



fig. 1  
*Natan Al'tman*  
*Plate, Land to the Workers, 1919.*  
*Porcelain, 24.3 cm diameter.*  
*State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.*

# Soviet Porcelain of the 1920s: Propaganda Tool

*Nina Lobanov-Rostovsky*

Soviet porcelain of the 1920s owes much to the young Soviet government's need for propaganda. It can be divided into several categories: straightforward propaganda pieces; symbolic and commemorative pieces; figurines representing characters of the new Soviet epoch; the traditional, with themes representing eternal Russia and rural life as well as Russian fairy tales; and the avant-garde, including Cubist, Suprematist, and abstract pieces. However, all porcelain decorated at the State—later renamed the Lomonosov—Porcelain Factory<sup>1</sup> during the first ten years after the October Revolution (1917–27) was in one way or another meant to be used for propaganda purposes even when free of slogans or abstract in form and design. This porcelain represented a new state, a new era, a new people, and the Soviet government, avid for foreign currency, sent hundreds of pieces abroad to exhibitions and to trade fairs. Thanks to this, certain propaganda pieces, which were later destroyed or simply disappeared in the USSR during the Stalinist era, have survived in foreign collections. Some of these pieces are contemporary testimony to the activities of the American Relief Administration and to the importance and activities of men such as Lev Trotskii and Grigorii Zinov'ev during the first years after the Revolution—whereas Stalin, who destroyed both men, does not appear on any early propaganda porcelain. Soviet porcelain of the 1920s has become an art document of the epoch.

## **Revolution and Propaganda**

During the Civil War the White leaders were military men with only a narrow understanding of politics. Although they believed in the justice of their cause just as firmly as the revolutionaries believed in theirs, they never thought it necessary to explain their political and social views to their subordinates or to the masses. To them, politicking and propaganda smacked of the subversive and were to be avoided.

The Bolshevik leaders were revolutionaries. In their underground work their chief task had been to persuade others of the correctness of their views in order to acquire followers. The teaching of Marxism, i.e., propaganda, was therefore considered necessary, indeed crucial. Lenin's ideas strongly influenced Soviet attitudes toward propaganda.<sup>2</sup> Lenin argued in his writings that one should not seek to fight ideas with ideas but should instead suppress the opposition's ideas and its organs—that is, one should censor the press. He also wrote that organization and propaganda were two sides of the same coin; a well-organized network could facilitate the work of propaganda, and the very process of carrying out agitation would help the work of organization.

From October 1917 to the spring of 1921, the Bolsheviks were in a desperate struggle to maintain power as the Civil War raged throughout Russia. Their survival depended in good part upon the Red Army created by Trotskii and upon the success of agitation and propaganda (agitprop) campaigns directed toward reconciling the populace, literate and illiterate, to the new government and the socialist way of life.

Anatolii Lunacharskii, the brilliant head of Narkompros (the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment), enlisted artists and writers to help in the battle for hearts and minds. Artists were urged to leave their studios and to design street pageants praising the Revolution, as well as decorations for the celebrations on May 1st and the anniversary of the October Revolution. They also painted the exteriors of agitprop trains, boats, and trucks with colorful revolutionary messages. Filled with trained agitators and representatives from various commissariats, these agitprop trains, boats, and trucks were sent systematically around the country. Each train was equipped with a small library, a bookstore, a printing press for producing pamphlets, a gramophone for broadcasting Lenin's

speeches, and a coach fitted out for meetings and for showing short agitational films. Some of the films were aimed specifically at the peasants, telling them about more efficient agricultural methods and urging them to learn how to read and write and to be inoculated against diseases.

Other successful forms of agitational art were political posters and Rosta (the Russian Telegraph Agency) windows. Political posters and wall newspapers had become substitutes for ordinary newspapers throughout war-torn Russia. In 1919, Mikhail Cheremnykh devised a new type of wall newspaper for Rosta, which consisted of the usual bulletin conveying the latest news in telegraphic style and was illustrated with satirical sketches that were either handpainted or stenciled. These bulletins were mounted onto a board that would fit into the ordinary store window, where, unlike the wall newspapers, they were safe from wind, rain, and graffiti. Vladimir Maiakovskii, Dmitrii Moor, and many other fine artists and writers produced Rosta windows, which were usually changed weekly.

Never before had artists and writers been so closely linked with the politics of their country. They took themselves very seriously and, like the political authorities, issued orders and decrees. The new republic became a vast canvas and stage for artists of various tendencies.

### **The State Porcelain Factory**

The Soviet leaders, immediately after the October Revolution, had the idea of using porcelain as a means of propaganda both within Russia and abroad. It was this decision which made the State Porcelain Factory a fertile field as well as a haven for artists who wanted to aid in the task of social and cultural reconstruction.<sup>3</sup>

The former Imperial Porcelain Factory, located on what is now Obukhovskaia oborona Avenue in the southern outskirts of St. Petersburg, was founded in the first half of the eighteenth century and worked exclusively for the Imperial court, to which it supplied dinner services, articles for the adornment of palaces and yachts, replacement pieces for the existing services, and presentation pieces (including services, vases, figurines, and other works of art) to be given away by the Imperial household. During World War I, it outfitted the Imperial army and army hospitals. Many of its workers went to war, leaving behind only a skeleton labor force.

After the February and October Revolutions, the artistic administration of the country presented a picture of extreme confusion and, at times, anarchy, as did just about everything else. The Bolsheviks had given relatively little thought to the way in which they would administer the country after assuming power. Many pragmatic decisions had to be made in education, art, and industry. There were no set procedures and in many cases specialists were able to keep the jobs they had had before the Revolution. This was the case at the Imperial Porcelain Factory, where the reorganization took place fairly swiftly and smoothly. After the February Revolution it came under the aegis of the Ministry of Trade and Industry of the new regime, which took absolutely no notice of the factory. Everyone at the factory stayed on and it was supposed to be ruled by a workers' control commission. Artists and sculptors ranked as workers, so there was no "class" problem. The sculpture workshop headed by Vasilii Kuznetsov and the painting workshop headed by Rudolf Vil'de continued working on prerevolutionary models. The artistic side of the factory, however, was threatened with closure because there was no outlet for its wares. Meetings were held and a petition presented to the ministry with no concrete result. After the October Revolution, the factory came briefly under the jurisdiction of the People's Commissariat of Agriculture and, a

few months later, by a decision of the Council of People's Commissars of March 23, 1918,<sup>4</sup> it was placed under the authority of Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment). This was a fortunate choice, for Lunacharskii at Narkompros was both a member of the Bolshevik inner circle and a highly cultivated man who had traveled widely. He had access to Lenin and was able to defend artistic projects and artists of various persuasions when necessary.

