

## Russia – Modern Art

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## Moves to Modern Art

Ironically, having revolted from the Academy, The Wanderers by the 1890s were in control of academic teaching. They were remarkable for the persistent and deeply felt desire for social reform and improving the life of ordinary men and women: “*were not their intentions, despite all the criticisms that can and have been made of their work, vastly to their credit as artists and human beings concerned with the welfare and destiny of their fellow-men? (Bird).*” Their painting style remained conservative: The Wanderers works would have fitted in easily at official Academy and even French Salon exhibitions. Only the subject - of paramount importance to them – would have seen their works rejected by these official bodies. As academic teachers, they were an obstacle to technical developments in painting. They rejected French Impressionists as being trivial and unconcerned with the welfare of men. Thus, once again, developments in Russian art had to take place outside the Academy.

Isaac Levitan had used lively brushwork in his landscapes. Konstantin Korovin and Valentin Serov followed this trend and, according to Bird, rescued Russian art from the drabness of the academic style of The Wanderers. Victor Vasnetsov and Mikhail Nestorov were the other rescuers, and they also introduced new subjects to Russian art. These four artists travelled widely in Europe and were familiar with artistic developments. Impetus was added when European Modern Art was brought into Russia by The World of Art group through exhibitions and journals, thus vastly increasing its exposure not just to Russian painters, but also to collectors and the public.

**Konstantin Korovin (1861 – 1939)** studied at the Moscow School of Painting under Vasily Perov and while there became friends with fellow students Valentin Serov and Isaac Levitan. Konstantin was seconded to the Academy for a year but was disappointed in the teaching there. On returning to the Moscow School, he painted the Impressionistic work *The Chorus Girl*, for which he was scolded by his teachers. He spent two years in Spain and France and became devoted to Impressionism. *In Summer, Lilac* with a girl enjoying nature in warm sunlight was to become a favourite theme in Russia.

Korovin is best remembered for his Parisian night-time scenes, usually showing from above boulevards or squares crowded with people. This was a period when Parisian scenes were popular with French artists too.



Konstantin Korovin, *In Summer, Lilac*, 1895



Konstantin Korovin, *Paris at Night: Boulevard des Italiens*, 1908

### Valentin Serov (1865-1911)

Valentin Serov was the son of two well-known composers. His father died when he was a baby. His mother, passionate about art and quite wealthy, took him to Paris in 1871. In 1874 they were invited to live with Savva and Elizabeth Mamontov at Abramtsevo (more below); Serov's father had been a great friend of Savva. Valentin was given drawing lessons there by Ilya Repin who arranged for him to enter the Academy in St Petersburg at the age of 15.

Following his two scholarship years in Italy after graduating, Serov returned to Russia and produced a work which is regarded as one of his best: *Girl with Peaches*. Serov was not familiar with the French Impressionists, but this comes close to Renoir. It was painted at the happiest time of his life while at Abramtsevo and he made many preliminary studies. The *Girl* - Vera Savishna Mamontova, daughter of the Mamontovs - is bathed in sunshine and serenity. Serov had known Vera for much of her life and realised he asked too much in getting her to pose repeatedly;

*"All I wanted was freshness, that special freshness that you can always feel in real life and don't see in paintings. I painted it for over a month and tortured her, poor child, to death, because I wanted to preserve the freshness in the finished painting, as you can see in old works by great masters."*



Valentin Serov, *Girl with Peaches*, 1887

The sunlight diffuses the edges of peaches, chairs, the knife and the tablecloth, and softens their colours. In contrast, Vera's face is strong and clear, outlined by her hair and blouse, shining out with the freshness Serov sought. There are lots of textures surrounding Vera's head in the painting but they are softer. This formula – strikingly dominant face and a myriad of textures - is the basis of the portrait of Sarah Bernhardt by Jules Bastien-Lepage, who was one of Serov's favourite artists.

In 1889 Serov went with Levitan to the Universal Exposition in Paris. More than the Impressionists, he was struck by the bravura effects achieved in portraits by Anders Zorn, one of Sweden's greatest painters, (Scandinavian artists were held in high regard by St Petersburg society as fellow Nordic people) and the genre scenes of French rural life by Jules Bastien-Lepage. From this visit on, Serov's main pre-occupation was with portraits.



He favoured sombre colours. The fierce concentration as Rimsky-Korsakov mentally plays through the music he has written is emphasised by the strong, well-lit face and head (a repeat of Vera). His profile and right arm and hand are strengthened Vermeer-like (light against dark, dark against light). The glints on Rimsky-Korsakov's glasses and his piercing black iris show the composer's genius in being able to 'see' music.



Valentin Serov, *Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov*, 1898

Serov became popular – everyone of note clamoured to be painted by him. In the mid-1890s he exhibited with *The Wanderers*, but they objected to his style and technique. Serov was, however, deeply sympathetic to their aims. The use of artillery against demonstrators and to shell worker's districts, and troops firing into unarmed crowds (which Serov saw from a window at the Academy) prompted him to renounce the title of Academician awarded to him in 1898 and turn his back on the administration. (Repin, on the other hand, did nothing because he said he had no proof that it was the Tsar who ordered the action). Serov remained in high demand among the conservative and very wealthy nobility but his distaste was evident from his portraits. Princess Orlova, resplendent in silk dress and fur with a long chain of pearls, is depicted aloof and haughty; a symbol of Russian high society. She was best known for wearing hats and, mockingly, Serov crowned her with a huge one. Olga was very displeased with the portrait and lost little time in getting rid of it, donating it to the Alexander II Museum in 1912.



Valentin Serov, *Princess Olga Orlova*, 1911

In this and Serov's other portraits the influence on him of Anders Zorn and John Singer Sargent is evident. Serov had other influences. The novel viewpoint of Degas and the linear silhouette in the manner of Toulouse-Lautrec are clear in the portrait of the outstanding dramatic actress of the generation, Maria Ermolova, the tragedienne famous for her portrayals of Joan of Arc, Mary Stuart, Lady Macbeth and the heroines of Ostrovsky and Ibsen. Serov caught her austere grandeur in a portrait that looks like a monument. His later portraits are his best, and with artists he remained sympathetic.

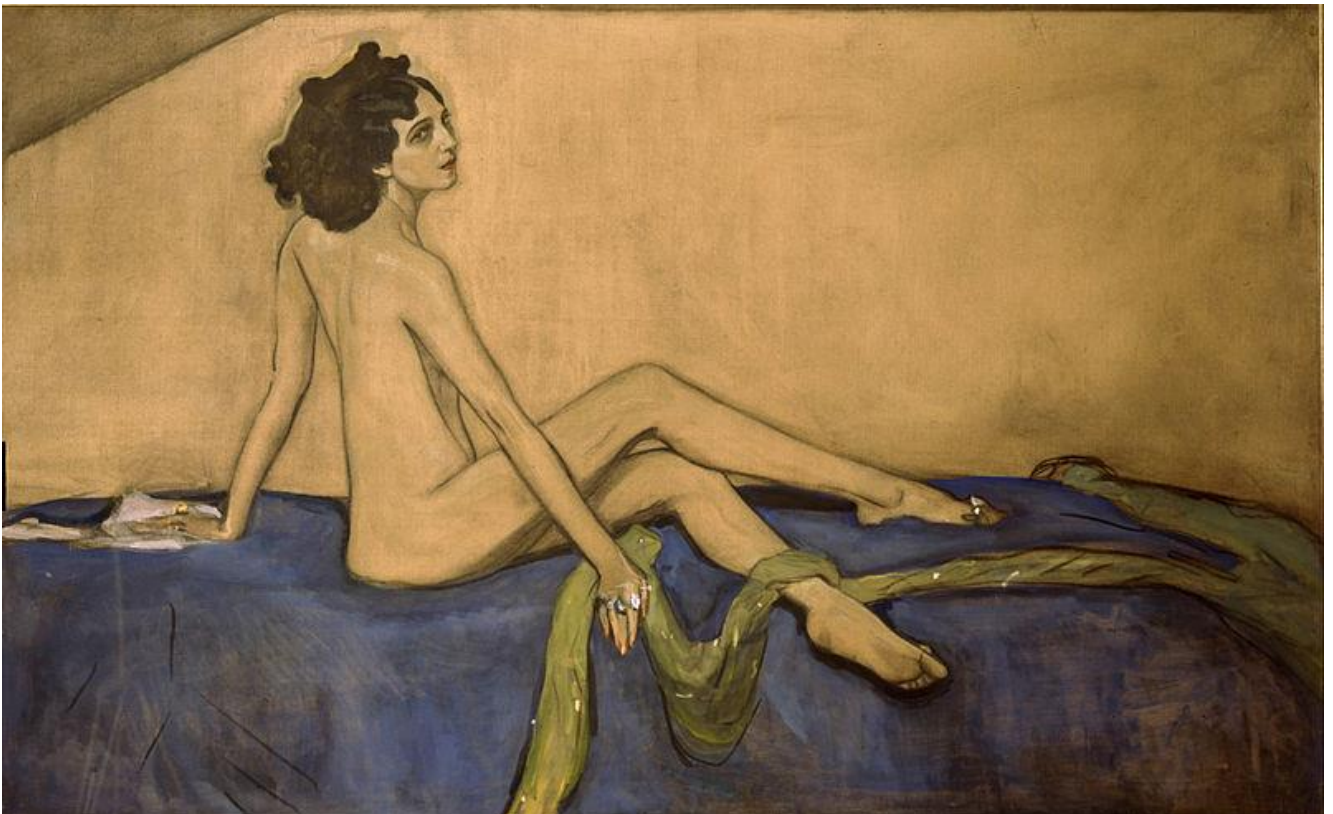
Towards the end of short his life Serov was influenced by Art Nouveau in his portraits. The most striking is of the ballet dancer Ida Rubenstein, famed for her Cleopatra and Scheherazade with the Ballet Russe (below). Serov was entranced; *"every move she makes is monumental; an archaic bas-relief come to life."* He emphasised her extravagance of manner and also her fragility, *"like a beautiful butterfly pinned to the surface (Sarabianov)"*. The portrait has the flatness of a mural and captures Ida's angularity and grace in a beautiful artistic contour. The allure is heightened by the tragic expression of her eyes and mouth in what Serov called her *"wounded-lioness look"*. Ida was an orphan of fabulously wealthy Jewish industrialists who decided to use money for an artistic career.



Valentin Serov, *Maria Ermolova*, 1905

She asked Fokine to teach her to dance – she lacked classical skills but her body language was unusually expressive. On 20 December 1908 (two years before Serov's portrait), in the main auditorium of the conservatory, she performed the *Dance of the Seven Veils* from Wilde's play *Salome* to music by Glazunov, casting aside the last veil to appear completely naked before the audience. Alexander Benois (section below) was most impressed, "to achieve her artistic aims she was prepared to test the limits of social tolerance and even decency – indeed, to go as far as to bare herself in public." Ida was wild. She later rented an enormous apartment in Paris where she kept all manner of wild animals, including a panther and a tiger.

Another portrait of a distinct style was that of Ivan Morozov - one of two art collectors who proved vital to the development of Russian modern art. Serov places the collector against a background of Matisse's *Fruit and Bronze* (1910). Matisse, as we shall see, was by this time already exerting a vital influence on Russian artists, but Serov was slightly unsettled, as he wrote to his wife; "I feel talent and nobility in Matisse, however, there is nothing joyful about him, and what is strange, everything else becomes boring." Serov died from heart failure the following year. He is regarded as the best Russian portraitist since Levitsky, but more importantly his various styles invigorated his country's art.



Valentin Serov, *Ida Rubenstein*, 1910





Valentin Serov, *Ivan Morozov*, 1910

### Viktor Vasnetsov (1848-1926)

Viktor Vasnetsov was important to Russian art for his subjects. His father was a rural Orthodox priest, an arduous vocation - only senior clerics lived comfortably. The regime realised this and arranged special primary education for the sons of priests, after which they attended a seminary for training so they could follow their fathers.

Vasnetsov was sent to a seminary at Vyatka (now Kirov) 500 miles to the northeast of Moscow. He was artistic – his grandfather was an icon painter and while at the seminary Vasnetsov worked in an icon shop. He abandoned the priesthood and travelled to St Petersburg and after help from Kramskoi, got into the Academy in 1868. Vasnetsov exhibited genre scenes (*The Village Shop*, *Moving Home*, *The People's Newspaper*, for example) with the Wanderers from 1874, but came to realise that such paintings were losing favour. It was in Paris that Vasnetsov turned to early Russian history and Russian fairy tales, starting with *Ivan Tsarevich Riding the Grey Wolf*, which he did not finish until 1889.



Viktor Vasnetsov, *Ivan Tsarevich Riding the Grey Wolf*, 1876-89

Many of Vasnetsov's well-known paintings are drawn from the fairy tale *Ivan Tsarevich, the Firebird and the Grey Wolf*. Each night a Firebird stole a golden apple from the king's tree. He promised half his kingdom and his crown to whichever of his two eldest sons could catch the Firebird. They each tried but fell asleep. The king's youngest son, Ivan, pleaded to be given the chance and he very nearly caught the bird, but managed only to snatch a feather – Ivan Bilbin, the famed illustrator and stage designer, depicted the scene (below) among his many illustrations for the fairy tale.



The Firebird escaped, but the king still longed to catch it. With the promise of kingdom and crown reiterated, the elder brothers saddled their steeds and set off to hunt down the bird. They came to a stone on which was inscribed that one road meant hunger and cold, the second the death of the horse, and the third the death of the rider. The brothers didn't like any of those choices and so returned home to lives of leisure. Ivan again pleaded to be given the chance. At the crossroads he decided to take the second road, whereupon the grey wolf enters the story – devouring the horse. Vasnetsov depicted a rider at the crossroads. Bilbin later used this composition (reversing it and adding a tree) in his illustration.

Many adventures ensue. Eventually, Ivan returns home with the Firebird in its golden cage, which Vasnetsov painted in *The Flying Carpet* (1880), and Princess Helen, whom he had rescued with the help of the grey wolf. His brothers kill him, steal the Firebird and claim their prizes from their father. Ivan, brought back to life in the nick of time by the wolf, takes revenge on his brothers and marries Helen.



Viktor Vasnetsov, *The Knight at the Crossroads*, 1882

Vasnetsov also drew inspiration from the epic poem *The Lay of Prince Igor* in which Igor is celebrated as the defender of Kievan Rus against the encroachment of the Mongol hordes. Alexander Borodin took the poem as the subject of his first opera, starting work in 1869 for a couple of years, and returning to it in 1874. Whether Borodin's interest inspired Vasnetsov is not clear. Borodin worked on *Prince Igor* for 18 years and the opera was incomplete on his death in 1887. However, a public performance of Borodin's chorus extolling Igor as he set out on his campaign was given in 1876. Igor had many successful campaigns against the Polovtsy who were fierce nomadic warriors of the Don River region, but the poem concentrates on his defeat in 1185. After leading his army deep into nomad territory, Igor was confronted with a large force. He and his officers could have fled on horseback but he refused to leave his soldiers. Only 15 escaped, the rest were killed. Igor was taken captive, and despite being guarded by 20 men, managed to escape. He lived until 1202.



Viktor Vasnetsov, *After Prince Igor's battle (The field of Igor Svyatoslavich's battle with the Polovtsy)*, 1880



Viktor Vasnetsov, *The Bogatyrs (The Heroes)*, 1898

An important work in Vasnetsov's fairy tale scenes is *The Bogatyrs*, depicting the three epic knights of Russian folklore. In the centre is Ilya Muromets, the embodiment of spiritual and physical power. The son of a farmer, Ilya suffered a serious illness as a child which left him unable to walk. At the age of 33 he was miraculously cured by two pilgrims and then was given super-human strength by a dying knight. Ilya defended Kievan Rus against the Golden Horde and is calm and majestic. Dobrynya Nikitich, on the left, is impulsive, furious and fiery. Alyosha Popovich, on the right, is noted for craftiness and agility, outsmarting foes with cunning, yet is deceptively simple and quiet in appearance. Their horses seem to share their characteristics; head up with flaring nostrils and mane flying, an obstinately lowered head and challenging eye, and the meek bowing from Alyosha's steed. The work is more decorative than others by Vasnetsov with patches of colour (red on the knights, various greens sweeping in the foliage), reflecting an interest in Art Nouveau.

