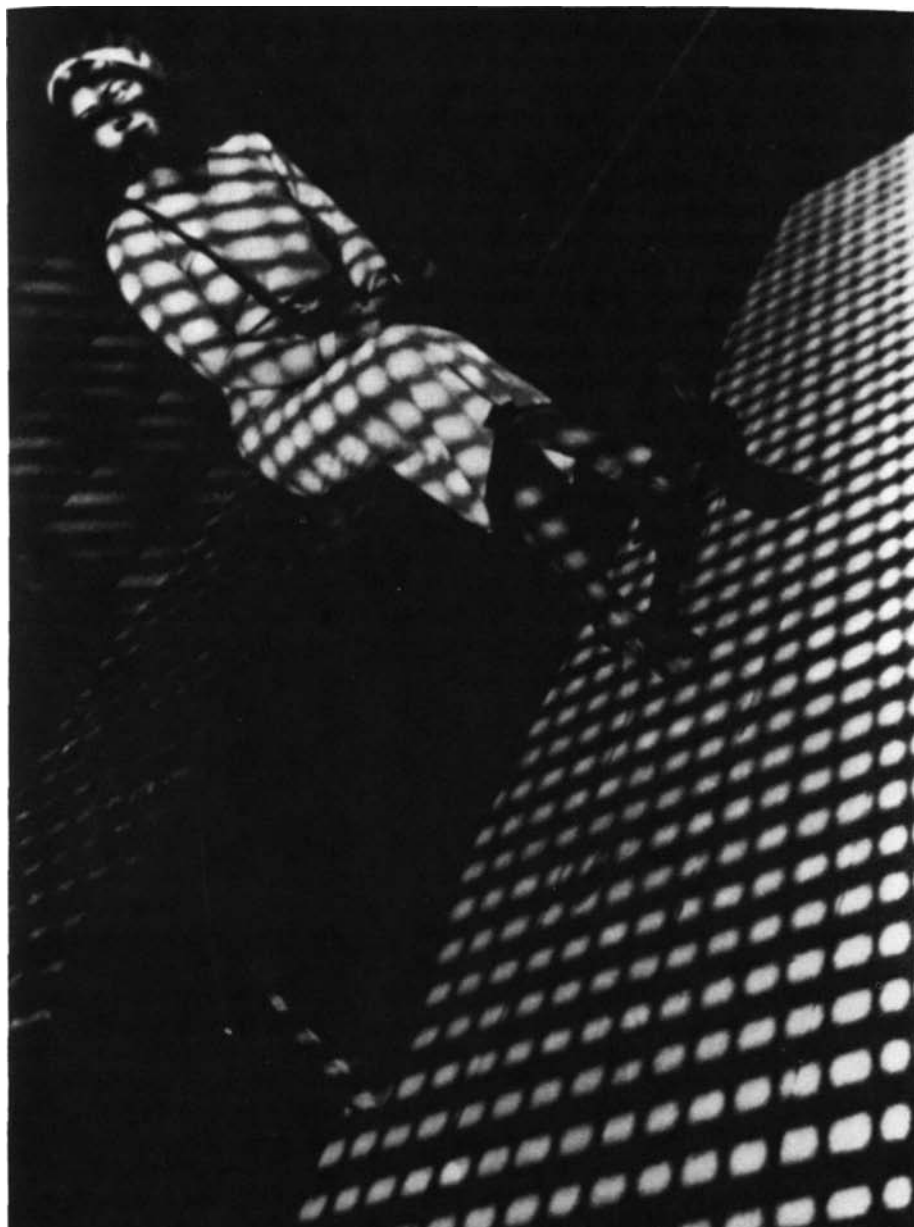


Fig. 9 Alexander Rodchenko, Young Woman in "Speckled Light," photograph, 1934. Private Collection.

⁶ These works are illustrated in Elliott, ed., *Rodchenko*, 29–53.

⁷ A limited amount of private enterprise was allowed to function, under the supervision of the Communist party, in order to stimulate the Soviet economy. This program, which included advertising, was known as NEP for "New Economic Policy," and it lasted from 1921 to 1928.

⁸ On Rodchenko's photography, see: Ronny H. Cohen, "Alexander Rodchenko," *Print Collectors' Newsletter*, VIII, no. 3, 1977, 68–70. On Russian photography of the period, see: Susan Compton, "Art and Photography," *Print Collectors' Newsletter*, VII, no. 1, 1976, 12–14.

⁹ Alexander Rodchenko, "Zapisnaya Kniga 'LEFa'," ["LEF" Notebook], *Novyi LEF*, 6, 1927, 3–4.