One of the problems the Bolshevik government had was finding paper and other materials for its propaganda campaign. This was an obstacle they did not encounter, initially, at the State Porcelain Factory, which they found full of unpainted plates, ready to be covered with slogans and revolutionary themes. This stock of blank porcelain was available at the factory because the practice had been, year in and year out, to produce a certain quantity of articles in advance: dinner services, platters, plates, jugs, teapots, cups and saucers, up to the "biscuit" stage. These were stamped with the monogram of the reigning czar and the current year, then stored away until an order came through from the Imperial household for a service or for gifts for distinguished visitors. The required items would then be painted, glazed, and fired.

Most of the blank porcelain found in the factory at the time of the Revolution dated from the reign of the last czar, Nikolai II (1894–1917). There was also a stock of blanks bearing the monogram of his father, Aleksandr III (1881–94), and of his grandfather, Aleksandr II (1855–81), and a few pieces which went back to Nikolai I (1825–55), though these were very rare. As each czar died, the leftover blanks, stamped with his monogram, were probably pushed to the back of the storage shelves where they gathered dust until the Revolution.

During the first two months after the overthrow of the Romanovs, artists at the porcelain factory painted on pieces which had been marked simply with the date 1917. (These pieces are today extremely rare.) Between April and December 1917, they painted on pieces marked with a crownless eagle in a hyphenated circle and the date 1917—the monogram of the Provisional Government, which had been designed by Ivan Bilibin. Between January and May 1918, the crownless eagle in a hyphenated circle continued to be used but without a date. Then, the factory artists became more pragmatic and used earlier monogrammed plates, but covered the Imperial monogram with an oval or a diamond-shaped patch of dark-green or black paint and added the State Porcelain Factory mark of hammer, sickle, and cog, and the year. This mark was designed by Aleksei Karev. From 1921 onward, they usually left the Imperial monogram uncovered and simply added the State Porcelain Factory mark and the year. Thus one usually finds both Soviet and Imperial marks on propaganda porcelain of the immediate postrevolutionary years.

Despite the unsettled conditions there was no break in production. At the very first meeting of the new management it was decided to abandon the difficult prerevolutionary methods of underglaze painting, and Sergei Chekhonin was elected to the post of artistic director, a post he held during 1918–23 and 1925–27. Superbly trained and experienced in the fields of architectural ceramics, enamel, graphic design, miniatures, and gilding, he experienced no difficulty in bridging the two worlds of painting and ceramics. On the contrary, suddenly his worlds came together. Though some people accused Chekhonin of having sold out to the Revolution,<sup>5</sup> anyone who knows his work realizes that this was not so. Chekhonin's firm commitment to artistic innovation was neither increased nor decreased by the consequences of the Revolution. He was inspired not by revolutionary ideology but by purely artistic interest in the possibilities of new designs

that might integrate and transform economic and social reality. Chekhonin's excellence as an artist and his resolutely undogmatic approach made other artists happy to work with him and allowed several styles to coexist at the State Porcelain Factory. Natal'ia Dan'ko, for example, the gifted sculptor who had been Kuznetsov's assistant in his workshop since 1914, stayed on as head of the workshop after Kuznetsov's departure in 1919.

A triumvirate consisting of Petr Vaulin, Chekhonin, and David Shterenberg—all of them on the Art Board of the Petrograd Izo Narkompros—was in charge of the general direction of the factory: Vaulin took care of administrative and economic matters, Chekhonin supervised all artistic matters, and Shterenberg was the Izo Narkompros representative. The directors of the porcelain factory worked in close collaboration with the workers' commission. At first, there were twelve workers in the painting section and one hundred workers in all at the factory.<sup>6</sup> The lack of technical ability among most of these workers and their low output forced the artistic director to start off with the production of very simply decorated porcelain. The factory artists were obliged to familiarize themselves with artisanal-type work so as to acquire the habit of using a brush and bright colors with ease. Chekhonin's reputation attracted many additional artists, well-known and unknown, to the art department of the factory, including Mikhail Adamovich, Vasiliï Timorev, Varvara Freze, Elizaveta Rozendorf, Elena Dan'ko (Natal'ia's sister), Mariia Ivashintsova, Elizaveta Potapova, Aleksandra Shchekotikhina-Pototskaia, and Ekaterina Iakimovskaia in 1918; Ekaterina Bol'sheva, Liubov' Gaush, Alisa Golenkina, Mariia Kirillova, Mariia Lebedeva, and Varvara Rukavishnikova in 1919; Nadezhda Kulikova and Bazilka Radonich in 1920; and Rene O'Konnell' in 1922. (Zinaida Kobyletskaia, who had worked at the Imperial Porcelain Factory from 1912–14, rejoined in 1918.) Established artists such as Natan Al'tman, Ivan Alekseev, Veniamin Belkin, Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, Vasiliï Kandinskii, Boris Kustodiev, Nikolai Lapshin, Vladimir Lebedev, Aleksandr Matveev, Ivan Puni, and Valentin Sherbakov created designs for the State Porcelain Factory. None of these established artists except Dobuzhinskii knew how to paint on porcelain, and Dobuzhinskii never painted on porcelain for the factory. In 1923 the Suprematists Kazimir Malevich, Nikolai Suetin, and Il'ia Chashnik worked for the State Porcelain Factory. In the late 1920s there was a new influx of artists, including Mikhail Mokh, Aleksandr Samokhvalov, Ivan Riznich, and Aleksei Vorobevskii. The last two are still alive, and Vorobevskii is still painting porcelain for the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory.

For many artists, working at the factory was their first professional experience. As long as they had been well trained their inexperience did not worry the directors of the factory, who were attempting to create a porcelain "nursery" for the new state. They banked on the ideals and the excitement of the Revolution to inspire the artists' creative powers. Under Chekhonin's guidance, many of the now characteristic designs of elegantly calligraphed slogans and inscriptions, monograms and dates, emblems, garlands, and flowery borders were developed. He adapted his mastery of graphic art to porcelain and transferred the vignettes he so loved to plates and to cups and saucers. (His style of calligraphy is still used on commemorative porcelain being produced at the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory today.)