### The Slavic Revival

Vasnetsov's subjects were popular with Slavophiles and made an important contribution to the Slavic revival which began in mid-century with academic studies by professors at Moscow University. Ivan Snegirev focussed on Russian proverbs, folk lore and pagan rites and Alexei Martynov examined ancient Russian architecture. They published frequently in the 1850s and 1860s. Dmitry Rovinsky published *History of the Russian Schools of Icon Painting* in 1856, which "*electrified the Russian art world (Grey)*" and sparked a series of scholarly studies.

The revival gained impetus in 1862 with the celebration of the millennium of the Russian nation. In 1852 Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow suggested that a Cathedral dedicated to St Vladimir should be built in Kiev for the 900<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conversion of Russia. Building work began in 1862. Internal decorations of mosaics and frescoes were intended to promote ancient religious art.

The revival included initiatives to reinvigorate crafts and folk art. Maria Yakunchikova, a painter and daughter of a rich German industrialist, founded craft centres in towns and rural areas. Wealthy patrons founded workshops on their estates. Among the more important of these were the workshops which Princess Tenisheva established in the 1890s on her estate at Talashkino, near Smolensk. But much the greatest impact on Russian art was made by the Abramtsevo colony. Savva Mamontov had made a huge fortune building the first major railways in Russia, linking Murmansk with the coal producers of the Donets Basin. In 1870 he and his wife Elizabeth bought Abramtsevo and its large estate, which had previously been home to many writers (Gogol being one). They were both interested in art, but it was Elizabeth who was the driving force. The Mamontovs wintered in Rome partly for their son's health and partly so they could visit studios and exhibitions. While there, the Mamontovs met Vasily Polenov and the idea of an artistic colony was raised. During stop-over in Paris on the way home in the spring of 1874, that they met Ilya Repin and with Polenov convinced him to move back to Russia. It was during this trip that the Mamontovs invited Valentin Serov and his mother to live with them at Abramtsevo. Thus began the life of the artistic colony, which was influenced by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement and Art Nouveau.

### **Symbolism**

#### Mikhail Nesterov (1862 – 1942)

At first sight, the works of Mikhail Nesterov, a deeply religious man ran in the same vein of mediaeval revival. He empathised with the nuns and hermits of medieval Russia. He frequently withdrew from society for long periods to religious houses in remote parts of Russia. *The Hermit*, a famous early painting, depicts a man deep in contemplation amidst nature untouched by human artifice. The serenity of the scene reflects the man's nature, and the sombre dark clothes contrast with his lively face. Nesterov realized "*that in this northern, simple nature, you somehow more clearly feel both the meaning of Russian life and the Russian soul.*"

Nesterov travelled widely in Europe, where he was influenced by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and also the Art Nouveau movement. *Taking of the Veil* reflects these influences.



Mikhail Nesterov, *The Hermit*, 1889



Mikhail Nesterov, *The Taking of the Veil*, 1898



Mikhail Nesterov, *The Child Bartholomew's Vision*, 1889

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century Bartholomew, later St Sergius of Radonezh [see Early Centuries under Icons], struggled with letters as a boy despite being intelligent. He was given a piece of holy bread by a spiritual elder and from then on could read. This event was interpreted as an angelic vision. Nesterov depicts the angel (with halo) as a strong presence, reinforced by the ancient oak tree, whereas Bartholomew has the same frailty as the young trees behind him and the budding flowers at his feet – which also have the great potential. The folding icon case and the distant church are symbols of the youth's future attainments; St Sergius and St Seraphim of Sarov became the most celebrated saints in Russian Orthodoxy. Nesterov painted a series of works on St Sergius' life. The mysticism and poetry of his art, most notably *The Vision* made him “undoubtedly the instigator of the tentative stirring of Symbolism in Russia (Bird)”.

On the eve of the Revolution, Nesterov's painted the double portrait of close friends Father Pavel Florensky and Sergei Bulgakov. Florensky was a polymath - leader of Russian Symbolism, philosopher and also a physicist who worked in electro-dynamics. In 1933 he was sent to one of Stalin's labour camps, eventually being condemned to death and executed in December 1937.

Bulgakov, a Marxist who became religious, ordained as a priest just after this picture was painted. He prophetically predicted the degeneration of the atheistic Soviet state into a despotic regime with the cult of the leader. Bulgakov explained that Nesterov aimed for; “*not just a portrait of two friends... but a spiritual image of the era as well. Both faces expressed the same insights, only differently; one of them saw a horror, and another - peace, joy, triumphant breakthrough.*”



Mikhail Nesterov, *The Philosophers*, 1917

Nesterov himself was imprisoned for some months and later in life concentrated on the safer genre of straight portraiture, some examples of which are included in the next chapter. Nevertheless, Nesterov's legacy remained his pre-Revolutionary spiritual works which sparked the development of Symbolism.

#### Mikhail Vrubel (1856-1910)

“*The transition from Mikhail Nesterov's mystical religious pictures to art as symbol was accomplished by Mikhail Vrubel (Hamilton).*” Vrubel, son of an army general, was highly educated; graduating in law from St Petersburg University and travelling to France and Italy before entering the St Petersburg Academy in 1880. Vrubel had a true artistic nature – not at all cowed by authority nor interested in public opinion. He rejected the aims of The Wanderers. After seeing their exhibition in 1883 in Kursk which featured Repin's *Easter Procession Kursk* [see previous chapter], Vrubel wrote to his sister in disgust;

*“the artist should not become a slave of the public; he himself is the best judge of his works, which he must respect and not lower in significance to that of a publicity stunt ... to steal that delight which differentiates a spiritual approach to a work of art ... is to deprive man of the best part of his life.”*



Vrubel struggled to sell the art he produced while at the Academy and often left pieces unfinished. He was recommended to Adrian Prakhov for the restoration of murals at the ancient church of St Cyril in Kiev. To prepare for this job Vrubel travelled to Venice where he was struck particularly by the brilliant colour of the mosaics and stained glass at St Mark's Basilica. These influences quickly became clear in Vrubel's paintings; first in *Girl against the background of a Persian Rug* (1886) and then in one of his most famous works, *Demon Seated*; rendered largely with a palette knife which creates a crystalline effect in the flowers, and throughout there is a myriad patchwork of colour, creating a flat ornamental effect.



Michael Vrubel, *Demon Seated*, 1890

*Demon Seated* was painted after a period of poverty and mental anguish. Finishing at St Cyril's in 1885, Vrubel failed to find work in Odessa and was given only small tasks under Vasnetsov at St Vladimir's in Kiev. He was often unable to afford oil paints. Vrubel was saved by being introduced to Savva Mamontov in 1890. Through Savva's contacts Vrubel was included in a group of artists (which included Repin, Shishkin and Aivazovsky) to illustrate a two-volume publication to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mikhail Lermontov's death. This was somewhat coincidental as, during the difficult years in Kiev, Vrubel had been drawn increasingly towards Lermontov's narrative poem *The Demon*, in which an angel cast out from heaven unexpectedly falls in love with Tamara.

Vrubel illustrated *The Demon* for the golden jubilee publication in black watercolour – *The Demon and Tamara* opposite being an example. While working on the illustrations, Vrubel painted *Demon Seated*, an image of the Demon at the start of Lermontov's poem, desolate, despairing but still a diabolic force. Vrubel wrote to his sister in May 1890 describing the Demon as; “a spirit which unites in itself the male and female appearances, a spirit which is not so much evil as suffering and wounded, but withal a powerful and noble being.”

*The Demon* was an important image for him. Mirroring the Demon's fate in the poem, Vrubel's later years saw increasingly poor mental health, with frequent breakdowns and confinements in lunatic asylums in which he spent the bulk of the last ten years of his life. His depictions of *The Demon* follow this progression; the spirit sorrowful and hostile soaring above the earth, a glowering angry head and finally a crushed defeated being.



Mikhail Vrubel, *Demon Cast Down*, 1902

The work again is flat and decorative; wings broken beside a head wearing a pink crown, the body surrounded by peacock feathers. The peaks are based on photographs of the Caucasian mountains which Vrubel was insistent on obtaining for this work, but rendered in intense colours. Vrubel's Demons demonstrated that artist's life and art were inseparable. Contemporary Symbolist poets Alexander Blok and Valery Bryusov particularly admired this.

Vrubel fell into depression in 1895, but was rescued from this despair when asked to produce the theatrical designs for the Russian premiere of the opera *Hansel and Gretel*. Attending a rehearsal, Vrubel immediately fell in love with Nadezhda Zabela, who sang the role of Gretel's little sister. Despite being broke (and Nadezhda knew this: "*Vrubel drinks, is very erratic about money, and has an irregular and unstable income*" she said to her friend), Vrubel proposed and the couple were married within six months. This marked a period in which Vrubel designed theatrical costumes and settings for Nadezhda, for whom Rimsky-Korsakov (who fell in love with her too) wrote a series of arias. She appeared in his *Sadko* and played the Swan Princess in the premiere of his opera of Pushkin's *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*. Vrubel designed the costumes and painted a portrait of his wife in the role.

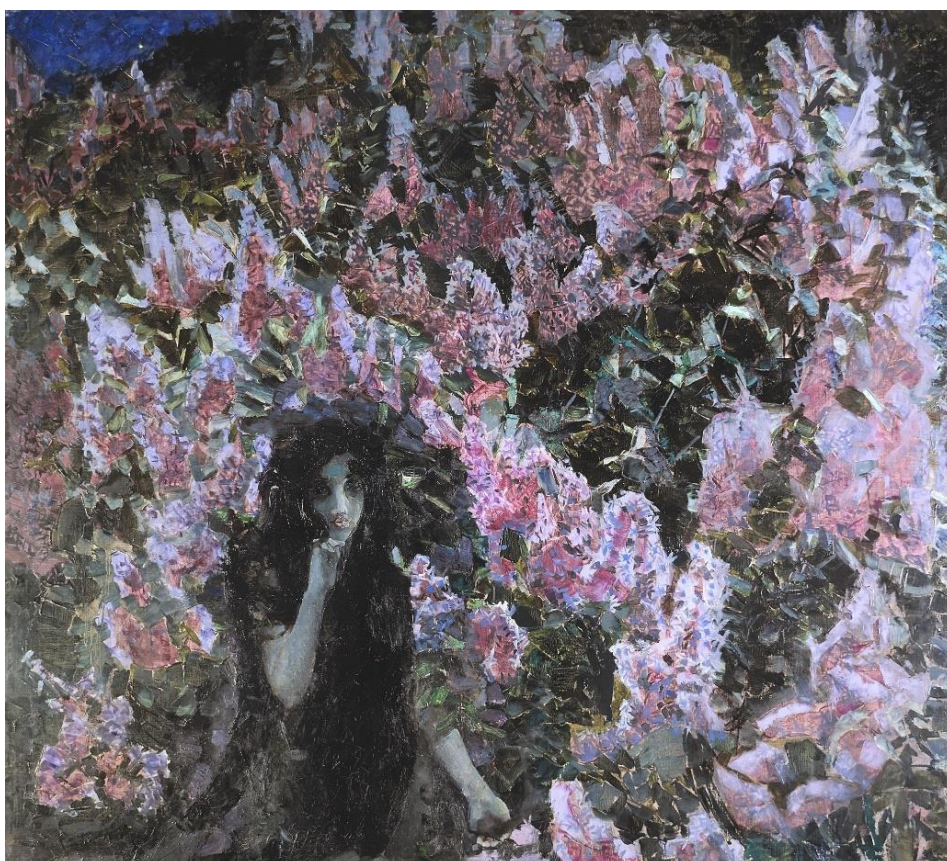


Mikhail Vrubel, *The Swan Princess*, 1900

This was Alexander Blok's favourite painting. The swan symbolises inspiration which can elevate the soul but may also bring knowledge of dark mysteries. Vrubel captures the moment of transformation which adds to the duality of meanings so beloved by Symbolists, and another reason why the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian poets admired him as a forerunner of their new movement. This duality also marks his painting of *Pan*. The Greeks loved Pan as a cheerful god, inventor of music and friend of nymphs, but feared him as the inspirer of terror (panic) in those who disturbed his peace. Vrubel depicts Pan as the Russian symbol of the forest and nature. The god seems to be growing out of a stump and some of his features appear wood-like. Pan is a poet listening to the sounds of nature which he will translate for his pipes, but his power is evident in his piercing blue eyes.



Mikhail Vrubel, *Pan*, 1899



Mikhail Vrubel, *Lilac*, 1900

Vrubel's interest in nature in Pan continued in a series of flower painting. In *Lilac*, Vrubel shows his preference for what Sarabianov calls the boundary between the real and the fantastic: under moonlight, a dryad the soul of a lilac bush, appears. Again, the paint is applied with a palette knife to give the effect of a mosaic. From 1902 Vrubel's mental illness worsened, and the death of his young son in 1903 was a grievous blow. Vrubel died in 1910. Blok gave the funeral oration calling the artist the "messenger of other worlds." It would be a mistake to label Mikhail Vrubel simply as a Symbolist: art historians regard him as much more important than this: Hamilton: "Vrubel was a member of that small group of masters who did so much, often with great pain and sacrifice, to create conditions of much modern art, Munch in Norway, Klimt in Austria, Beardsley in England, Toorop in his early work in Holland and Gauguin in France" is echoed by Bird (who names the same artists), "Vrubel belongs to the restless, unhappy men, ceaselessly striving to express their inner selves, adrift in the wild seas of their own warring emotions."

#### Victor Borisov-Musatov (1870 – 1905)

Victor Borisov-Musatov was, with Vrubel, the creator of the Russian Symbolist style, which in their hands tended towards melancholy, nostalgic longing, even pessimism. He was the son of an ex-serf who worked on the railway in the Volga city of Saratov. After showing promise in the drawing classes at Radishchev Museum, Viktor was enrolled in the Moscow School of Art but was dissatisfied with the teaching there and also at the St Petersburg Academy to which he transferred in 1891. Attracted by Symbolism in Moscow, he left for Paris in 1895 to work in the studio of Gustave Moreau. He admired Puvis de Chavannes, and during his four years in Paris established "his fascination with the past, in the style of the 1830s, remained a constant characteristic – not a specific moment but simply the past gone for which he ever seems to grieve (Gray)." Victor was regarded as melancholy – understandable perhaps as he suffered an horrendous accident as a child which crippled his spine. Like all sensible chaps, he believed in the redeeming power of women. In *Self-Portrait* he and his sister appear self-absorbed but somehow feel linked.



Victor Borisov-Musatov, *Self-Portrait with Sister*, 1898

When Borisov-Musatov returned to Russia he was dismayed with the grim dirtiness of industrial development, which only strengthened his taste for the past. He returned to Saratov where a landowner gave him an abandoned park with a derelict house, whose white colonnades and rounded domes often appear in his works. *Phantoms*, painted thinly with the coarse-grained canvas appearing beneath, seems a symbol of the fragility of the longed-for gentler times.

In his most famous work, *The Pool*, Victor establishes the Russian Symbolist blue. His sister and his wife seem to be souls in tune with each other and their surroundings (Sarabianov). Blue stands for spiritual harmony, the water of the untroubled pool and transcendental freedom. As we shall see Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky also saw heavenly harmony in blue too.



Victor Borisov-Musatov, *Phantoms*, 1903



Victor Borisov-Musatov, *The Pool*, 1902-3

## Blue Rose Group

Following Borisov-Musatov's premature death from a heart attack, Sergei Diaghilev (who was an admirer) arranged a retrospective exhibition of his work in 1906 which did much to inspire the Blue Rose group.

### *Pavel Kuznetsov (1878-1960)*

The leader of the group, Pavel Kuznetsov, was, like Viktor, a native of Saratov and had exhibited there in 1904. The group was much more optimistic than Vrubel and Borisov-Musatov. Figures in his works appear to be emerging from deep sleep, struck with wonder at the mystery of life. Water appears frequently in the Symbolist works of the group. Kuznetsov's *Blue Fountain* is a symbol of the cycle of life, with women as the source of eternal birth.