### Traditional and Contemporary Sources

Propaganda porcelain was the child of the October Revolution but it had several grandparents: first, the *lubok* (illustrated broadside), which existed in Russia from the seventeenth



fig. 2  
Sergei Chekhonin  
*Plate, Science Must Serve People, 1918.*  
Porcelain, 24 cm diameter.  
Private collection, London.

century onward; second, icons, which are not only objects of worship in the Orthodox Church but are painted to be “read” by the onlooker as pictorial commentaries on the Scriptures; and third, the Russian tradition of graphic design in newspapers and journals. The hundreds of satirical journals published during the two years following Nikolai II’s October Manifesto of 1905, establishing a limited freedom of the press, were very open and mordant in their criticisms of the government and of established institutions. This period was like an open university course for many artists, during which they acquired a civic consciousness and learned the importance and social significance of artistic endeavor. Chekhonin, Dobuzhinskii, and Kustodiev were all designing for satirical journals in the years 1905–7.

The contemporary sources of inspiration for propaganda porcelain were the Revolution and its heroes, past and present, and their ideas; Lenin’s Plan for Monumental Propaganda<sup>7</sup> as well as the agitprop campaigns; revolutionary posters and Rosta windows; and designs for the decoration of streets and squares for revolutionary festivities.

The same slogans and aphorisms that were appearing in wall newspapers and on posters and on some of the newly erected monuments could also be read on propaganda porcelain. Class struggle and the new revolutionary morality were important themes. Slogans often expressed an opposition of old and new. Extracts from speeches by or about Lenin provided a common source of inspiration, as did quotations from European utopian-socialist writers, revolutionary activists of many nationalities, and the *Communist Manifesto*. Texts were also taken from classical authors such as Ovid and Cicero, from Fedor Dostoevskii and Lev Tolstoi, even from the Gospels. Some artists placed their hope in “Labor, Science, and Art” as a means of reeducating the social consciousness of the masses, and this is reflected in their designs and maxims. The range of source material was paralleled by an equally wide range of treatment; each artist had favorite motifs and a characteristic manner of execution.

### **Propaganda, Symbolic, and Commemorative Pieces**

In 1918 a sculpture of Karl Marx in porcelain—possibly the first sculpture of Marx—was commissioned by the Soviet government and executed at the State Porcelain Factory by Kuznetsov. The same year Chekhonin decorated a series of plates with brief slogans: “He Who Is Not with Us Is against Us,” “Struggle Gives Birth to Heroes,” “The Mind Cannot Tolerate Slavery,” and “What Has Been Produced by Working Hands Cannot Be Swallowed by a Lazy Belly.” Chekhonin, who was a consummate graphic artist, managed to make every inscription look elegant: on the plate decorated with the slogan *Delo nauki sluzhit' liudiam* (*Science Must Serve People*, 1918, fig. no. 2), the stylized black letters circling the edge of the plate, interspersed with small, colorful flowers and leaves, are both powerful and appealing. His work, as already mentioned, was characterized by an attachment to the past as well as enthusiasm for the present and the future, and for different trends in art. Thus, we have Chekhonin’s depiction of the hammer and sickle plus part of a cog representing industry (the mark of the State Porcelain Factory) surrounded by very naïve field flowers and leaves (fig. no. 3), showing his attachment to folk art, followed by a plate known as *Kubisticheskii dizain s serpom i molotom* (*Cubist Design with Hammer and Sickle*, 1919, fig. no. 4). Chekhonin also designed various plates and platters with a red ribbon winding along the edges intended to convey the atmosphere of festively decorated streets with fluttering banners and streamers.

The banner that hung from the General Staff Arch in



fig. 3  
Sergei Chekhonin  
Plate, Blue Emblem with Flowers, 1918.  
Porcelain, 24.5 cm diameter.  
Private collection, London.

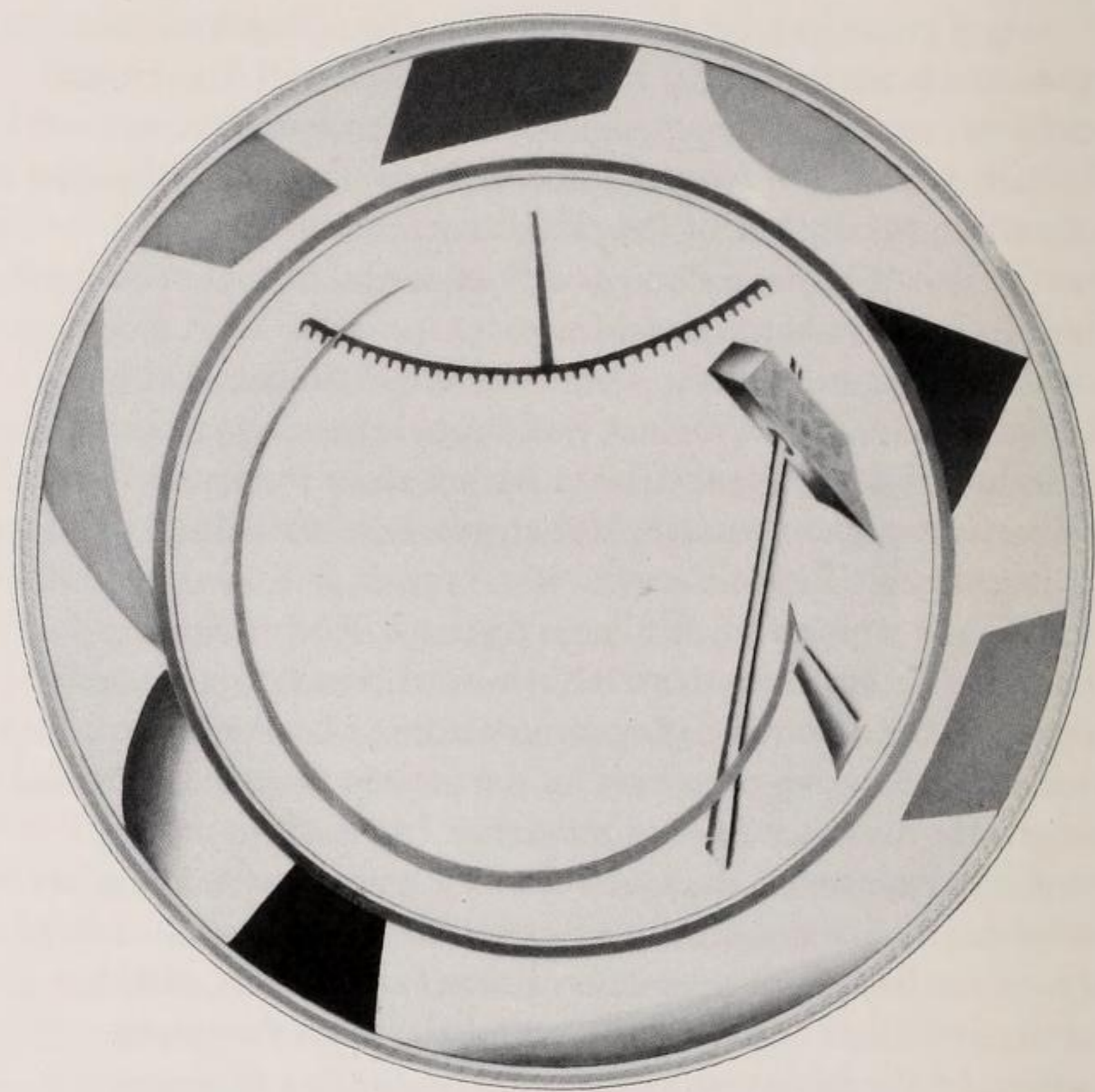


fig. 4  
Sergei Chekhonin  
Plate, Cubist Design with Hammer and Sickle, 1919.  
Porcelain, 25.8 cm diameter.  
Private collection, London.

Petrograd on the first anniversary of the October Revolution was reproduced in a green-and-red plate, *Zemlia trudiashchimsia* (*Land to the Workers*, 1919, fig. no. 1), designed by Al'tman. The green field incorporates a red rhombus containing a factory with tall stacks, a sickle, and an ear of wheat all painted in red, with the inscription, also in red, circling the edge. According to Al'tman's widow, the two colors were specifically chosen to represent the land and the workers. Everything was carefully thought out—the clear, strong lettering and the equal space and value accorded to the two colors.<sup>8</sup> The monumental style of the design emphasizes the importance and the essence of the theme. Several identical plates and a few watercolors and studies by Al'tman, supplemented by descriptions from contemporary witnesses, are all that remains as evidence of Al'tman's extraordinary transformation of Palace Square, the Winter Palace, and the General Staff Arch and Building on the first anniversary of the October Revolution (plate nos. 103–106). Russia was on the verge of collapse, yet Al'tman was allotted fifty thousand feet of canvas to mount Futurist constructions and designs on the Winter Palace walls and on the General Staff Arch. The Aleksandr Column was turned into a Futurist sculpture.

Al'tman also produced a famous portrait of Lenin drawn from life (he was one of the few artists allowed this privilege), which was included as one of the elements in the composition of the plate *Kto ne rabotaet, tot ne est* (*He Who Does Not Work Does Not Eat*, 1921, fig. no. 5) designed by Adamovich. In addition to Lenin's portrait it depicts ration cards, half an Imperial eagle, and a red star, accompanied by LENIN and RSFSR. Dancing around the border in multicolored letters is the slogan. This slogan is an adaptation of II Thessalonians 3:10—"if any would not work, neither should he eat"—and was incorporated into the Constitution of the RSFSR in 1918. It is interesting to note that in the prototype of this plate created in 1921, the red star of the Revolution is on top of the eagle, obliterating and crushing it. When copies of the plate were ordered, however, the factory artists obviously thought it a pity to cover up the eagle, so they painted the star underneath. One often finds such anomalies in agitprop porcelain.

Soviet heraldry acquired great importance in the decoration of art porcelain. An elegantly executed hammer and sickle on their own, or a hammer and sickle entwined with flowers and foliage, or RSFSR elegantly calligraphed and frequently adorned with flowers and gold, are often the only designs on plates by Chekhonin and other artists. The vast RSFSR, which stretched from Finland to the Bering Strait, was founded in November 1917, and was for five years the one and only republic; the USSR was established only at the end of December 1922. (An error frequently made by fakers of propaganda porcelain is to decorate a plate or a vase with USSR and the date 1919, 1920, or 1921.)

Adamovich made sketches for several colorful propaganda plates containing the emblems of the new republic complemented by revolutionary symbols and slogans. His best plates, however, are those depicting life in the Red Army, where he served during 1919–21 between two stints at the porcelain factory. He created several plates glorifying the Red Army on its fifth anniversary, and one plate (fig. no. 6) honoring Trotskii, the creator of the Red Army. Trotskii, second in importance only to Lenin as a leader of the Bolshevik Revolution, was defeated by Stalin in the power struggle that followed Lenin's death in 1924, exiled in 1929, and assassinated by a Stalinist agent in Mexico City in 1940. This plate survived in a collection in Paris.

In Western collections one often sees plates, figurines, or large dishes with the full-face portrait or profile of Zinov'ev—another subject that one never encounters in public or private



fig. 5  
Mikhail Adamovich  
Plate, *He Who Does Not Work Does Not Eat*, 1921.  
Porcelain, 25 cm diameter.  
Private collection, London.

fig. 6  
Mikhail Adamovich  
Plate, *Fifth Anniversary of the Red Army*, 1922.  
Porcelain, 24 cm diameter.  
Private collection, London.



collections in Russia.

Zinov'ev was one of Lenin's chief collaborators before and after the October Revolution. He returned with him to Russia in the famous sealed train in April 1917. A member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and of the Politburo, he was also elected chairman of the Executive Committee of the Comintern in 1919. During the summer of 1920 he presided at the First Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in Baku. This meeting was convened to organize the Moslem world against colonial imperialism, with 1,891 delegates—two-thirds of them already Communists and forty-four of them women—representing thirty-two nations ranging from Morocco to Manchuria. Several pieces of porcelain were designed to commemorate it (fig. no 7).

Zinov'ev reached the pinnacle of his power in 1923–24 as one of the triumvirate, with Stalin and Lev Kamenev, which prepared to take over after Lenin's death. But Stalin turned on the other two and had Zinov'ev stripped of power and expelled from the Party in November 1927. In 1936 Zinov'ev appeared as a defendant at the first show trial, was sentenced to death for treason, and was executed.

The celebration of the second anniversary of the October Revolution is the subject for several plates executed by Vil'de, an artist of the older generation who worked from 1906 until the mid-1930s in the Imperial/State/Lomonosov Porcelain Factory, eventually becoming head of the painting workshop. Vil'de's anniversary plates were always highly decorative. One of the best known has a cobalt-blue border decorated with leaves, flowers, and tools, beautifully executed in etched gold and oxidized silver. The cavetto is decorated with a red banner inscribed, in gold letters, "Victory to the Workers" and "25th Oct." Above the banner, also in gold, are the dates 1917–1919. When the oxidized silver blade of the sickle is rubbed clean the letters RSFSR appear.