Pavel Kuznetsov, *Blue Fountain*, 1905

Art critic Sergey Makovsky wrote in his essay *Blue Rose* (1907) Kuznetsov's works are; *"alluring visions which lead us into a world of airy forms and misty outline ... visions in tones of pale blue, matt peaceful tones, of trembling other-worldly silhouettes, transparent stems of mystical flowers bathed in the early light of day. On everything there lies the breath of things untold, of things grasped by dim premonition."*

Kuznetsov went to see the retrospective exhibition of Paul Gauguin's work in Paris in 1906, which re-awakened his childhood fascination with the nomadic tribes from the Volga and beyond. He had often dreamed of joining them, and his paintings symbolise his feeling that *"the spirit of the Orient preserved certain fundamental principles of humanity which had disappeared in the West (Sarabianov)."* People are united with the land and sky. The Kyrgyz nomads in these paintings lack any ethnic detail so appear as universal figures suggesting that everyone can be content and secure in nature



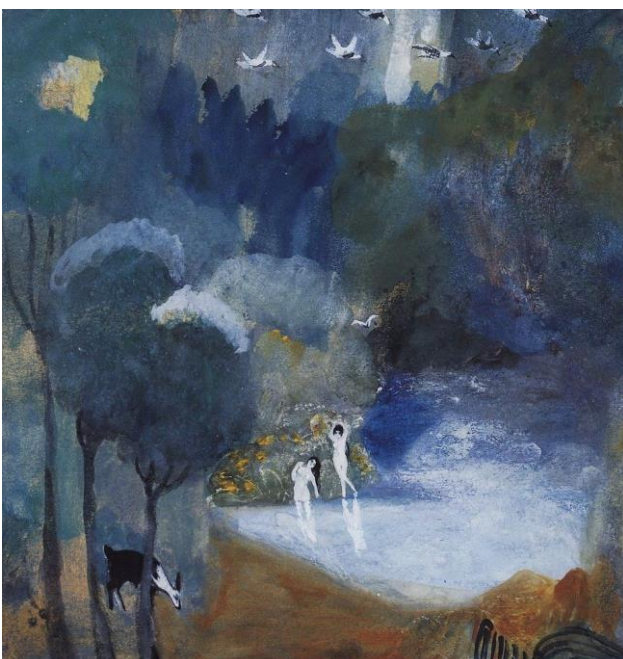
Pavel Kuznetsov, *Sleeping in Koshara*, 1911



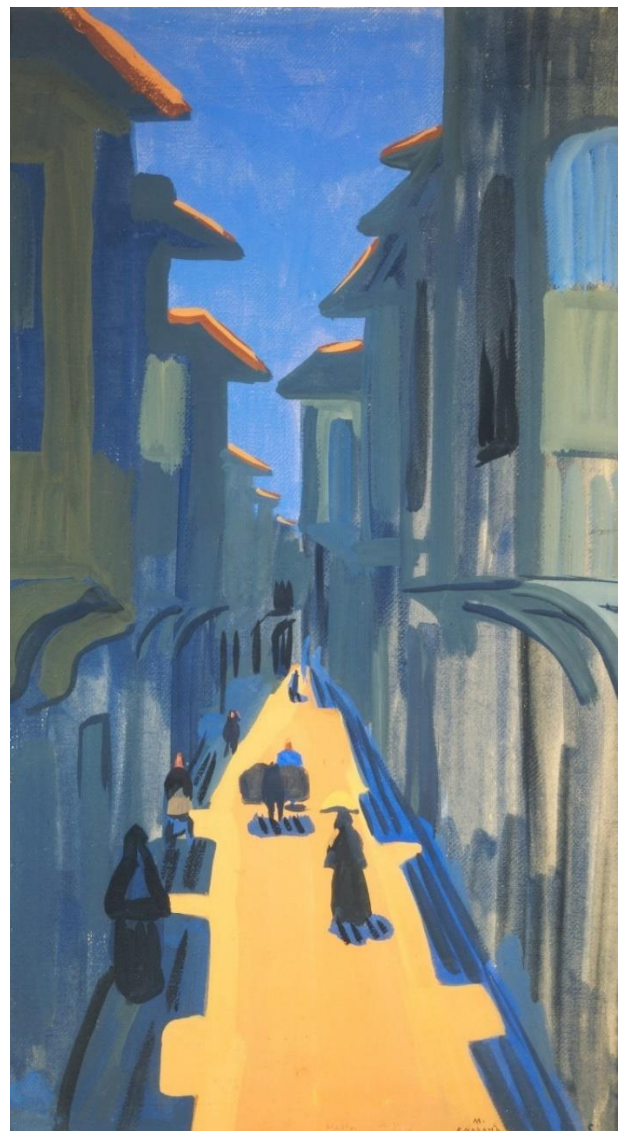
Pavel Kuznetsov, *Evening on the Steppe*, 1911

*Martiros Saryan (1880-1972)*

The Armenian Martiros Saryan followed a similar route in his art. *Fairy Lake* is a typical Blue Rose work; two girls enjoy their bathing accompanied by animal and birds. Saryan's art changed after a trip to Turkey, Egypt and Persia, in much the same way as Kuzentsov's after Paris. *Constantinople Street* uses much bolder colours and shapes, and immediately transports us to the blazing heat of the city in which life on the street is melted to a slow rhythm, stifled by the tall buildings. Saryan captures the essence of life in Egypt together with national symbols.



Martiros Saryan, *Fairy Lake*, 1905



Martiros Saryan, *Constantinople Street: Midday*, 1910 (tempera on cardboard)





Martiros Saryan, *Date Palm: Egypt*, 1911 (tempera on cardboard)



Martiros Saryan, *Walking Woman*, 1911 (tempera on canvas)

Saryan was the painter of Armenia, producing many boldly-coloured works depicting the landscape and life of his native country. The oriental paintings of Kuznetsov and Saryan sparked an interest in Russian artists. **Nikolai Roerich (1874-1947)**, a pupil of Repin, painted a series of pictures dedicated to Russia's past – *Overseas Guests* (1902) being the most noted - but his art also changed after an international trip. An expedition to Central Asia in 1923 prompted him to found a scientific research institute in India to study the Himalayas. Much of his remaining career was devoted to the subject.



Nikolai Roerich, *Remember!* 1924

The art of Kuznetsov and Saryan was heavily influenced by Gauguin and Matisse, which leads us into the explosion of modern art which occurred in Russia in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was founded on the exposure of modern European art movements to every Russian artist (and the public) through exhibitions and collections.

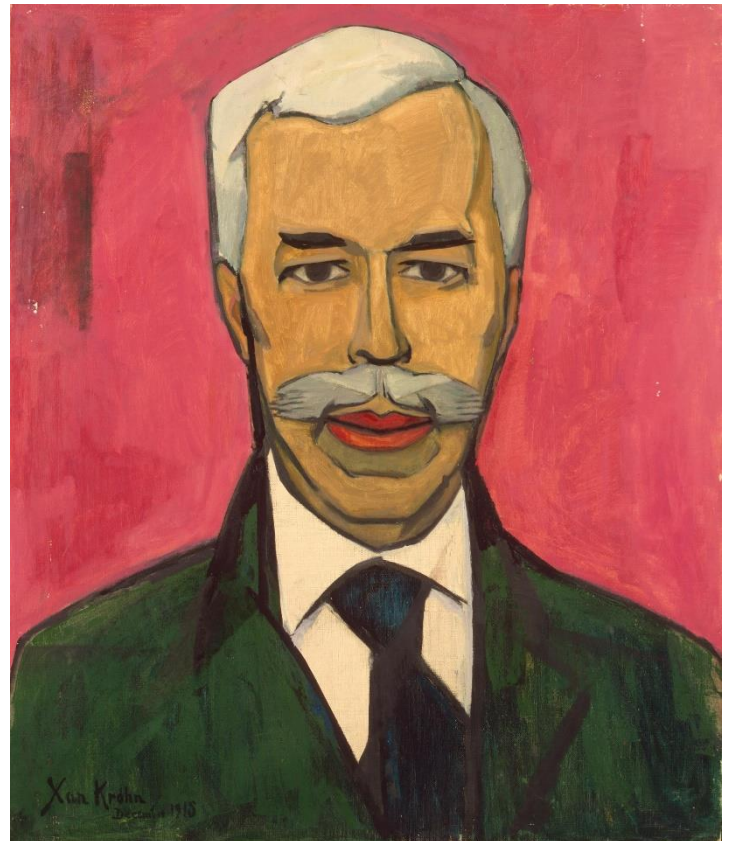
## Modern Art

### World of Art

The World of Art group originated in a student society formed in the late 1880s by Alexandre Benois in a private college in St Petersburg. They believed art was a medium of beauty and considered The Wanderers provincial and barbarous. Leon Bakst was the first professional artist to join the group, after his 1889 graduation piece for the Academy was rejected by the jury who drew a huge cross on the work in crayon. The World of Art group wanted Russia to contribute to European culture and its *"importance, both in the cultural and artistic field cannot be over-estimated (Rice)"*. The group wanted to familiarise Russian artists with French, German and English ideas. Not simply to adopt them, as the Westerners wanted, but to ensure students had a complete education, which they weren't getting from the Academy. The Academy's conservatism rejected Filipp Malyavin's graduation piece, *Laughter (1898)*, which one year later won a gold medal at the Paris Exposition. The group also encouraged the revived interest in national culture. World of Art was astonishingly successful – within 15 years Russian artists would not just be integral to the development of avant-garde culture in Europe but would be leaders, notably in pure abstract art and ballet.

From 1895 World of Art put on regular exhibitions of Western art under the impetus of Sergei Diaghilev. He also started the *World of Art* magazine, which ranged across European modern art. The last numbers in 1904 were devoted to Bonnard, the Nabis, Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cezanne – the first time Russian art students and the public had been introduced to these masters. World of Art exhibitions continued until 1922 and other magazines followed (notably *Golden Fleece 1906-9*). Aside from educating Russian artists, a major consequence of the group's work was to promote the collection of modern art by wealthy citizens. Two in particular were vital to the growing familiarity of modern art to the Russian public and student artists.

**Sergei Shchukin** started collecting in 1897, buying a Monet's *Lilacs in the Sun (1872)*. By 1904 paintings by Sisley, Renoir, Degas, Monet, Manet, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Nabi, Derain were on the walls of his large Moscow house which was open to the public on Saturday afternoons. His portrait (right) was painted by Norwegian artist Xan Krohn who came to Russia in 1905 and was a member of World of Art. Shchukin met Matisse in 1906 and became an important patron, commissioning *Dance and Music* in 1908 which Matisse travelled to Moscow in the winter of 1911 to install, alongside other works by him, in the Matisse room in Shchukin's house.



Matisse, who was impressed by Russian icon and folk-art (*"It was looking at icons in Moscow that I first understood Byzantine painting"*), introduced Shchukin to Picasso in 1908 and the collector bought over 50 early and Cubist works from the Spanish artist. The second important collector was **Ivan Morosov** (portrait above). His collection of 135 paintings featured Cezanne, Monet, Gauguin and Renoir. The World of Art initiatives and these collections provide the foundation for Russian modern art. But before moving on to that, mention must be made of another artistic contribution from the group; Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russe.

## Ballet Russe

Here Savva Mamontov was the innovator. After summer activities at Abramtsevo came winter gatherings at his large Moscow house where he hosted readings of fairy tales which were followed by little pageants. By 1881 these had turned into full blown theatrical productions for which Isaac Levitan, Konstantin Korovin and Nicholas Roerich helped Victor Vasnetsov design sets, backdrops and costumes. These productions culminated in Mamontov's *Private Opera* which opened in 1883 with Rimsky-Korsakov's adaptation of Alexander Ostrovsky's 1873 play *The Snow Maiden* with stage sets and costumes produced by Victor Vasnetsov. *Private Opera* ran until 1903, introducing Mussorgsky, Borodin and Glinka to Moscow's public, and throughout used professional painters to design décor, stage sets and costume. By the early 1890s the Imperial Theatre had to accept this popular idea. Nicholas Roerich joined World of Art and together with Leon Bakst produced sets for Sergei Diaghilev, who was employed by the Imperial Theatre to revolutionise its performances. However, Sergei soon fell victim to internal politics and was dismissed. Thus, in 1906 he brought Ballet Russe to Western Europe.

**Leon (Lev) Bakst (1866-1924).** Sergei Diaghilev's Ballet Russe revolutionised how ballet was presented in all its aspects, including music and style of dance – a prominent critic said, “*we are truly witnessing the birth of a new art.*” Particularly stunning was the way “*sets and costumes were coordinated and integrated into the visual spectacle.*” Lev Bakst was responsible for this. His sets were spectacular with vibrant colours and lavish use of material. Nijinsky and Ida Rubenstein were lauded for their work in the 1910 performance of *Scheherazade* but the real star of the show was Bakst with his set. The following year he produced amazingly natural scenes for the performance of Debussy's *Afternoon of a Faun*. Bakst's costumes were graceful and astonishingly erotic, and it was the 1909 Ballet Russe performance of *Cleopatre* that launched him and Ida Rubenstein. Even when the performance of the ballet was not particularly notable, it was Bakst's costumes that were remembered. Such was the case of *Narcisse* in 1911. Diaghilev would use many artists to design sets and costumes - Goncharova, Matisse, Picasso (many times) – but no-one surpassed Lev Bakst. Contemporaries called him “*the first tailor of Europe.*”



Lev Bakst, Sketch for stage set for *Scheherazade*, Ballet Russe, 1910



Lev Bakst, Sketch of Stage set for *Afternoon of a Faun*, Ballet Russe, 1911



Leon Bakst, costume for *Cleopatre*, (danced by Ida Rubenstein), 1909



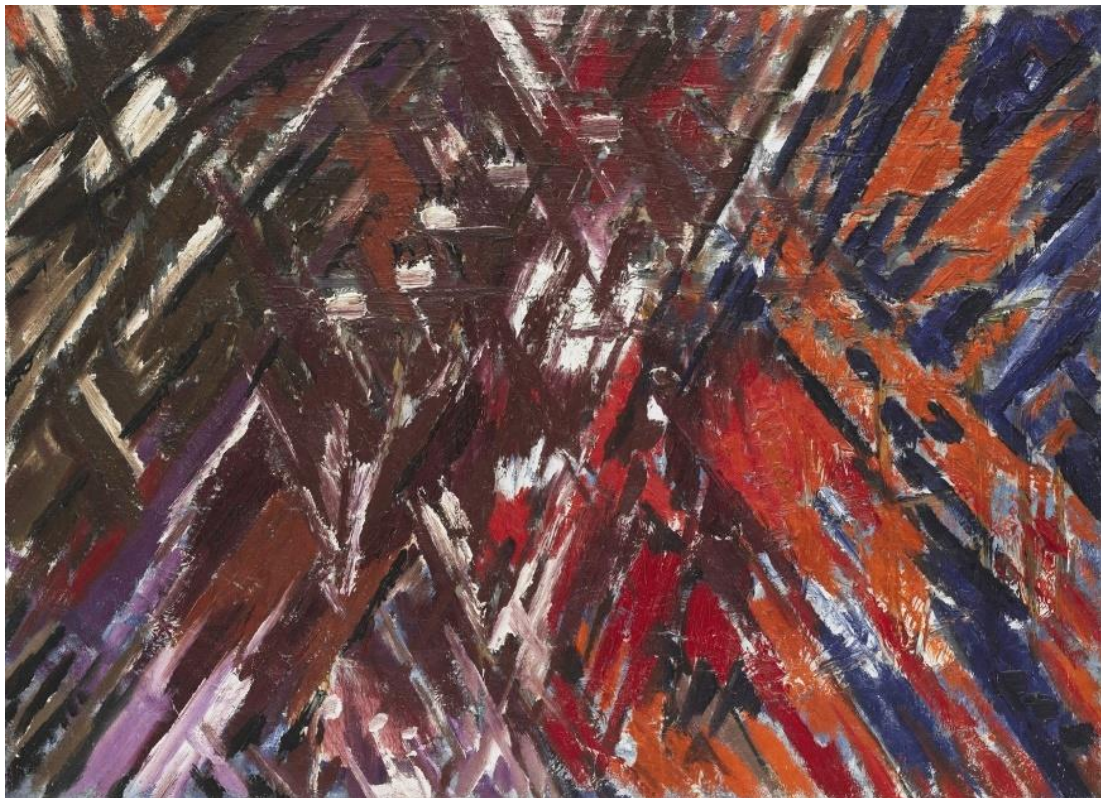
Lev Bakst, costume for *Narcisse*, 1911

## Primitivism, Rayonism and Cubo-Futurism

Cezanne, Gauguin, Picasso and Leger had immense influence on Russian artists but Matisse was king. His Fauvist colour, flat surface and the simplicity of forms was very close to Russian artists' revival of folk art and icons; Primitivism. **Mikhail Larionov (1881 – 1964)** was born in a provincial town on the border of Ukraine and Poland, to which he returned every year for summer holidays. His paintings are child-like and very similar to peasant *lubok*. Hairdressers appear frequently but a street scene was his first primitive work.



Mikhail Larionov, *Walk in a Provincial Town*, 1907-8



Mikhail Larionov, *Domination of Red*, 1912-3

At the Target exhibition of 1913, Larionov introduced his Rayonism; “hail to our rayonist style of painting independent of real forms ... [instead] spatial forms are obtained through the crossing of reflected rays from various objects ... the ray represented by a line of colour ... new forms depend on the degree of saturation of a colour-tone and the position in relation to other tones.”

Rayonism was a short-lived movement, lasting for only a few years and practised by only two artists. Nevertheless, it was important, as the first purely abstract Russian art. It was quickly followed by the European-leading abstract art of Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky and Vladimir Tatlin. They were not influenced directly by Rayonism, but the idea of abstraction opened their eyes and those of collectors.

Larionov suffered shell-shock at the front in 1914. In 1915 Larionov left Russia to work with Sergei Diaghilev and he lived in Paris for the rest of his life. Beside him was his lifelong partner, a relationship dating from the early 1900s when they were both students in Moscow. She was much the more outstanding artist - Natalya Goncharova.

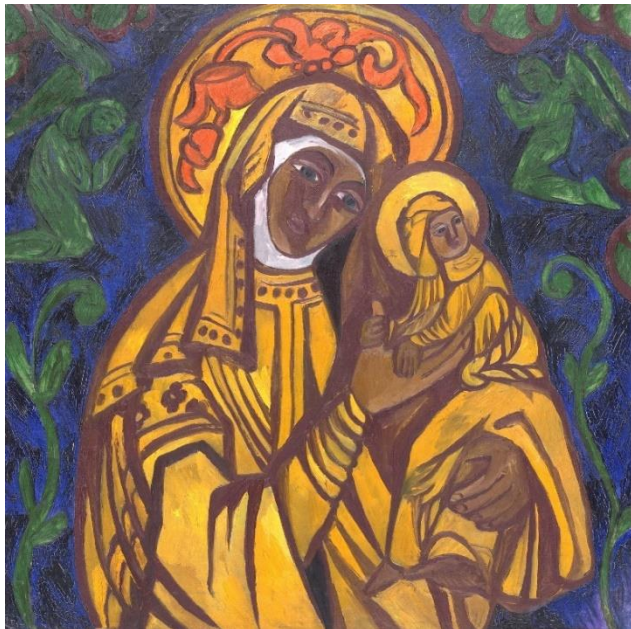
### Natalya Goncharova (1881-1962)

Natalya's Primitivism was very different to her man's; favourite themes being icons and peasants at work.



Natalya Goncharova, *The Evangelists*, 1910

*The Evangelists* have the same pose – inclined head and rounded shoulders – and the depth of religious feeling as Rublev's medieval icons. The tight framing recalls Albrecht Durer's *Four Apostles* (1526). Russian icon art is the basis of two paintings of 1910, similar in theme, with a Rabbi under the hand of God sadly stroking his cat before fleeing the persecution inflicted by the frequent pogroms against Jews.



Natalya Goncharova, *Madonna and Child*, 1910



Natalya Goncharova, *Rabbi with Cat*, 1910

Natalya was born in Tula province, southeast of Moscow and grew up on the country estate of her father, who was an architect (graduate of the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture). In 1901 she was accepted into the Moscow School and began sculpture classes under Prince Paolo Trubetzkoy (from the ancient Russian family) whose brilliant impressionistic sculpture of Isaac Levitan had been exhibited not long before. Natalya won a silver medal for sculpture but switched to painting. Perhaps her sculpture background partly accounts for the solid form of her peasant women. However, she was known to love the Scythian stone idols – wise old women (“baba”) – dating from a few centuries BC and dotted over parts of Ukraine, Siberia and Southern Russia.



Natalya Goncharova, *Gardening*, 1908

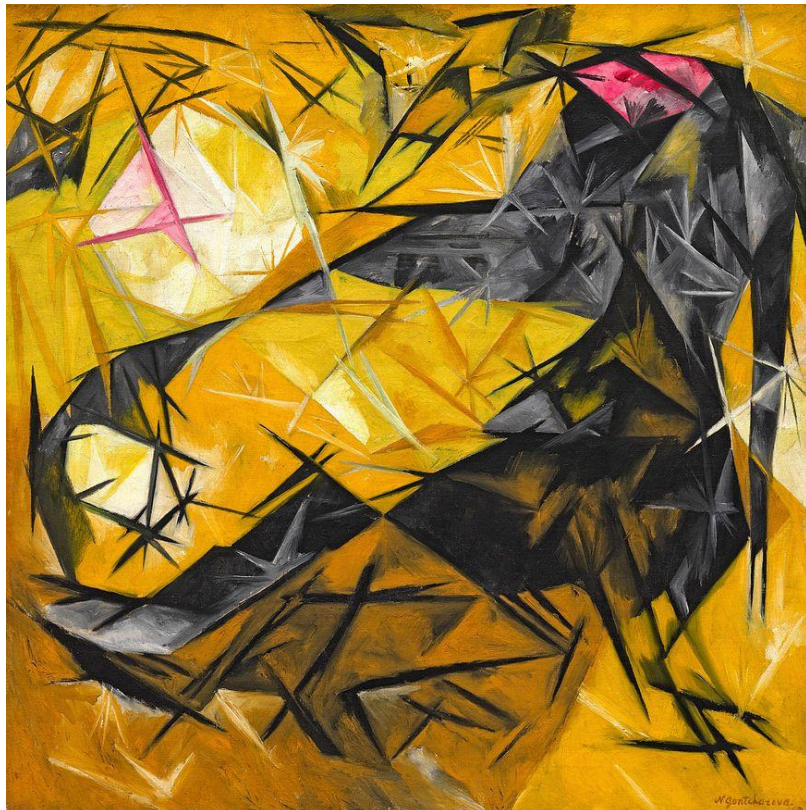
1913 was tremendously busy. First, she reacted to Larionov's initiative – indeed, might be said to have surpassed him – with a re-working of the flowers she had used in an early self-portrait. Then, she moved on to Cubism and Futurism.



Natalya Goncharova, *Rayonist Lilies*, 1913



Natalya Goncharova, *Self-Portrait with Lilies*, 1907



Natalya Goncharova, *Cats (Rayonist) Black, Yellow and Rose*, 1913





Natalya Goncharova, *Linen*, 1913

The inscription “праче” is part of the word for laundry and “б.с” is an abbreviation for ‘white wash’. Natalya painted her monogram on the iron. The left side is male, showing shirts, collars and cuffs, and right female, with blouse and laces. It is clear from the position of the iron who does the work.



Natalya Goncharova, *Weaver*, 1913



Natalya Goncharova, *Dynamo Machine*, 1913

Natalya's year ended with Cubo-Futurist works. The *Weaver* is barely apparent under the electric light against the bulk and noise of the machine, but she and the *Cyclist* are united with their devices and together they are more productive; "the principle of movement in a machine and in a living being is the same and the whole joy of my work is to reveal the balance of movement". This is key feature of Cubo-Futurism which differs to the Italian Futurist celebration of the machine, and we will return to it.



Natalya Goncharova, *Cyclist*, 1913

Natalya left Russia with Mikhail and designed costumes for Diaghilev's productions. When Ballet Russe toured Spain in the 1920s she was drawn to the country's culture and character. "When I returned to Paris, I started creating images of Spanish women in colours suggested to me by this country's atmosphere. Now, my compositions featured red-brown, black and white, without yellow, red, violet and orange - and featured Spanish women of very fair or strong colours,"



Natalya Goncharova, *Spring: Spanish Women*, 1932



Natalya Goncharova, *Autumn Evening (Spanish Women)*, 1922-28

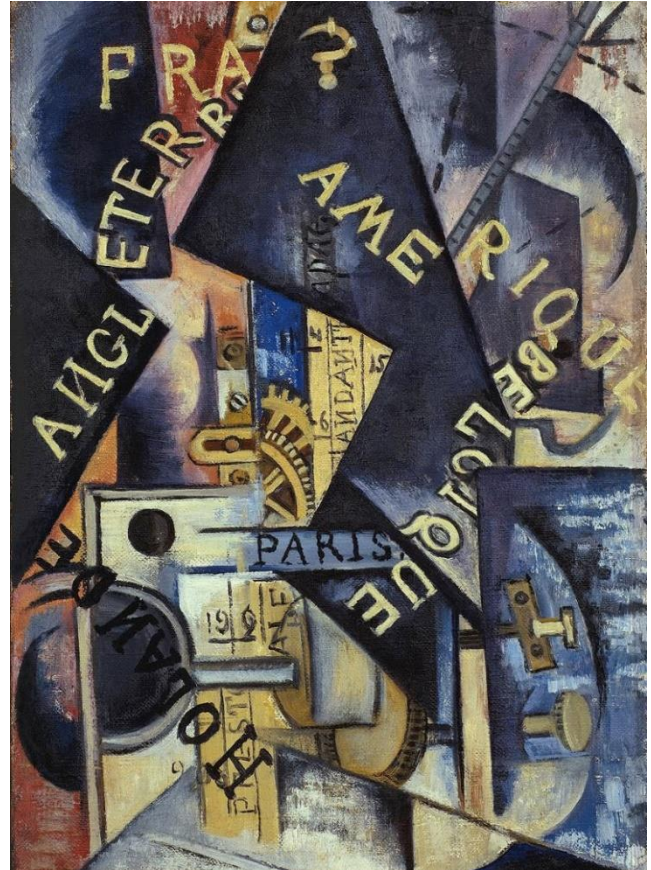


In the 1920s and early 1930s Natalya (seen above with her *Spanish Women*) was close friends with Russia poet Marina Tsvetaeva, who often visited her in her Parisian Studio. Marina saw the Spanish Women there and commented; "*Everything from the cathedral: both folding, and verticality, and stone and laciness. Goncharovsky Spaniards are precisely cathedrals under the lace, in all the straightness under it and separate from it. The first feeling is that you cannot bend it. Lacy citadels*".

Russian Cubo-Futurism was founded by writers and maintained a strong literary element (more on this later). In another way, too, it differed from Italian Futurism. The latter celebrated speed and idealised the machine which would supplant man and solve all of mankind's problems. Russian artists saw the machine as a partner for humans – together life would be easier and more productive. Perhaps this reflected the growing industrialisation in Russia under Witte towards the end of the century. Anyway, Russian works tended to show either man and machine together, or the mechanical components of the machine which, in contrast to Italian images of the effect of sleek cars and fast trains, tended to de-mystify it. A group of outstanding female artists were drawn to the movement.



Olga Rozanova, *Writing Table*, 1915



Olga Rozanova, *Metronome*, 1915

**Olga Rozanova (1886-1918)** was born in a small town near Vladimir, and travelled to Moscow for art training in a series of private studios from 1907 to 1910. Two of her contemporary female artists, Popova and Udaltsova also studied at these studios, but unlike them Olga did not study abroad. Nevertheless, *Metronome* has Paris as the centre around which other countries art revolves. The pace of the metronome is 190 – presto – the rod and cogs frozen in movement. The work has the same format as other Cubo-Futurist works; images and scraps of text. Olga's evocation of the sound of the rapid tick of the metronome reflects her other talent, that of a poet. She contributed to most of the Futurist publications in Moscow either with verse or illustrations, particularly for poems by Aleksei Kruchonykh and Velimir Khlebnikov. After her lithographic cycle entitled *War*, she followed Kazimir Malevich into Suprematism (as we shall see below). Olga died at 32 from diphtheria after contracting a cold whilst helping prepare for the celebrations of the 1918 Revolution.



Aleksandra Ekster, *Venice*, 1915

**Aleksandra Ekster (1882 – 1949)** travelled widely across Europe. She studied for a time in Paris and was well-known at the salons. She knew Braque and Picasso, but her greatest friend was Fernand Leger – his influence is evident in *Venice*. Aleksandra was noted for her costume designs which she began in 1916 and continued long afterwards; those for *Romeo and Juliet* are shown below. Unlike the other three female artists in this section, she became more involved in Constructivism.



Nadezhda Udaltsova, *At the Piano*, 1915



Lyubov Popova, *Air Man Space*, 1913/14

**Nadezhda Udaltsova (1885 – 1961)** and **Lyubov Popova (1889 – 1924)** had studied together at private schools from 1907 to 1910. The pair then shared a studio and went off to Paris together in 1912 to study under Jean Metzinger and Henri Le Fauconnier. Udaltsova dabbled briefly with Constructivism but turned to Suprematism. In the 1920s she reverted to figurative art with Fauvist portraits and landscapes. Lyubov Popova was more prolific, despite dying young from scarlet fever which she caught while nursing her son (she died two days after he did). *Italian Still Life* pays tribute to the Italian Futurist journal *Lacerba*, published from 1913 to 1915. *The Traveller* features a well-to-do woman wearing a yellow necklace and carrying a green umbrella. The work is reminiscent of Kazimir Malevich's paintings. In contrast to Nadezhda, Lyubov turned to Suprematism first, but in her last three years becoming absorbed entirely in Constructivism



Lyubov Popova, *Italian Still Life*, 1914



Lyubov Popova, *The Traveller*, 1915

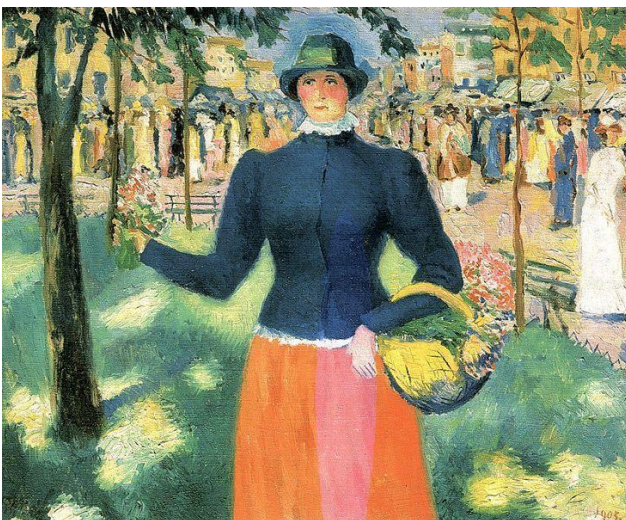
Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935)

Kazimir Malevich was born in Kiev to a Polish family, one of the many who had been stranded in Ukraine after the three partitions under Catherine the Great reduced Poland to the Duchy of Warsaw. His father worked as a foreman in sugar refineries, so Kazimir spent his childhood in rural factory towns, graduating from agricultural school at age 15. He was close to his mum – she lived with him until she died in 1929 aged 96. She taught him to embroider and crochet and he always sought her opinion of his work. He was drawn to art by farm workers; *“I excitedly watched peasants painting on walls; I helped them plaster clay on the floors of their thatched houses and decorate their stoves. The peasant knew how to paint cocks, horses and flowers devilishly well. The colours were mixed where and when they were needed, using different types of clay and blue colouring.”* Malevich’s ambition was fired further by watching three professional artists from St Petersburg who visited to restore the decorations and icons at his village church. Malevich was admitted into the Kiev School of Art, but afterwards in 1896 his family moved to Kursk as his father took a job working for the Kursk-Moscow Railway. Malevich got a job as a draughtsman in the railway’s drawing office and was allowed to practise his art. After seemingly long years, having saved up enough money he left; *“I went to Moscow, that was in 1904 ... I went as an Impressionist.”*



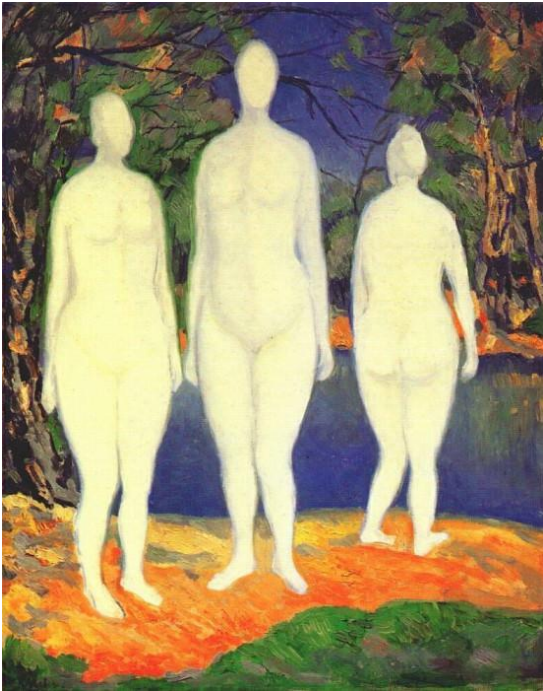
Kazimir Malevich, *Apple Trees in Bloom*, 1904

Malevich painted an almost identical version of *Apple Trees* in 1930. This was part of his vast undertaking to prepare for retrospective exhibitions of his work in Moscow and Kiev in 1929 and 1930, for which he had none of his significant works! His career was followed closely in Poland and Germany, and Berlin arranged for a solo exhibition of his work from May to September 1927. Malevich took important paintings from various stages in his development to Germany for that exhibition. He went home before the exhibition closed, believing he would be able to return to Berlin soon and retrieve his art. He was never able to. His paintings were carefully stored away in Germany, discovered in 1951 and most of them acquired by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1957. So it was that Malevich had to re-create his masterpieces for Russian exhibitions. El Lissitzky wrote to his wife in July 1930; "*He [Kazimir] is growing old and is faced with a very difficult situation. He is going abroad in autumn and paints and paints pictures, which he intends to exhibit, signing them '1910'. A pitiful venture. He is completely serious about it too and genuinely believes that he will succeed in fooling everyone.*"



*Apple Trees* was re-produced accurately, but other works suffered from hindsight. His 1903 *Flower Girl* (left) appeared in the 1930 version (right) in a dress in Suprematist form and colours; a shift repeated in *Boulevard* (1904 & 1929-30). Apparently, Malevich also dated works earlier than the originals to emphasise his pioneering achievement.