Numerous plates were designed to celebrate May 1st, the workers' holiday banned under the czars. One such plate, oval in shape (fig. no. 8), has a design by Vil'de that consists of a bouquet incorporating pliers and a hammer entwined with a red ribbon. At the top of the plate are the words "We Celebrate while Working." At the bottom is the date May 1, 1920.

Fascinating from a historical and documentary point of view is the large *Podpisnoe bliudo* (*Signature Platter*, 1918–23?, fig. no. 9).<sup>9</sup> It is based on a design by Chekhonin that incorporates most of his artistic concepts. The center is painted with a magenta sunburst background emanating from a stylized sun enclosing the date 1917 and illuminating the part of the globe depicting Russia; it is framed by a hammer and sickle. Multicolored letters in the middle of the cavetto read "Autographs of the Architects of the Great Russian October Revolution." A twirling red ribbon and oak leaves circle the cavetto. (Oak and laurel leaves are traditionally reserved for heroes. The red ribbon derives from the design of the service for the Knights of the Order of St. Aleksandr Nevskii, from the Gardner Factory, commissioned by Ekaterina II in 1777 and completed in 1780.) The border is decorated with leaves and seventeen facsimile signatures. Clockwise from the bottom, they are the signatures of: Abel Enukidze, V. Iakovleva, V. Volodarskii, Zinov'ev, Trotskii, Moisei Uritskii, K. Eremeev, A. Riazanov, Nikolai Krestinskii, Lunacharskii, Vladimir Ulianov (Lenin), Georgii Chicherin, Aleksandra Kollontai, Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, S. Gusev, and S. Zorin. Between Uritskii and Eremeev there is an indecipherable signature (which some have read as Podbelskii). It is noteworthy that neither Nikolai Bukharin's nor Stalin's signature is included.

One of the signatories, Kollontai, was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and became People's Commissar for Social Welfare after the Revolution.



fig. 7  
Vasilii Timorev  
Plate, Congress of the Peoples of the East under the Presidency of Zinov'ev, 1920.  
Porcelain, 36 cm diameter.  
Christie's, London.

fig. 8  
Rudolf Vil'de  
Plate, We Celebrate while Working, May 1, 1920, 1920.  
Porcelain, 28 x 19 cm.  
Private collection, London.

She also became the first Soviet woman ambassador—indeed the world’s first woman ambassador in modern times—and, after brief postings to Norway and Mexico, was sent to Sweden (1930–45), where she was very popular. Kollontai liked propaganda porcelain and took several fine pieces with her to Sweden as gifts for government officials and personal friends. One of the items was a platter dated 1925, with a beautiful painting on it of Léon Bakst’s famous costume design for Vaslav Nijinsky as Iskander in the ballet *La Péri*. (The original costume design is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum, New York.) This platter was probably painted as a tribute to Bakst, who had died in Paris in 1924. There are several other platters at the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory Museum painted after Bakst costume designs.

A plate designed by Golenkina (fig. no. 10) is a good example of how Soviet artists drew upon themes from Russia’s past. The plate is decorated with a torch-bearing red rider on a winged horse, also red (the Revolution), flying over collapsing monuments (the past) which are in flames. Clouds of smoke billow upward. The winged horse and its rider are backed by golden rays. The border is circled with black letters proclaiming, in German, “We Shall Set the World Ablaze with the Fire of the Third International.” (A similar plate with the slogan in Russian can be seen at the State Historical Museum in Moscow.) The winged horse and its rider are Soviet adaptations of Il’ia Muromets, the peasant’s son on his flying horse. Though the old pagan religion was finally vanquished by Christianity in the Slavic countries, vestiges of it remained in Russian epic poems. Among the most popular of these is the series devoted to Il’ia Muromets, who, though a good Christian, is portrayed with a number of features apparently derived from the pagan god of lightning, Perun.<sup>10</sup> Golenkina also seems to have been influenced by Bilibin’s famous woodcut of this subject.

Other plates, drawing their inspiration from icons of St. George slaying the dragon (the triumph of Christianity over paganism), show a Red Army soldier, on horseback or on foot, slaying a dragon (the Revolution suppressing the counterrevolution).

Many Soviet propaganda plates have German inscriptions. There were various reasons for this. German was the language of Marx and was spoken by most international revolutionaries. In addition, German inscriptions may have been aimed at the Baltic states where German was the lingua franca. Lenin had hoped, moreover, for a German and European revolution. These hopes died after the failure of the November 1918 uprisings in Germany and the murders of the revolutionary heroes Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, both of whom appear on propaganda plates by Chekhonin. However, German continued to be used in propaganda for a few more years, perhaps because the unstable situation in Germany led the Soviet government to believe that Germans would be susceptible to Communism.

Numerous colorful plates and cups and saucers were painted by Shchekotikhina-Pototskaia, who also contributed many designs for plates that were executed by other artists at the porcelain factory. Shchekotikhina’s trademarks are exuberant colors and subjects from eternal Russia: peasants feasting, bell ringers, betrothal scenes, the sun and the moon, motherhood, Snegurochka the Snowmaiden, fishermen, and accordion players.

Shchekotikhina came from a family of Old Believers whose traditional crafts were icon painting, illumination of old books, and embroidery. Her studies and her trip through northern Russia in 1910, sponsored by her art school, deepened her love and knowledge of naïve, native Russian art forms. A trip to Paris in 1913, at a time when Sergei Diaghilev’s “Russian Seasons” were dazzling Parisians, further increased her



fig. 9  
Sergei Chekhonin  
Signature Platter, 1918–23?  
Porcelain, 54 x 38.5 cm.  
Christie’s, London.



fig. 10  
Alisa Golenkina  
Plate, We Shall Set the World Ablaze with the Fire of the Third International, 1920.  
Porcelain, 23.8 cm diameter.  
Private collection, London.



awareness that there was much to be proud of in her Russian heritage. Her familiarity with icons encouraged her to disregard perspective in her many fantastic compositions for porcelain. Her designs are full of energy and impetuous rhythm with exaggerated frontal figures and objects.