Malevich moved from Impressionism pretty quickly. He admired Cezanne; “in the personality of Cezanne our history of painting reaches the apogee of its development.” *Bathing Women* uses the blues, greens and browns associated with the French master. The Fauves were also an influence: *Three Red Houses* reminiscent of Braque’s landscapes; the colours and contours in *Still Life* very similar to Matisse [see background of Serov’s *Portrait of Ivan Morozov* above].



Kazimir Malevich, *Bathing Women*, 1908\*



Kazimir Malevich, *Three Red Houses*, 1910-11



Kazimir Malevich, *Still Life*, 1911



Malevich's Primitivist works partly reflect his childhood memories; "all my life the peasantry attracted me strongly ... Peasants always seemed to me clean and wonderfully dressed" and the beauty of icons; "the icon is a superior form of peasant art ... the study of the art of icons convinced me that it was not a question of learning anatomy or perspective nor of restoring truth in nature, but that one must have intuition about art and artistic reality."



Kazimir Malevich, *The Floor Scrubbers*, 1911



Kazimir Malevich, *Peasant Woman with Bucket and Child*, 1912



Kazimir Malevich, *Woman with Pails: Dynamic Arrangement*, 1911-12

He shared Goncharova's interest in female stone idols and was struck by the colour reproduction of Gauguin's ceramic sculpture *Oviri* (1894), the Tahitian goddess of mourning, which appeared in the *Golden Fleece* journal in 1908. Malevich produced his own versions as peasant woman with pails.



Kazimir Malevich, *The Accounting Lectern and Room (Portrait of a Landowner)*, 1913

Malevich moved to Cubism and then Futurism. His most famous Futurist work is *The Knife Grinder*. He was aware of machines from a young age, having seen them in sugar mills;

*“There, each worker followed the movements of the machines as if they were predatory animals. At the same time, they had to keep an eye on their own movements. Any false move could result in death or the loss of a limb. For the little boy I was at the time, the machines resembled carnivorous monsters.”*

He did not worship them as did the Italian Futurists, but believed they would help man tame nature;

*“Nature groans in defeat, for my legs which were given me by it are nothing by comparison with the wheels that I myself have created. The train will take me and my baggage around the world at the speed of lightning. My communications with other towns will be easy and convenient. I shall make my whole state comfortable and convenient ... [man would] become a demi-god seizing the world from the hands of nature to build a new world belonging to himself.”*



Kazimir Malevich, *The Knife Grinder*, 1912

Russian Futurism was begun by the *Hylaea* literary group. They caused scandals, going about in strange clothes and with flowers or algebra signs painted on their faces. Their manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (1912) called for Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy "to be thrown overboard from the steamship of modernity."



Futurist poetry was illustrated lavishly: Velimir Khlebnikov's poetry collections were illustrated by Natalya Goncharova. A page from Vasily Kamensky's *Tango with Cows* is shown above. Kamensky was besotted with aeroplanes and was taught to fly by Louis Bleriot. A few months after his first solo flight in 1912, Kamensky crashed during an aerobatics display. The accident, which almost killed him, spurred on the Futurists just as poet Marinetti's car crash in 1908 had in Italy.

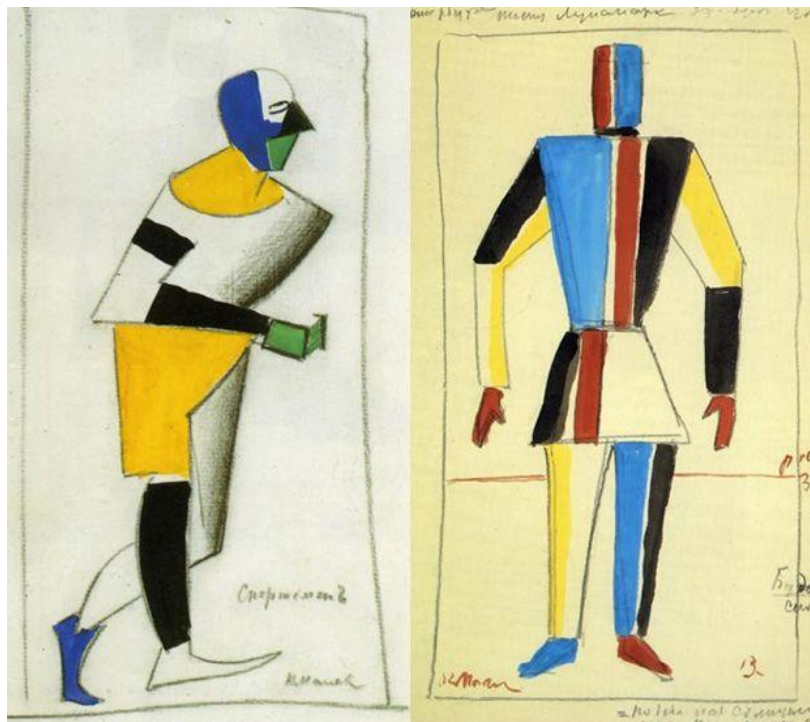
Kazimir was drawn to the Futurists, partly through his idea of alogia (without logic) works – unexpected objects juxtaposed with unusual sizes. Kazimir produced an alogic portrait of Kamensky. His *Englishman in Moscow* is a similar work with all manner of objects in odd scales. A top hat with a utensil (here a red wooden spoon; in the portrait of Kamensky, a fork) was part of the uniform of the Russian Futurists. The two words written across the scissors are “galloping society” referring to the English passion for riding and also for Russia racing into the future.

*Englishman* is probably a portrait of Futurist poet Aleksei Kruchyonykh who dressed the part and because the hat obscures the sun; rays emerge on the left and the inscription ЗА ТМЕНИЕ means eclipse. The significance of the latter is that Kruchyonykh wrote the libretto for the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*.



Kazimir Malevich, *An Englishman in Moscow*, 1914

This opera prompted Malevich to launch Suprematism and saw the first instance of his famous *Black Square*. The opera arose from the two-day convention, grandly named the First All-Russian Congress of Bards of the Future held in Finland in July 1913. In the opera (music by Mikhail Matiushin), the sun symbolises obsolete logic and romanticism that must be overcome and defeated. Malevich designed the sets and costumes for the characters who fight the sun (sportsman and strongman are shown to the right). Costumes of cloth, cardboard cones and cylinders were changed in appearance by Malevich's use of stage spotlights. Benedikt Livshits, a member of *Hylaea* who saw *Victory over the Sun* described the effect: “the figures were cut up by blades of lights and were deprived alternately of hands, legs, head etc. because for Kazimir they were merely geometric bodies subject not only to disintegration into their component parts but also to total dissolution in painterly space.”

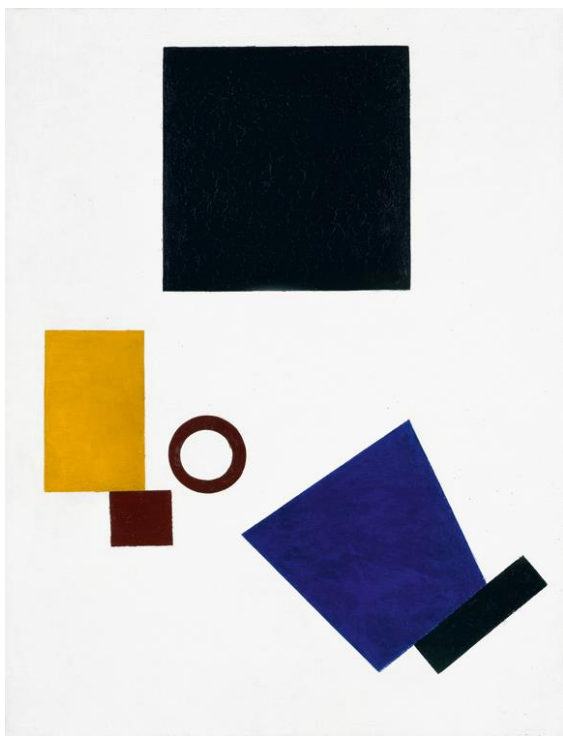


## Suprematism

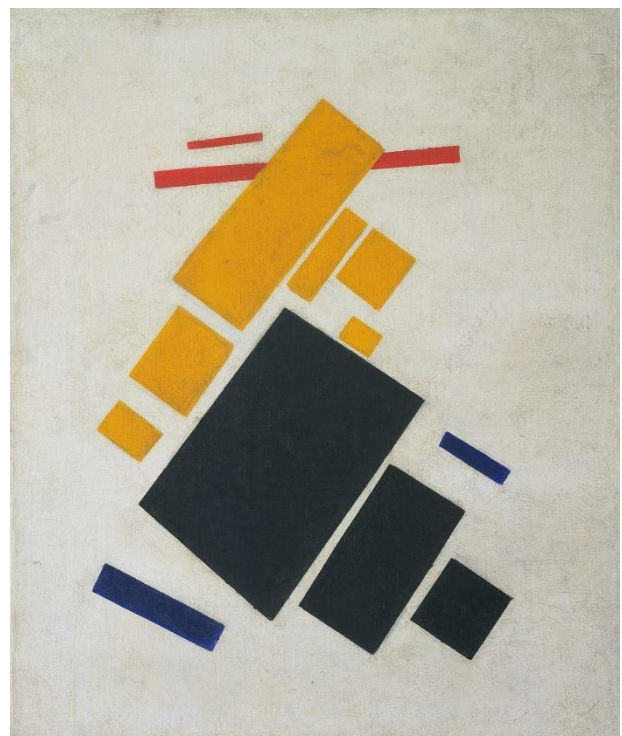
A black square appears frequently in the opera: on the costume of the man who dug the sun's grave; on the end of the sun's coffin; and, as a symbol of the defeat of the sun. The opera had only two performances and provoked violent reactions – heavy criticism or utter delight. The main result was the birth of Suprematism. *Black Square* and other early Suprematist works by Malevich were shown in 1915; *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10*. Malevich wrote; “Considering that Cubo-Futurism has fulfilled its objectives, I now move to Suprematism, to new painterly realism ... which is derived from painterly masses and which neither repeats nor modifies the basic forms of objects in nature ... it seems to me Suprematism is the most suitable term, since it signifies dominance.”



Kazimir Malevich, *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10*, Petrograd, 1915



Kazimir Malevich, *Self Portrait in Two Dimensions*, 1915



Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying*, 1915

*Black Square* occupied the corner near the ceiling opposite the door, traditionally the site of the family icon to which people look when they enter and make the sign of the cross. Malevich wrote to Benois, describing *Black Square* as “a single bare and frameless icon of our times.” Benois was unimpressed, savaging *0.10* in an article, and expressing a majority verdict among the critics; “Barrenness, monotony, there is no painting and no individuality in the Suprematists.” *Black Square* is not placed centrally nor is it exactly square, and was noticeably painted in free hand. Malevich never used drawing instruments or perfectly uniform colour, as he wanted the imperfections of the human hand to be seen.

Malevich soon left the simple format of his paintings at *0.10*. In a letter of 1916, he wrote; “the keys to Suprematism lead me to a discovery of something as yet uncomprehended. My new painting does not belong exclusively to the earth. Earth is abandoned like a house eaten from within by woodworm. And there is actually in man, in his conscience, an aspiration for space, a desire to detach himself from Earth ...Space is bigger than heaven, stronger, more powerful.”

The father of one of his pupils worked with Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, one of founder fathers of rocketry and astronautics whose work later inspired scientists in the space programme. Malevich became interested in space satellites and space-flight imagery. *Supremus No 56* has balanced objects along an axis; the long straight configurations associated with space technology. Kazimir’s imperfect knowledge of space is betrayed by his use of aerial perspective for distant objects.



Kazimir Malevich, *Supremus No. 56*, 1915

This stability, with a sense of gentle movement and peace, recurs in *Supremus No. 58*.



*Kazimir Malevich, Supremus No 58 with Yellow and Black, 1916*

Science began appearing in art; magnetic attraction, energy, telegraphy, gas chromatography, petri dishes can be found. Many artists joined Malevich's *Supremus* group in 1916, among them Olga Rozanova. Her Suprematist works did not slavishly follow Malevich (unlike those of the other artists who joined). Instead, they were usually more vividly coloured. Moreover, Olga produced colour field works, like the remarkable *Green Stripe*, which anticipated art in the US in the 1950s and 1960s.

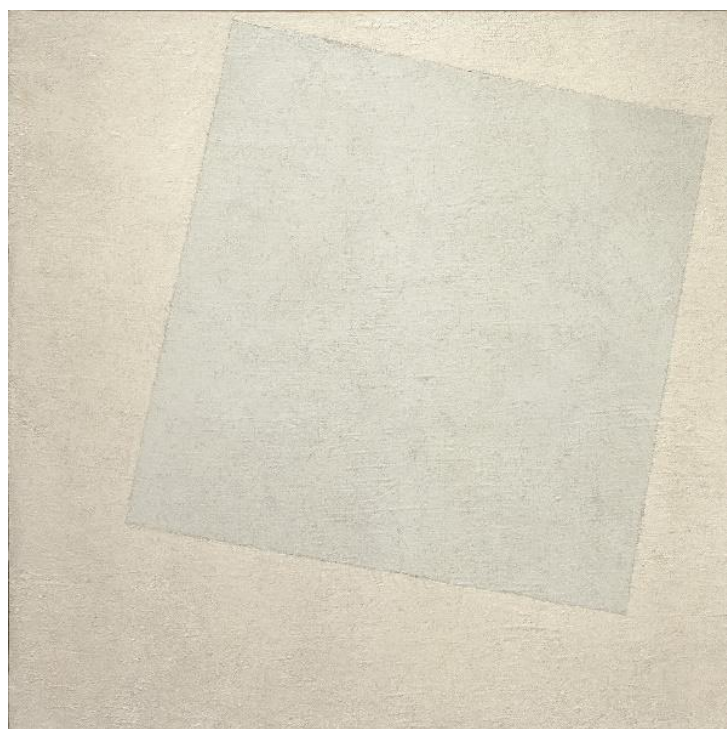


Olga Rozanova, *Suprematism*, 1916



Olga Rozanova, *Green Stripe*, 1917

Whether *Green Stripe* with its diffuse edges inspired Malevich is not clear, but soon afterwards he produced a series of softer paintings, usually with shapes fading into white, which culminated in his *white-on-white* series: "I have broken the blue shade of colour boundaries and come out into white. Behind me comrade pilots swim in the whiteness. Swim! The free white sea of infinity lies before you."



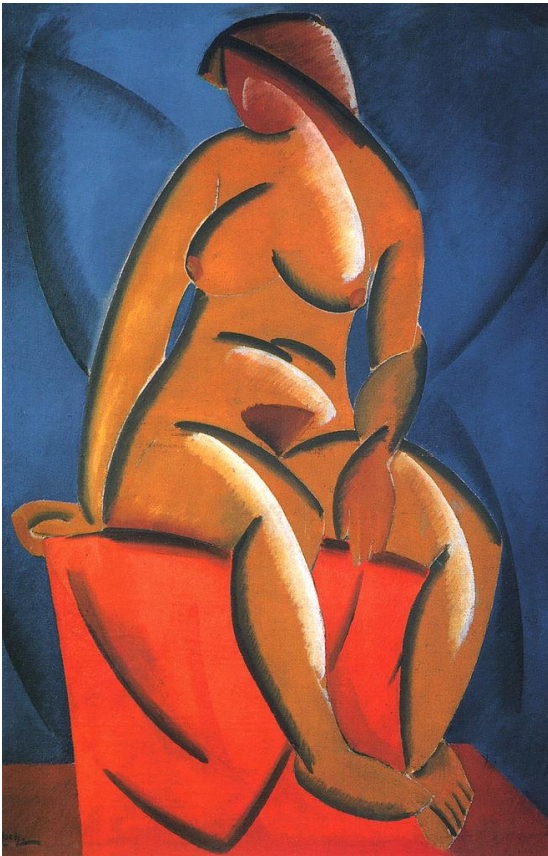
Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition; White on White*, 1918



## Constructivism

### Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953)

Vladimir Tatlin, the founder of Constructivism, had an unhappy childhood. His mother died when he was two and he disliked her intensely. His father, a technical engineer, was stern and unimaginative. Vladimir ran away from home and became a sailor. His first voyage was to Egypt and spurred him to draw sea-ports and fishermen. On his return he went to the Penza School of Art and then the Moscow School but stayed only for a year. Tatlin developed his art slowly. Up to the age of 30 he worked as a sailor occasionally to make ends meet. Sometimes, any odd job would do: Natalya Goncharova recalls he once worked as a wrestler in a circus act but was so frail and inexperienced he put up a poor fight and lost hearing in his left ear. His initial paintings were mainly sea-life and his style was influenced by Cezanne. Goncharova introduced him to icons, and the flat surface and curving rhythm of religious works appear in *Composition from a Nude*.



Vladimir Tatlin, *Composition from a Nude*, 1913

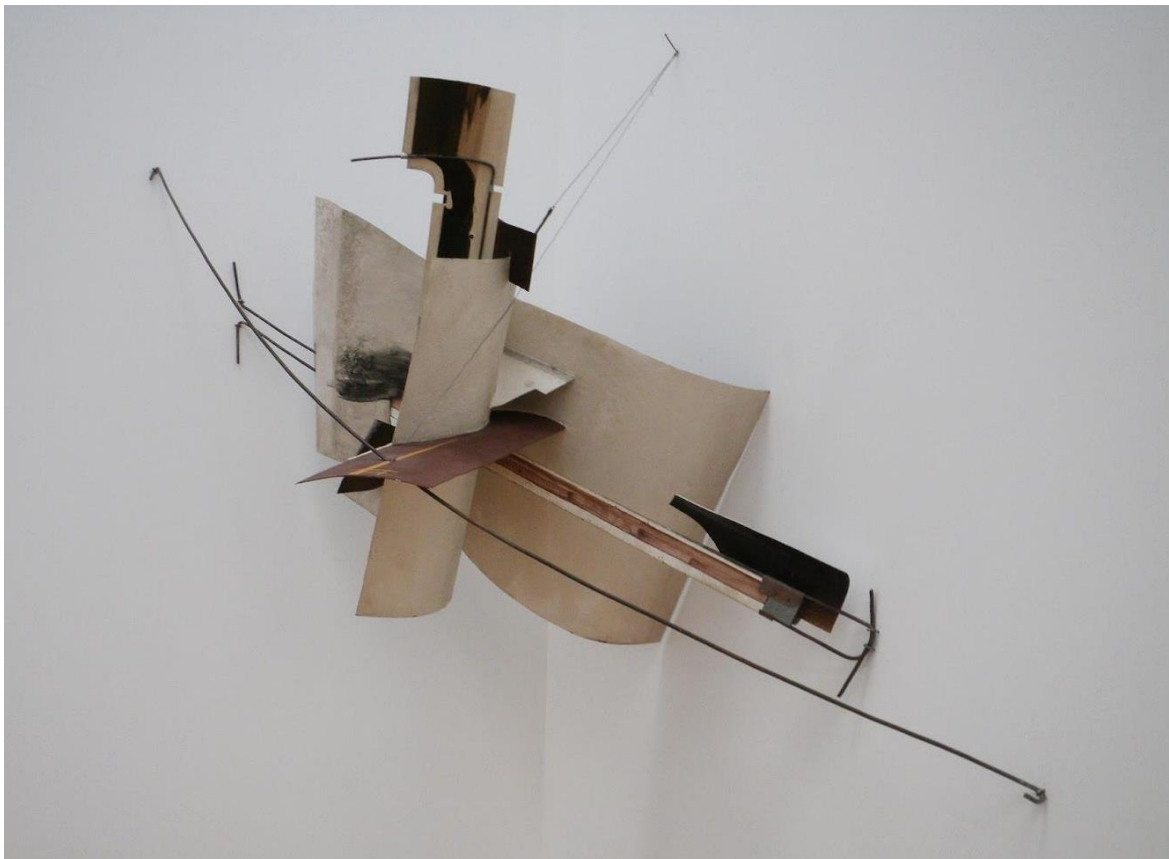


Vladimir Tatlin, *Painterly Relief*, 1914 (Wood, Metal, Leather)

Tatlin went to Paris in 1913, endeavouring to do odd jobs for Picasso so he could watch the Spanish master work. Picasso was over-run, so Tatlin visited his studio only for a few short visits, but they changed his art. Tatlin returned and made a series of *Painterly Reliefs*, which started his deep interest in materials. Having dispensed with frames, he felt the background still isolated the work from reality. This separation was something Tatlin aimed to destroy: "*real materials in real space*". Thus, his *Corner Reliefs* with their intersecting rhythm of planes and contrast between materials. The works did not represent objects or emotions, but celebrate the aesthetics of material.



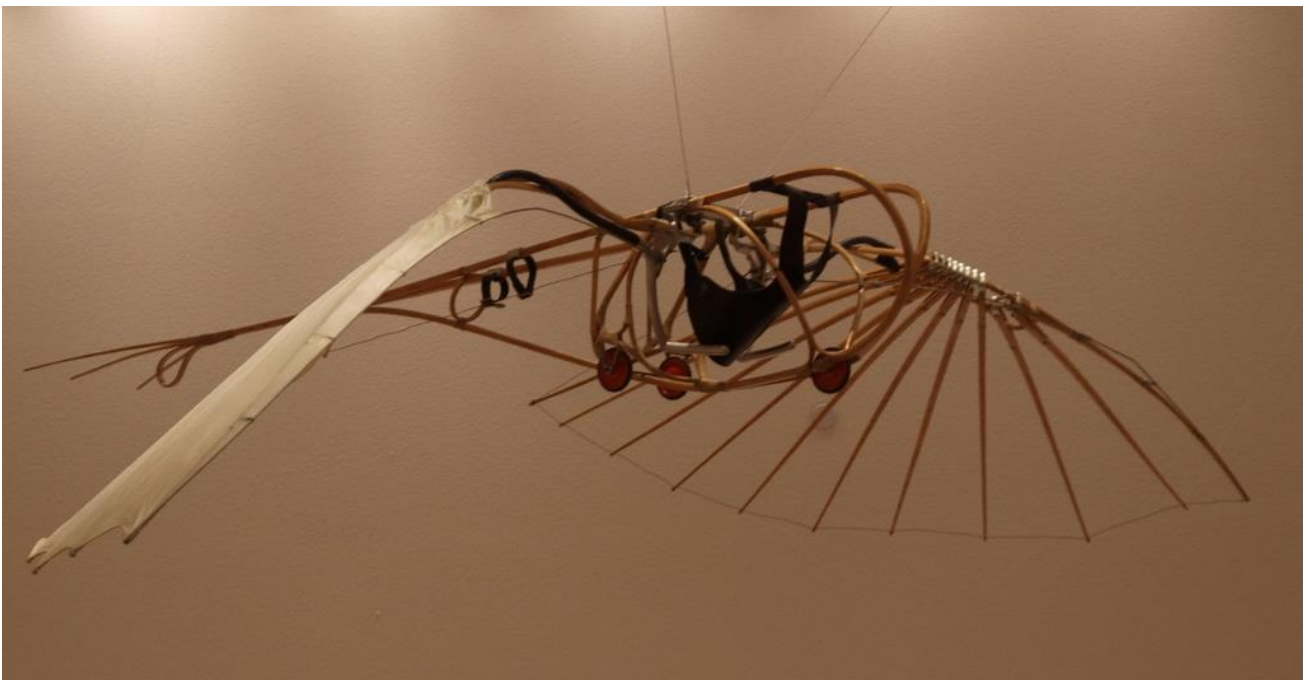
Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Counter Relief*, 1915 (reconstructed) (Iron, Copper, Wood, Cables)



Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Relief*, 1915 (reconstructed) (Iron, Aluminium, Wood, Primer)

Tatlin and Malevich were great rivals. Essentially, before the 1917 Revolution most Russian artists sided with either Suprematism or Constructivism (in some cases oscillating between the two). Malevich's art was theoretical whereas Tatlin was grounded in the real world. At the *0.10* show Tatlin declared Malevich to be an amateur and said that his Suprematist works had no place in an exhibition of professional artists. The resulting fight was alarming as Malevich was much larger and had a fierce temper when provoked, but was stopped by Alexandra Ekster. Despite declaring that he could not abide to be in the same town as Malevich, Tatlin followed his rival's art. The papers and articles in his possession had all references to Malevich underlined in blue pencil and he had copies of all Malevich's essays (Grey).

Tatlin's great obsession, on which he spent twenty years, was his *Model of an Air Bicycle* or *Letatlin* (a combination of the Russian verb "to fly", *letat*, and his own name); "*the dream is as old as Icarus ... I too want to give back to man the feeling of flight. This we have been robbed of by the mechanical flight of the aeroplane. We cannot feel the movement of our body in the air.*" Tatlin was aware of pollution, so *Letatlin* would be pedalled.



Vladimir Tatlin, *Letatlin No. 1*, (reconstructed) 1929-31

He also despised the forms used in modern machines; *“The engineers made hard forms, evil, with angles. They are easily broken. The world is round and soft.”* *“Vladimir Tatlin would take baby insects and grow them in boxes; when they were fully grown he would take them out into a field and watch them respond to wind, unfold their wings against it and fly away (Grey).”* He used cork, silk (for wing coverings), leather, wood and whalebone (which is very strong). *“My machine is built on the principle of life, organic forms ... work on the formation of material is art.”* Tatlin’s idea was that these machines would be a means of travel for simple folk.

A test flight had to be abandoned because of damage to the *Air Bicycle*, so the designs were never tested. *Letatlin No. 3* was found in sorry state in the Central Air Force Museum, just outside Moscow and restored by the Tretyakov Gallery.



Vladimir Tatlin, *Letatlin No. 3* (restored) 1930-32

Lodder writes that the *Letatlin* models were great examples of Russian Constructivist art; natural, simple, organic materials used to make a practical and functional work that could not only be viewed by people but would serve them as well. Tatlin was not, however, just a utilitarian; there is great romance in his vision. He was to have many followers but none of them really had much feeling for the beauty of materials – far less his deep love of these elements which shape the world.

#### Alexander Rodchenko (1891 – 1956)

Alexander Rodchenko was born in Saint Petersburg where his father worked as a craftsman in theatres and his mother as a laundress. The family’s ancestors had been serfs. When his father died, they could not afford to remain in the city and moved to Kazan. Rodchenko inherited his father’s drawing ability and went to his local art school in Odessa where he met his future wife, Varvara Stepanova. In 1914 he went to Moscow to the Stroganov School of Applied Art, but his professors’ intolerance of his art forced him to leave. Cubism was an influence, but he was keen on removing the brushwork from art and early on produced his compass and ruler drawings.

Rodchenko explained that delicate brushwork was necessary for traditional figurative painting, but for the Constructivist such subtleties were no longer required: *“The brush... became an insufficient and imprecise instrument in the new, non-objective painting, and it was crowded out by the press, the roller, the pen with ruler and compass.”* Rodchenko was more concerned with how art was constructed than the materials used.



Alexander Rodchenko, *Dance: An Objectless Composition*, 1915



Alexander Rodchenko, *Compass and Ruler Drawing*, 1914-5

Over the next few years Rodchenko vacillated between this version of Constructionism and Suprematism. Malevich, remember, believed imperfections in brushwork and paint were important in his art, and Rodchenko adopted the same approach in some of his paintings, even though the ruler and compass remained.

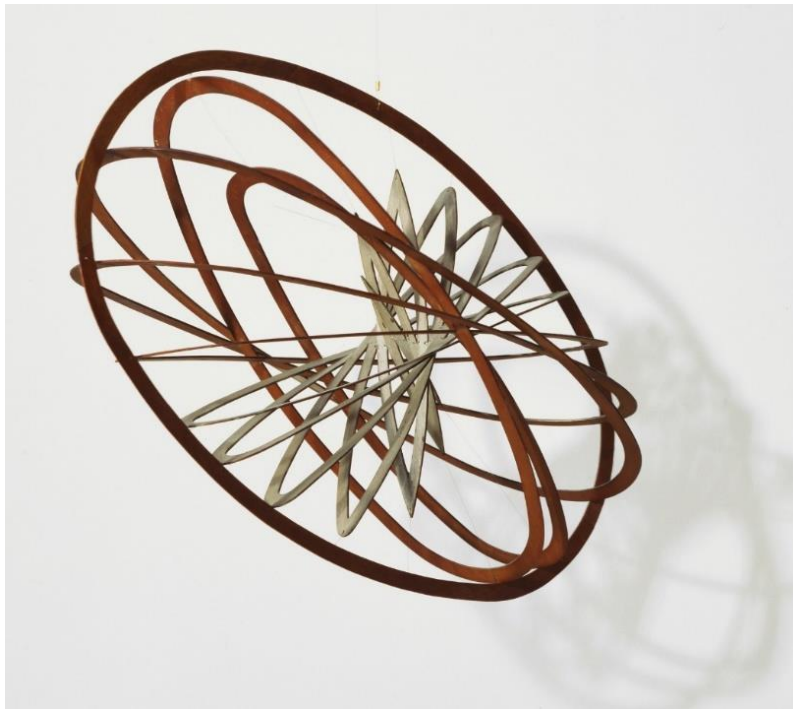


Alexander Rodchenko *Untitled (Composition with Compass and Ruler)*, 1915 watercolour and ink on varnished cream paper



Alexander Rodchenko, *Composition*, 1919 (gouache on paper)

Rodchenko continued to produce purely geometric works into the 1920s, including mobiles out of simple shapes: hexagons and squares (now lost), ovals and circles.