Occasionally she portrayed people of the new regime. *Progulka matrosa v Petrograde. I maia 1921 goda* (*The Sailor's Stroll in Petrograd, May 1, 1921, 1921*, fig. no. 11) shows a patriotically tattooed sailor of the Baltic Fleet strolling along a quay in Petrograd, arm-in-arm with his appropriately tattooed sweetheart." The background includes colorful sailboats on the Neva River and the former Stock Exchange Building (now the Central Naval Museum), flanked by the Rostral Columns—all well-known Petrograd landmarks. The columns were designed to act as lighthouses, and the gas-fired torches are still lit on special occasions. They are lit on this dish to mark the fact that the Civil War was over at long last, and Russia was at peace. This made the First of May, 1921, a very special celebration.

### Figurines

After the October Revolution, the State Porcelain Factory began producing sculptures reflecting the new reality. There was first a bust of Marx, in two sizes, by Kuznetsov (1918) and then *Krasnogvardeets* (*The Red Guard*, 1918), also by Kuznetsov. This defender of the people's state is the first Soviet sculpture in porcelain representing a man of the new epoch. It was Natal'ia Dan'ko, however, who became the acknowledged chronicler of the characters of the new Soviet era. She trained in the studios and workshops of four fine sculptors including Leonid Shervud, who had studied under Rodin. In 1910–11, Kuznetsov took her and another assistant with him when he went to Rome and Turin to oversee the final stages of the execution of reliefs and figures for the Russian pavilions at the *Esposizione internazionale di Roma* (*Rome International Exhibition*, Rome, 1911) and the *Esposizione internazionale d'industria e de lavoro* (*International Exhibition of Industry and Labor*, Turin, 1911). Thus, Dan'ko saw the monuments and statues of Rome, Florence, Venice, and Milan. In 1914, when Kuznetsov was appointed head of the sculpture workshop at the Imperial Porcelain Factory, Dan'ko went along as his assistant. From 1919, when Kuznetsov decided to leave Petrograd, until the factory was evacuated during World War II, she remained as head of the sculpture workshop.

Basing her work on the old folk traditions of Russian genre figurines, she set about creating figurines with contemporary relevance. Dan'ko's basic theme was the people in the street and in everyday life: men, women, and children, soldiers and sailors of the Revolution, bureaucrats, gypsy fortune tellers, and, later, cooperative farmers—a chronicle in porcelain of the first ten years of the citizens of the Soviet state. Dan'ko worked 313 months at the porcelain factory and created 311 works of art.<sup>12</sup> A dozen of the best-known and best-loved are: *Partizan v pokhode* (*Partisan on a Campaign*), *Matros* (*The Sailor*), *Matros so znamenem* (*Sailor with a Banner*), *Vyshivaiushchaia znamia* (*Woman Sewing a Banner*), *Militsionerka* (*The Militia Woman*), *Gadalka* (*The Fortune Teller*), *Rabotnitsa govoriashchaia rech'* (*Factory Woman Making a Speech*), *Mal'chik s krasnoi gazetoi* (*Newspaper Boy*), *Anna Akhmatova*, *Piatiletie Krasnoi armii* (*Fifth Anniversary of the Red Army group statue*), *Prodavshchitsa tsvetov* (*Flower Girl*), and *Khuligan s balalaikoi* (*Street Hooligan with Balalaika*). Then there is her amazing chess set, *Krasnye i belye* (*The Reds and the Whites*). This set was designed and produced in 1922–23 for exhibitions abroad. The Red king is a worker holding a sledgehammer, the Red queen a peasant woman holding a sheaf of wheat; the White king is a skeleton wearing a black cloak, the White queen a woman with a horn of plenty out of which gold pieces spill. The Red pawns represent busts



fig. 11  
Aleksandra Shchekotikhina-Pototskaia  
Plate, *The Sailor's Stroll in Petrograd, May 1, 1921, 1921*.  
Porcelain, 35.9 cm diameter.  
Gilman Paper Company Collection.

of peasants, each holding a sheaf of wheat and a sickle; the White pawns represent busts of slaves, wrapped thrice in black chains. The subject matter and the modeling are remarkable. Ideally, the pieces should be laid out on a red-and-white board. The chess set was shown and sold in Paris in 1925, and orders for it came in from as far away as Australia.

Another Dan'ko creation is a statuette consisting of two Soviet stevedores unloading sacks stamped AMERICAN MEAL USA and GOSTORG PETROGRAD RSFSR (Gostorg being the acronym for the State Trading Agency). The prototype of the figurine was created in 1922 and quite a few were produced. It is proof in porcelain and a surviving Soviet reminder of the generosity of the United States and the work of the American Relief Administration (ARA), which saved millions of lives in the RSFSR during the great famine of 1920–21 in the Volga region. A member of the Soviet government later wrote: "The people of the Soviet Union will never forget the generous help of the American people." The same government was to order the arrest of all Soviet citizens who had worked for the ARA on the grounds that they were potential spies.<sup>13</sup>

The famine, which claimed millions of lives, provided tragic subject matter for the porcelain artists. Plates and dishes were painted for a charity sale to raise money for the starving population. These items carried on the reverse a special mark designed by Chekhonin and painted by hand. It consisted of the State Porcelain Factory mark and the notations "1921" and "To benefit the starving," all in gold. There are apparently twenty-three pieces with this mark. The auction never took place and the pieces remained at the factory. Some were eventually sold. Three pieces with this mark can be seen at the Kuskovo State Porcelain Museum, near Moscow, and one at the British Museum, London.

### **Constructivist, Cubist, Suprematist, and Other Abstract Porcelain**

Most of the avant-garde artists in the RSFSR in the early 1920s created one or more designs for either the State Porcelain Factory or the Ceramics Faculty at Vkhutemas (the Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops) in Moscow. Many of these designs were never executed, as was the case with Liubov' Popova's Cubist composition for a cup and saucer. Aleksandr Vesnin created several designs for porcelain in Constructivist style, of which only one was executed—probably by a Vkhutemas student—on Dulevo ceramic. It is based on a design by Vesnin commemorating the Third International, and the sharp linear elements and gold-silver-and-black color scheme are characteristic of his work. Lebedev made Cubist designs for plates that were executed. Lapshin's tea service and plates decorated with an abstract pink-white-and-black design are well known abroad; examples of this service can be seen at both the Ludwig Museum in Cologne and the Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe. A single example exists at the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory Museum of a plate decorated with a design by Vladimir Tatlin, painted by Chekhonin. However, as it is based on a costume sketch for a protagonist in *Tsar' Maksimilian i ego nepokornyi syn Adolf* (*The Emperor Maksimilian and His Disobedient Son Adolf*), a folk drama produced in Moscow in 1911 and in St. Petersburg in 1912, it is arguable that it was not designed specifically to decorate porcelain. From 1927 to 1930, Tatlin was a teacher at Vkhutein (the Higher Artistic-Technical Institute) in Moscow; he taught in the Metalworking and Woodworking faculties and, in due course, in the Ceramics Faculty as well. Tatlin designed a milk jug meant to be used as a milk bottle for babies in the many collective nurseries that had sprung up. One of his students, Aleksei Sotnikov, later made a series of baby bottles and a tray in which they could be carried, ten at a time (plate no. 529).

Sotnikov joined the Dulevo Porcelain Factory, near Moscow, as a sculptor in 1934, and his sculpture *Sokola* (*The Falcon*) became the factory mark. Aleksandr Rodchenko created spherical black, red, and white designs for an eight-piece tea service in 1922. It was not executed during his lifetime.

Kandinskii made a few sketches for the decoration of porcelain in 1921 before leaving Russia for Germany. Three of these sketches are at the library of the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory. Others are in private collections in Moscow and in museum collections in France (at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris) and Germany.

Although Kandinskii designed for porcelain, he had a decorative as opposed to utilitarian conception of applied art. The cups and saucers with Kandinskii designs simply show characteristic, colorful elements from the pictorial imagery of his pre-Bauhaus period. They are not created with the curved surface of the cup in mind. Moreover, the designs for the saucers are for the center of the cavetto, rather than circling it, which means that the decoration is partly concealed when the cup is resting on the saucer. (Of course, in Russia many people drank from the saucer, and Kandinskii may have designed with this habit in mind).

(As Kandinskii did not paint on porcelain himself and, having left Russia, could not supervise the cups and saucers painted according to his designs, one wonders whether it is right to attribute them to Kandinskii. When the original artist has no involvement in the reproduction process, is the work still his?)

Early Kandinskii cups and saucers are extremely rare. There are none at the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory Museum. Contemporary exhibition catalogues show that a cup and saucer with a Kandinskii design were exhibited at the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung* (*First Russian Art Exhibition*, Berlin, 1922), and three cups and saucers with a Kandinskii design were exhibited at Stockholm in 1923.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1960s, a student of Rodchenko's, Zakhar Bykov, became director of the Stroganov School of Applied Art in Moscow and suggested that students in the ceramics section paint cups and saucers based on the designs of Kandinskii and of Rodchenko. Most Kandinskii cups and saucers in museums and in private collections date from this period, though they frequently bear an earlier date.

Malevich, founder and leader of the Suprematist movement, and two of his followers, Suetin and Chashnik, arrived in Leningrad from Vitebsk in 1922.

At the end of 1922, Al'tman and Shterenberg returned from the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung*, having learned that there was a tremendous interest abroad in Russian avant-garde designs and painting. They must have reported this to their colleagues at Izo Narkompros, which was in charge of exhibitions within the country and abroad and under whose aegis the State Porcelain Factory found itself. The result was that Malevich, Suetin, and Chashnik were asked, either by Nikolai Punin or by Chekhonin, to create some decorative designs for the State Porcelain Factory.

There were two kinds of ceramic design undertaken by these three artists. In the first, the complete object was rethought along Suprematist lines; in the second, Suprematist decoration was painted onto existing plates and cups and saucers of standard design.

Malevich designed a teapot that looks like a locomotive and some demitasse cups that are, literally, cups cut in half (plate nos. 185–186). The teapot is modeled in an ordered scale of cylinder and sphere to curve and of square to rectangle. Balancing the masses and thus achieving dynamic tension was one of the objectives of Suprematism. Though Malevich did not intend the teapot to be a functional object, but rather a

study of the interaction of forms, it is agreeable to handle and pours well.

Suetin designed another curious teapot, a milk jug, and a series of inkstands which look like a horizontal arkhitekton or spatial composition. The inkstands are cuboid in form and stand on a base made up of square and rectangular slabs laid on a quarter-circle. Sometimes they have a large standing disc at the back.

All these ideas were original and thought-provoking, but only a few such experimental pieces were produced.

Suprematists considered the color white—and therefore white porcelain—an ideal medium since it expressed weightlessness. To Malevich it also symbolized infinity. Onto this white background they painted their designs made up of red, yellow, black, and white triangles, rectangles, squares, and circles, which seem to interact and to float, defying the laws of gravity and generating a remarkable energy.

In 1920, in Vitebsk, Malevich wrote the text and made the lithographs for *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* (*Suprematism: 34 Drawings*), published in 1921. The album provided a survey and graphic paraphrase of his major Suprematist paintings of 1915 onward. Malevich never painted plates himself, but designs from the album were used by factory artists to decorate plates. The design on one such plate (plate no. 187) is the same as that of the lithograph entitled *Aeroplan letit* (*Airplane Flying*) in *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*. The oil painting of *Airplane Flying* (1915) is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Suetin and Chashnik made designs for the decoration of teapots, coffee pots, plates, cups and saucers and also painted on all these items themselves. Chashnik's 1923 design for a cup and saucer consisting of a black circle bisected by a red axial stripe was one of his most successful designs for porcelain. In the Central Lenin Museum, Moscow, there is another bold design by Chashnik for a platter with LENIN and a red square in its black cavetto (plate no. 146). It was designed to honor Lenin after his death in 1924 and ensuing deification, and reminds one of the sacred monogram IHS on church plates.

Most early Suprematist pieces were intended for export. Chashnik or Suetin would paint a prototype item which they signed or initialed, adding the word "Suprematism" and the number 474, as well as a black square within a square, the symbol of the followers of Unovis (the Affirmers of the New Art) and of Suprematism. These prototypes usually remained at the factory, or inside Russia. The factory artists would make copies to be sent to exhibitions and trade fairs abroad. The backs of the authorized factory copies are usually marked *po ris Chashnika* ("based on design by Chashnik") or *po ris Suetina* ("based on design by Suetin"). The entire 1922–24 Suprematist output probably consisted of less than one thousand items. It is what one might call first-edition Suprematism. Subsequent authorized repeats are in the same category as other later editions and should be considered as such. (The demand for Suprematist ceramics in recent years has caused many signed, posthumous pieces to appear on the market.)

Suprematism and its basic motifs were taken up by many artists working in ceramics in the late 1920s and early 1930s at the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory and at the Dulevo Porcelain Factory. Indeed, thanks to the fact that Suetin was art director at the Lomonosov Factory from 1932 to 1954, Suprematism gained a new lease on life there, when artists elsewhere had turned to Socialist Realism.