Alexander Rodchenko, *Spatial Construction No. 12*, c 1920 (Plywood, Aluminium paint)

### Art Under Lenin/Revolutionary Russia: The First Decade

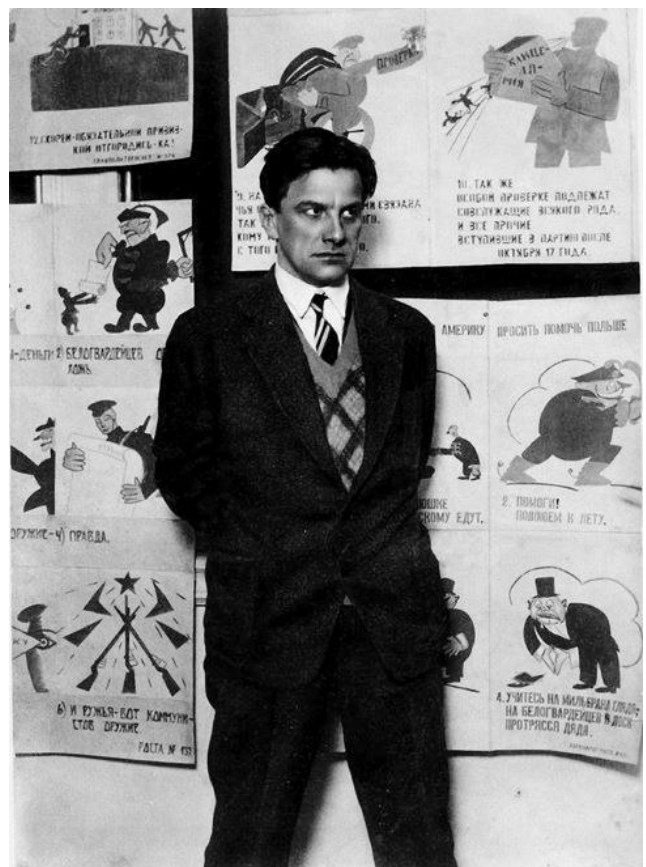
There was tremendous excitement after the October 1917 revolution. Peterhof Station, where the imperial train was impounded after the arrest of Nicholas II, was decorated with a Suprematist work; the double-headed eagle tumbling to the ground with a slogan, “*The Imperialist War and the Collapse of the Autocracy.*”



Scientists and engineers were keen to help remake Russia. After 1917 Lenin used thousands of economists, statisticians, agronomists, university graduates and doctors. White collar folk were as important as workers and peasants. There were some protests at the privileges given to them, but Lenin rejected 'specialist-baiting' because they were working for a socialist state and the working class. A poster designed by Lev Brodsky in 1917 shows a peasant (with scythe), worker (with hammer) and an intellectual (with scroll), and is perhaps the only Russian revolutionary poster that features a member of the intelligentsia in a positive light.



Artists were anxious to prove themselves useful. Much as in the *Out of the Studios and onto the Streets!* Movement in China around the same time, artists realised this was no time for picture painting. "We do not need a dead mausoleum of art where dead works are worshipped, but a living factory of the human spirit – in the streets, in the tramways, in the factories, workshops and workers' homes", said Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. Mayakovsky, with support from fellow poet Alexander Blok, designed large posters called *ROSTA* (the name of the Russian Telegraph Agency) Windows to explain the social benefits, health programmes and workers' co-operatives of the new state. Many were in the form of the old peasant *lubok*, and used short verses. Mayakovsky (on the right in front of other posters) designed the *Do You Want to Join?* poster on the left: *Do you want to conquer coldness?/Do you want to conquer hunger?/Do you want to eat?/Do you want to drink?/Hurry up to join the strike team of exemplary labour.*



Posters were important in getting messages to the masses, and making sure they were aware of the dangers of counter-revolutionaries. They continued to be used during the civil war between the Red Army and the White Army (a motley association of monarchists, capitalists, social democrats, which enjoyed the material support of 13 foreign nations, including the Allied powers of World War I). Posters rallied the Red faithful, this beautifully-composed example by painter and graphic artist Vladimir Lebedev bears the caption; *One has to work but keep the rifle handy.*

From August 1918 the Soviet organised a fleet of Agitation-Instruction trains which toured the country taking news of the Revolution everywhere. Each car had propaganda and instruction pamphlets and a little library. Each train had a special film exhibition car. Peasants had never seen film before, so the medium was very successful in getting messages across: there were 430 free film showings in a month on one train. Phonographs were carried and used to play instructional records to large crowds beside the trains. Train cars were decorated by artists – Kazimir Malevich among them. Such was the success of the agit-trains, that Red Star, an agit-boat, was introduced. It sailed up and down the Volga for two years.



Vladimir Lebedev, *Civil War Petrograd ROSTA Window*, 1919-21



The cinema car of the agit-train *V I Lenin* (above left) and the car with information and help from nurses on family and child health and hygiene (above right) with typically enthusiastic queues. The agit-boat *Red Star* on the Volga in 1920 is swamped with people wanting to see films (below).





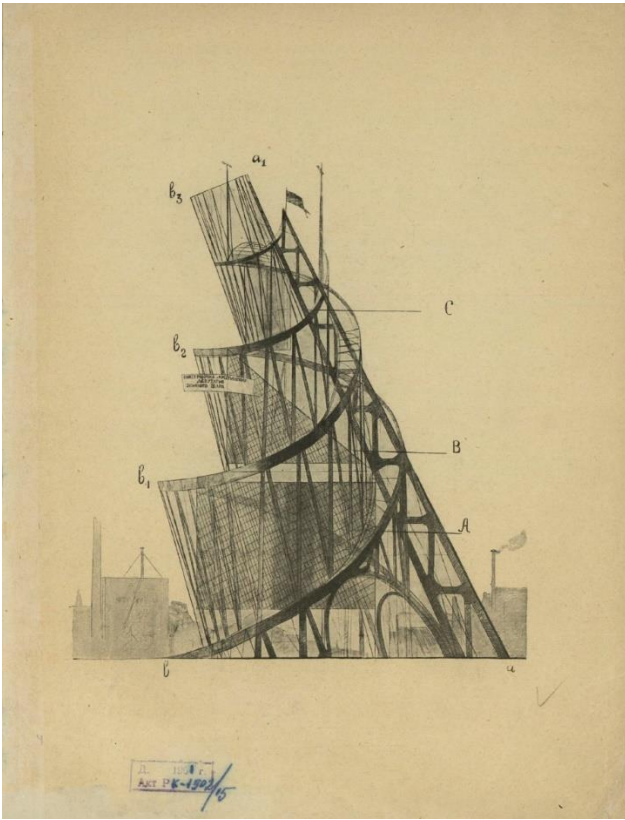
Pre-dating the Agit-Trains was Lenin's *Programme for Monumental Propaganda*, an idea he had in the Winter of 1917-18 which was the subject of the decree on 12 April 1918: *On the Dismantling of Monuments Erected in Honour of the Tsars and Their Servants and on the Formulation of Projects for Monuments to the Russian Socialist Revolution*. In January 1918, Lenin said Moscow should be decorated with statues and monuments to "predecessors of socialism or its theorists and fighters as well as those luminaries of philosophical thought, science, art, etc. who, while not having direct relevance to socialism, were genuine heroes of culture (Bowl)." In all, 67 people were to be commemorated, the bulk of whom were 31 revolutionaries and social activists (Russians and foreigners including Danton, Robespierre and Robert Owen) and 20 writers. Andrei Rublev, Mikhail Vrubel, Gustave Courbet and Paul Cezanne were among the artists.

The Union of Sculptors, which allocated statues to artists, was contracted in August to deliver the statues by 7 November. These statues were to be temporary, made of cheap materials such as plaster, concrete and terracotta with the public deciding which ones were to be re-cast in permanent form. Each unveiling was to be a little festival, accompanied with music and speeches, on a Sunday. As church-going was denigrated, such events drew decent crowds; as the photograph of the unveiling of Robespierre (left) indicates.

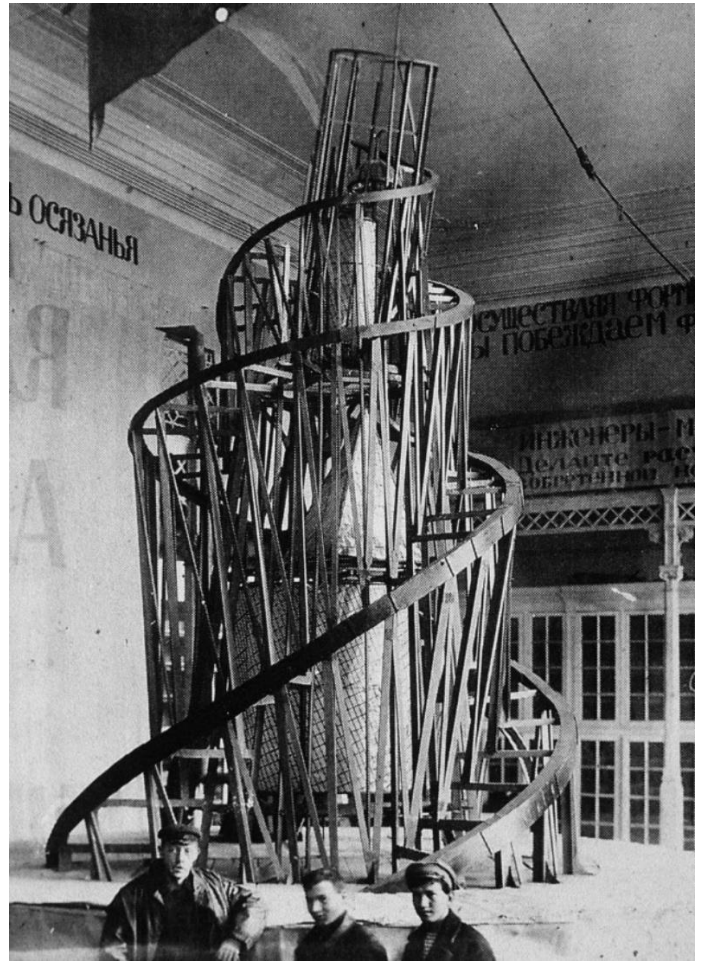


The programme ran into trouble because of the severe lack of materials, generally grim living conditions and then the Civil War. The public did get involved, though. They denounced Boris Korulev's statue of Bakunin in a Cubo-Futurist form (right) as a 'scarecrow' and demolished it only three days after it was displayed.

The Revolutionary monument which is best remembered is Vladimir Tatlin's proposal for the Third International. "A union of purely artistic forms (painting, sculpture and architecture) for a utilitarian purpose", maintained Vladimir. He built models using metal and wood in 1919 and 1920, one of which (below with Vladimir on the left with two assistants) was exhibited at the Congress of Soviets in December 1920.



Vladimir Tatlin, *Design Drawing of Monument to the Third International* (published in Nikolai Punin's book in Petrograd in 1920)



The *Monument* was to be twice the height of the Empire State Building. An iron spiral framework was to support a body consisting of a glass cylinder, a glass cone and a glass cube. The cylinder was to revolve on its axis once a year, and would house lectures and conferences). The cone was to rotate once a month, housing executive committees and the cube once a day holding the information centre. News and proclamations were to be issued by telegraph, telephone, radio and loudspeaker, and an open-air screen would light up at night to relay the latest news and throw a daily motto in words in the sky. The model was seen by Lenin "whose opinions were by no means favourable (Bird)."

Tatlin's design is utterly romantic and Utopian, and completely impractical. It stands as a symbol of the enthusiasm and idealism of the early years of Communism when the future looked impossibly bright. As we shall see, Vladimir was not alone in this feeling.

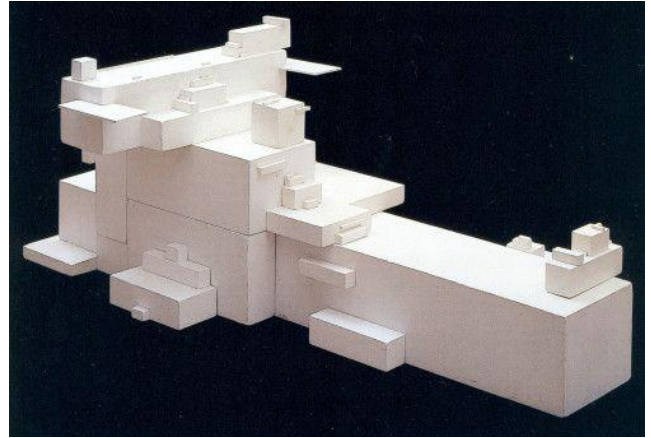
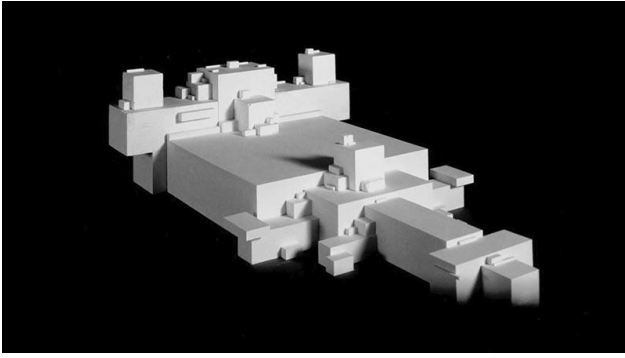
More successful were attempts to educate the Russian people. Anatoly Lunacharsky was put in charge of the Commissariat for People's Education (Narkompros) where he placed great emphasis on universal literacy, much higher pay for school teachers and the opening of teacher training colleges which used modern techniques. By the time he left office in 1929 virtually the whole country was literate and numerate, and a good Soviet education was something of which to be very proud. Lunacharsky was also keen on ordinary people enjoying and taking part in music, drama, literature and the visual arts – Lenin placed great value on the organisation of cultural life. The Department of Fine Arts (IZO) was created in 1918 under Lunacharsky to organise and run the artistic life of the country. IZO set up a fund to buy modern works of art for museums across the country so people could see art. Russia became the first country in the world to exhibit abstract art officially and on such a wide scale; 36 museums were completed and 26 more planned when IZO was liquidated in 1921. Alexander Rodchenko was the director of the Museum Bureau who decided to which towns works of art should be sent. There was sometimes resistance. Grey records Naum Gabo being warned that Rodchenko intended to send Gabo's *Head* (1916) to a tiny village in the depths of Siberia – the indignant Gabo withdrew his work immediately.



Naum Gabo, *Head*, originally 1916, 1960s enlarged version

The other main initiative from IZO was the reorganisation of art schools. A free studio, *svoma*, replaced the Academy in Petrograd and was open to anyone – no diploma was required to enter. The higher technical artistic studio, *vkhutema*, opened in Moscow replacing the school of art there and, as well as training artists, offered free lectures and discussions for the public. This reorganisation was to confirm the dominance of Constructivism. Marc Chagall was appointed director of his native Vitebsk School of Art. On the first anniversary of the Revolution a flag was placed on the roof of the school, a knight mounted on a green horse with the inscription '*To Vitebsk, from Chagall*'. The students adored him; *"they covered all the palisades and signs which survived the Revolution with little upside-down cows and pigs in Chagall's style (Kovtun)."* Chagall invited Malevich to teach at Vitebsk and this was fateful. Malevich put on an exhibition of his work there in 1919. On the anniversary that year, young enthusiasts covered buildings in the main streets with white paint and covered them with painted green circles, reddish-orange squares and blue rectangles. Malevich announced Chagall's work to be old-fashioned and irrelevant and took over the running of the school. Chagall went to Moscow and not long after left Russia for good. Higher arts teaching was organised by the Institute of Artistic Culture (Inkhuk). Initially, Inkhuk proposed to follow the programme worked out by Wassily Kandinsky (which was later used as a basis of his Bauhaus course). As soon as the programme was published in 1920, Constructivists in Inkhuk rejected it. Kandinsky left the organisation and soon left Russia for Weimar.

These two great artists, Marc Chagall and Wassily Kandinsky, are covered in their own chapters. The rejection of them left Constructivists in charge. They were split between laboratory art and production art. Laboratory art was supported by Kazimir Malevich who felt art could provide the models for a new style of architecture. Malevich's interest in space echoed that of many intellectuals. The Russian philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov thought space was the future for mankind, *"then Man will cease to be a lazy passenger of Earth. He will become the 'crew' of this vessel that is the globe, put into motion by a force unknown."* Malevich produced his *architectons* and *planits* as ideas for inhabitable structures. The modularity of the forms would be used decades later in the International Space Station.



Kazimir Malevich, *Architectons Beta and Alpha*

El Lissitzky (1890-1941)

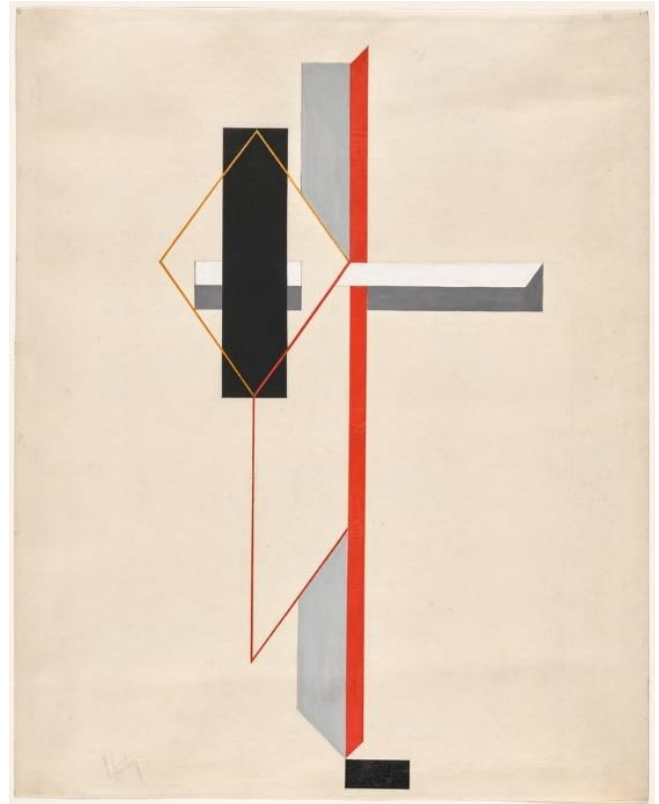
Slightly more down to earth but in a similar vein, Lazar (El) Lissitzky produced his *prouns* - project for the affirmation of the new - which he described as, "stations where one changes trains between painting and architecture."