### Design Training

Experimental work and training was carried out at Vkhutemas, which had replaced the State Free Art Workshops in 1920. In 1927, the Moscow Vkhutemas became Vkhutein.

(Vkhutemas/Vkhutein workshops existed in both Petrograd and Moscow.) Experimental work also went on at the Central Artistic Ceramic Laboratory (1922–23), the Artistic Bureau of the State Experimental Institute of Silicates (1924–28), and the Commission for the Study of Ceramics at the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (1926–29).<sup>15</sup>

### Exhibitions Abroad

In 1921, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was launched. Diplomatic relations began to be normalized and foreign trade was encouraged. The Lomonosov Porcelain Factory was placed under the aegis of the Academic Center of Scientific and Artistic Institutions of the RSFSR. At the same time, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs reserved for itself the factory's entire output of artistic wares for five years. Services were ordered for the new Soviet embassies and hundreds of pieces were sent abroad to advertise the new regime and bring back desperately needed hard currency. The first exhibition of Russian porcelain abroad was, as mentioned above, at the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung*. The ceramics section included 125 plates, cups and saucers, and teapots. This exhibition went on to Amsterdam in 1923. Other exhibitions took place in Tallinn, Estonia (1923); Lyons (1923); Stockholm (1923); Paris (the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* [*International Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Art*, 1925]); Lyons (1926); Monza, Italy (1927); Paris (1928); New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Detroit (1929); Monza (1930); Leipzig (1930); Winterthur, Zurich, St. Gallen, and Basel, Switzerland (1931); and Vienna (1931). The pieces that did not sell in Paris in 1925 were sent to England, where they were sold at a shop in Hampstead called Fortunate Finds.

Propaganda porcelain was also sold in special state stores in Petrograd and Moscow. At first, the State Porcelain Factory had no store, but eventually it was decided to turn the former Kornilov Bros. porcelain store on Nevskii Avenue in Petrograd into a showcase for the factory. (The store is still selling Lomonosov Porcelain Factory wares today, at 63 Nevskii Avenue.) Despite their relatively high prices, all the items sold rapidly, fully recovering production costs. This caused Izo Narkompros to worry that propaganda porcelain was being bought by collectors and foreigners rather than by the workers for whom it was intended. A lively eyewitness account—by Elena Dan'ko—has survived of the store on what was then known as October 25th Avenue:

*Anyone who remembers the Petrograd of those years—the jagged wildernesses of its avenues and its deserted houses plunged into darkness and cold, their windows starred with the traces of recent bullets—will remember too the window-display of china on October 25th Avenue. There, on dazzling white plates, red stars glittered, the hammer and sickle shone with the dull gleam of gold on porcelain, and fabulous flowers were plaited into the initials of the RSFSR. There stood tiny porcelain Red Guards, sailors, and partisans, and new Reds and Whites chess sets sparkled. A large plate bore the legend, encircled by a garland of flowers: "We Will Turn the Whole World into a Blossoming Garden." Passersby would stop at the window and gaze long at the china. This china was a message from a beautiful future . . . This china went the rounds of the capital cities of Europe.<sup>16</sup>*

Today Soviet porcelain of the 1920s is being exhibited and collected not only in Russia and Europe but also in Japan and the United States. Whether featuring revolutionary slogans or Suprematist designs, these plates cause the viewer to notice and remember them, thus fulfilling the intentions of their creators.

## Notes

1. After the February Revolution of 1917, the Imperial Porcelain Factory was renamed the State Porcelain Factory. Still later, in 1925, it became the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory as a tribute to Mikhail Lomonosov, Russia's first great scientist and a distinguished man of letters. That remains its name today.
2. In Russia, the word "propaganda" has positive overtones analogous to those of "advertising."
3. Artists working at the State Porcelain Factory were also assured food rations. This was of crucial importance in the years 1919–21 in Leningrad, with inflation rampant and even rationed bread often unobtainable.
4. *Farfor pervykh let Oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii muzei, n.d.), p. 23.
5. A. Ephros and N. Punin, *S. Chekhonin* (Moscow: State Press, 1923), p. 7.
6. Eric Gollerbach, *La Porcelaine de la manufacture d'état* (Moscow: Mospetschat, 1922), p. 13.
7. In April 1918, Lenin announced a Plan for Monumental Propaganda for the towns and villages throughout the country, meant to inspire the people with the events and achievements of the Revolution. Statues were to be erected glorifying heroes of the Revolution as well as progressive scientists and writers.
8. Irina Al'tman, conversation with author, Petrodvorets, 1988.
9. This *Signature Platter* was bought at the State Porcelain Store in Moscow in 1923 by Captain Desmond Allhusen, Assistant British Agent in the Soviet Union. There are two other known examples of this platter, one bought by a French diplomat in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and the other bought by a British Labor Party lawyer at a store in Hampstead which sold Soviet agitprop porcelain. No one knows where the original is. Russian authorities on this period of porcelain have never seen such a platter in their country.
10. *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, introduction by Robert Graves (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Press, 1959).
11. The central composition of this plate, the sailor and his sweetheart strolling, was probably inspired by a well-known watercolor on the same subject, *Matros i milaia* (*Sailor with Sweetheart*, 1920), by Kustodiev.
12. Iu. M. Ovsiannikov, "Esli by Natal'ia Dan'ko vela dnevniki . . .," *Panorama iskusstv 6* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1983), p. 31.
13. Alex de Jonge, *Stalin and the Shaping of the Soviet Union* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), p. 140.
14. *Utställning av Modernt Ryskt Porcelain* ([Stockholm]: Alf. Olssons Konsthandel, [1923]), no. 13.
15. Lydia Andreeva, "Soviet Ceramics, 1917–1935," in David Elliott, ed., *Art into Production: Soviet Textiles, Fashion and Ceramics, 1917–1935*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, the Crafts Council of England and Wales, and the Ministry of Culture of the USSR (Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), p. 13.
16. E. Ia. Dan'ko, *Vvodnaia stat'ia k katalogu Gosudarstvennyi farforovyi zavod im. M. V. Lomonosova* (Leningrad: Gos. kontora spravochnikov i katalogov, 1938).

# The Great Utopia

*The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde,  
1915–1932*

*Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*

*State Tret'iakov Gallery*

*State Russian Museum*

*Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt*

G U G G E N H E I M M U S E U M

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