El Lissitzky, *Proun 19d*, 1920 or 1921



El Lissitzky, *Proun GK*, 1922-3



El Lissitzky, *Proun Composition*, 1922

Lazar Markovich Lissitzky was born near Smolensk, son of a Jewish artisan and grandson of a wood carver. After attending Smolensk High School, he had to move to Darmstadt in Germany because Jews were not allowed in technical schools or universities in Tsarist Russia. Indeed, Nicholas II encouraged pogroms against Jews by the vicious Black Hundreds gangs. Lissitzky completed his training as an architect in Moscow. He was influenced by Suprematism; his most famous work being produced during the civil war.



El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1920



El Lissitzky, *Part of the Mechanical Setting for the Electro-Mechanical Show 'Victory over the Sun'*, 1920-21

*Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* shows El Lissitzky's terrific talent in graphic design, and this interested him much more than painting. After seeing a production of *Victory over the Sun* staged by Malevich in Vitebsk in 1920, Lissitzky adapted the opera for a cast of mechanical puppets. The setting shown above includes characters El Lissitzky designed: top right is the New Man; top left The Announcer; the Globetrotter is in the white circle; the Gravediggers are on the edge of the black circle.

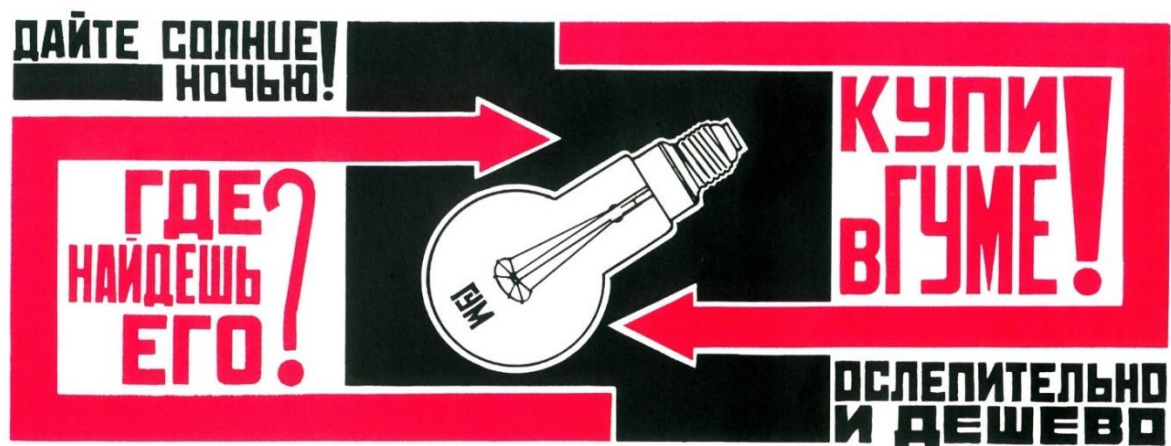
El Lissitzky also worked in the medium which is one of the great achievements of the Constructivists; photomontage. His idea was that mechanical devices or photography could produce attractive art. Some of his works are in this aesthetic vein, such as *Bridges*. Photomontage and graphic design were also used for practical purposes which leads to a Production Art.



El Lissitzky, *Bridges*, 1929 (photomontage)

## Production Art

Alexander Rodchenko led the way in rejecting academic art. In October 1921 at the 5 x 5 = 25 exhibition he presented three monochrome canvases, *Pure Red*, *Pure Blue* and *Pure Yellow* colour, and announced that this was “*the end of painting*”. Instead, he favoured Production Art: the idea of the artist-engineer improving the working and living conditions of the proletariat. Rodchenko also produced graphic art in the service of the state. The ravages of the Civil War which followed the 1917 revolution and the terrible Volga famine of 1921, resulted in extensive food shortages. In his New Economic Policy, Lenin had no alternative but to secure reliable food supplies by allowing peasants to sell surplus produce on the private market and encouraging small family businesses in industry. Rodchenko went into partnership with Vladimir Mayakovsky to design posters and packaging for products sold in the state stores GUM and MOSSELPROM (Moscow Association of Enterprises Processing Agro-Industrial Products). The two below are for Mosselprom cooking oil and Mozer clocks (“*the most businesslike, neatest one*”) in GUM



Alexander Rodchenko, *Buy your Lightbulbs at GUM*, 1923

Other posters by Rodchenko and his wife Varvara Stepanova advertised state firms and organisations.



Alexander Rodchenko, Poster for the Russian state airline Dobrolet, 1923



Varvara Stepanova, *The Literate Will Improve the Farm Economy! Teach Your Children with Gosizdat Textbooks!* Poster for the State Publishing House (Gosizdat), c 1925



Alexander Rodchenko, *Trade Union is a Defender of Female Labour*, 1925

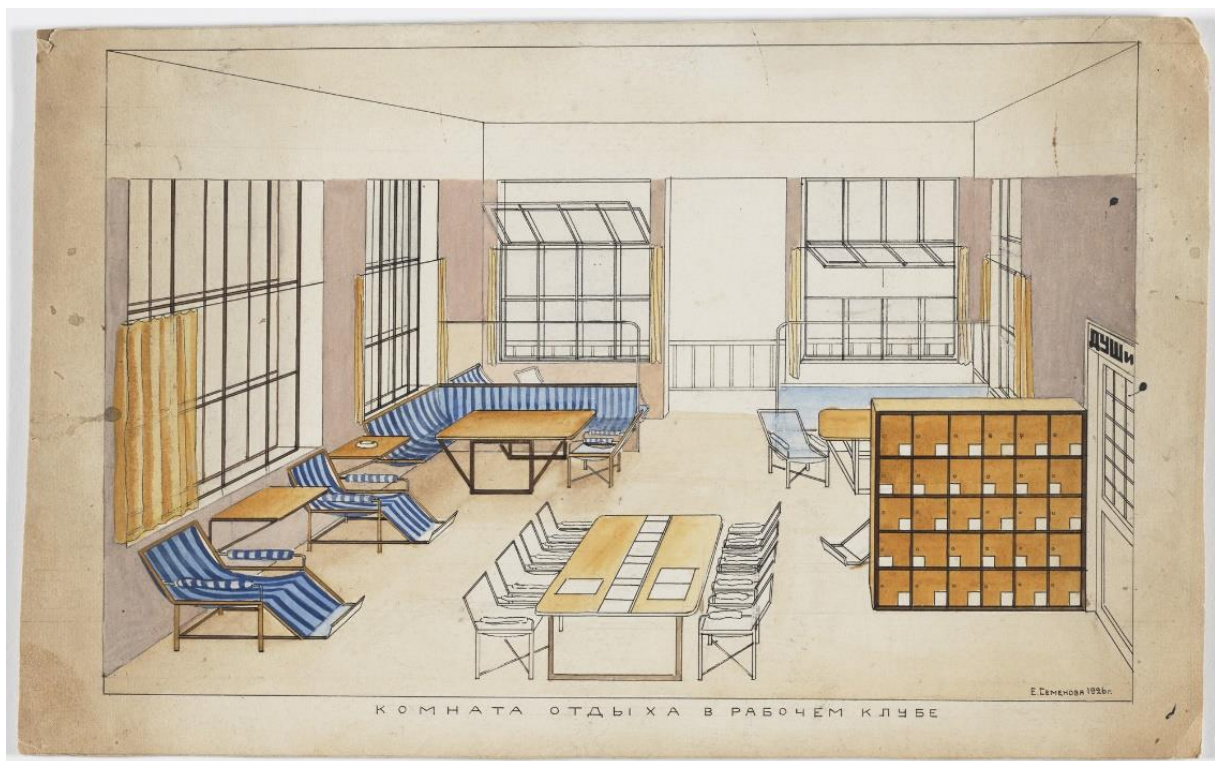
Photomontage and typographic designs were produced for a range of journals. *Red Field* (1923-30), a mass circulation weekly of literature and art with large reproductions of paintings by Russian and foreign artists (Renoir, Cezanne, Gauguin) and graphics, was immensely popular, even commissioning covers from Diego Rivera. *Left Front of the Arts (LEF)* (1923-5) and *New Left* 1926-8) were other notable artistic journals.



For the Soviet exhibit at the Decorative Arts and Modern Industry Exposition in Paris 1925, Rodchenko designed a Workers' Club, a communal centre for learning and leisure. The original and a recent recreation at Kunst Museum Lichtenstein appear below.



Workers' facilities were suggested by other artists, particularly for factories.



Elena Semanova, *Design for Workers' Club Lounge*, 1926

Whether these clubs and lounges were ever built for the proletariat is doubtful. Russia was suffering from a grave shortage of materials and money was short. Aside from typographic designs, the two areas in which Constructivists had a real effect on everyday life were in textiles and the theatre. Lyubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova produced textile designs for the First Moscow Textile Factory, and these were featured in 1924 in *LEF*. Popova was one of the most enthusiastic believers in production art; "no artistic success has given me such satisfaction as the sight of a peasant or a worker buying a length of material designed by me." Other magazines, like *Red Virgin Soil*, published patterns for cheap dresses designed by famous artists.



Varvara Stepanova, Textile Designs, 1923



Lyubov Popova, Dress designs 1923-24

Lyubov made remarkable contributions to theatre design. Theatre took on a new importance. The idea as ace theatre director and producer Vsevolod Meyerhold explained was, “for a new form of theatrical presentation ... making do with the simple objects which came to hand and transforming a spectacle performed by specialists into an improvised performance which could be put on by workers in their spare time.” Meyerhold staged Ferdinand Crommelynck’s *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in 1922 with sets and costumes by Lyubov Popova. This was the first glimpse the public had of the consequences of the time and motion studies of American cybernetician Frederick W Taylor, which had wide influence in the US. Encouraged by Lenin who was a fan, Aleksei Gastev, Russian scientific management pioneer, wrote in 1919 of the benefits of “mechanisation, not only of gestures, not only of production methods, but of everyday thinking, coupled with extreme rationality which normalises to a striking degree the psychology of the proletariat.” Lunacharsky saw the sinister implication; “the idea of subordinating people to mechanisms and the mechanisation of man.”

The inhumanity of Taylor's ideas was savagely parodied in *We* (1920) by Evgeny Zamyatin. The book was banned in Russia (and remained so until 1986) because the state censor felt it criticised the Communist system. *We* was published outside Russia pretty quickly. Indeed, George Orwell told Aldous Huxley that *Brave New World* (1932) must have been based on *We*; an accusation which Huxley hotly denied. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* had machine-like sets and all the actors wore 'production clothing' – the example shown below left was for Actor Number Five.



Lyubov Popova, Set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, 1922 (maquette copy constructed in 1967)

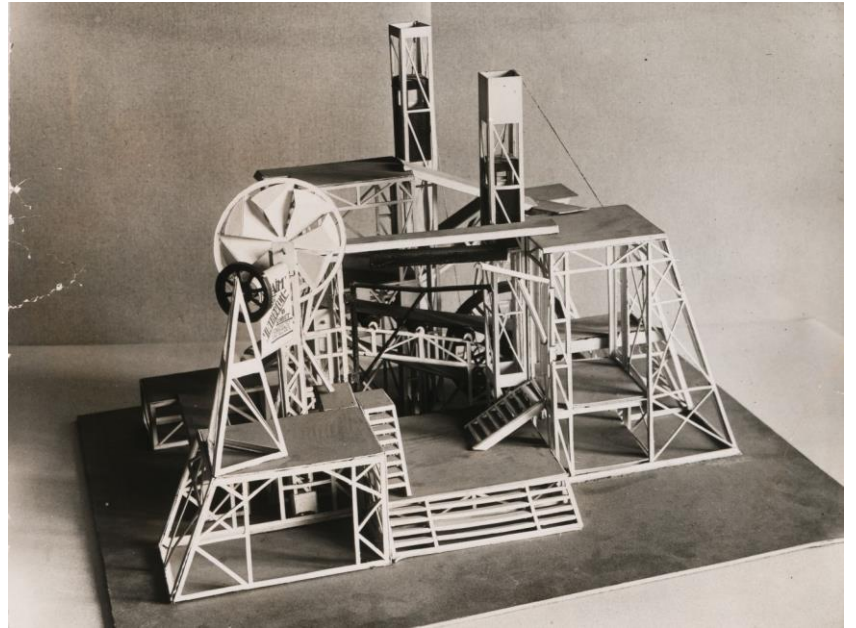


Lyubov Popova, *Production Clothing*

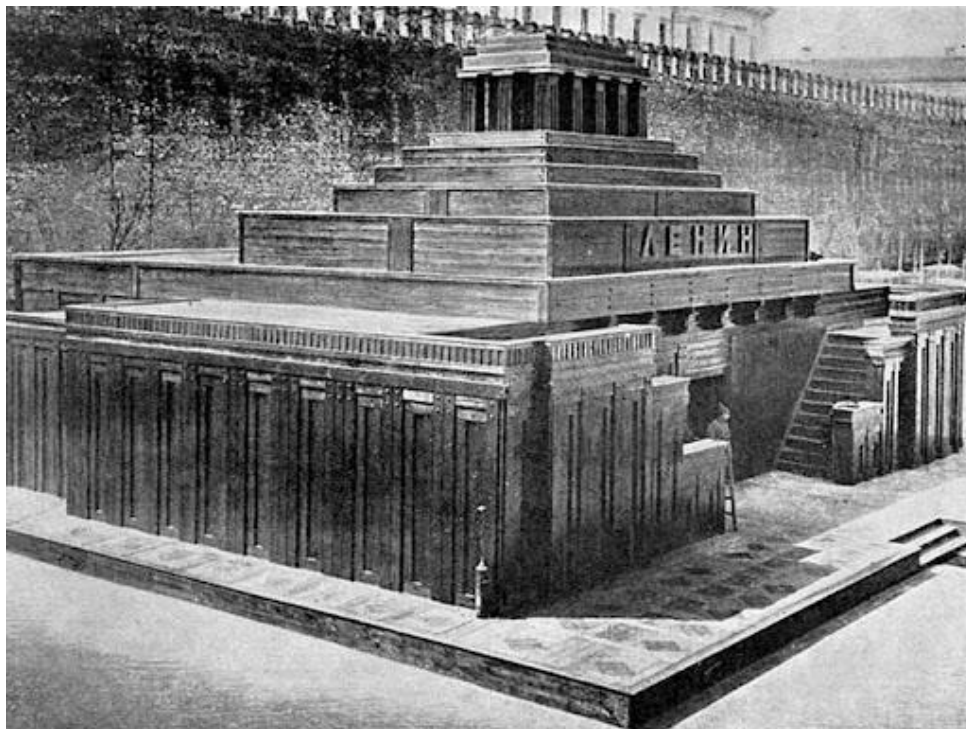


Alexandra Ekster, *Design for Romeo and Juliet*, 1921.

Alexandra Ekster produced costumes and sets (above right and below left) for *Romeo and Juliet* in 1921. Lyubov was back in action with Alexandre Vesnin for the set of G K Chesterton's *The Man who was Thursday*, Moscow 1923. The model for which is shown on the right.



The spirit of Constructivists mirrored the romance of the possibility of Utopia in Russia, and there is a vibrancy and energy to all their work. The details of the movement were taken to Western Europe by El Lissitzky and had a strong impact there, especially at the Bauhaus and in the Netherlands. There are, however, few remnants left today in Russia. Lenin's Mausoleum is the only obvious memorial to Constructivism. This was originally built with wood in 1924 (photograph below).



Because of the dire economic situation, building in more permanent materials became possible only in the late 1920s. By then Lenin had been long dead and Constructivism was withering under the onset of Stalin's regime.

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