

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

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REVOLUTION: RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE, 1912-1930
RARE WORKS FROM MUSEUM COLLECTION ON VIEW

The world of art, like that of politics and society, was a chaotically creative center for new ideas in Russia during the years surrounding the epochal Revolution of 1917. REVOLUTION: RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE, 1912-1930, on view in the third-floor Sachs Galleries of The Museum of Modern Art from October 12 through January 2, is a unique, comprehensive overview of avant-garde developments in Russia during a period of crucial change in artistic theory and practice. Surveying the Museum's Collection of drawings, paintings, sculpture, prints and photographs of this period, the exhibition features works by Malevich, Rodchenko, Gabo, Popova, El Lissitzky, Archipenko, Gontcharova (one of the five women in the show), Kandinsky, and Tchelitchew, among others. On view will be two watercolors by Vladimir Tatlin, the only examples of work by this artist in a Western museum. REVOLUTION: RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE, 1912-1930 is being directed by Magdalena Dabrowski, Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Drawings.

While the art of the Russian avant-garde is much discussed in artistic and critical circles, it has been comparatively little seen. A large share of its still remains sequestered away by the Soviet authorities. Notes William S. Lieberman, Director of the Department of Drawings: "As the result of the pioneering interest of its first Director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., The Museum of Modern Art was able to acquire a substantial and unique collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings and prints that illustrate crucial points in the Russian artistic evolution during the second and third decades of this century. These holdings have been considerably augmented during the past few

years, most recently by The Lauder Foundation's gift of two watercolors by Vladimir Tatlin, the only examples of his work held in a public collection in the West."

During the years 1912-1930, artistic movements in Russia succeeded one another with an extraordinary rapidity: Rayonism, Cubo-Futurism, Suprematism, and Constructivism. Rayonism and Cubo-Futurism, both influenced by Parisian Cubism and Italian Futurism, were two movements of the 1912-1914 period. Among the works in the exhibition representing these two stages on the way to a non-objective art are Larionov's Rayonist watercolor Composition #8 (1912) and Malevich's Cubo-Futurist painting Private of the First Division (1914) and his print Simultaneous Death of a Man in an Airplane and a Train (1913).

Suprematism, pioneered by Malevich, was a decisive step in the quest for "pure painting." Making its first public appearance at the "0.10" exhibition of December, 1915, Suprematism's main goal was to achieve a spiritual quality in painting through the manipulation of basic geometrical forms of pure primary colors set in unstructured, neutral space. The fundamental formal elements of Suprematism--the square, the rectangle, the triangle, and the circle--are exemplified by the Malevich drawings in the exhibition. But "0.10" also revealed a second and opposite avant-garde tendency, typified by Vladimir Tatlin's exploration of volume. According to Tatlin's philosophy of the "culture of materials," every material, by reason of its natural qualities, generates different forms. In his studies for the assemblages of modern industrial materials he called "painterly reliefs" (and later "corner" and "counter-reliefs")--which differed from traditional reliefs by virtue of their forward projection into the viewer's space--the various materials to be used are conveyed by variegated textures and colors. His watercolor study for a three-dimensional construction Board #1 (The Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow) and

the Study for a Counter-Relief of 1914 are among the few Tatlin works still in existence.

According to Magdalena Dabrowski, "the Revolution of 1917 affected developments in art in two ways: it undermined various existing art groupings and gave the impetus to leftist currents. The artists convinced of the affinities of their ideas with those of the Revolution aligned themselves with the new regime. For a brief period of over a decade they were given an important part to play in shaping the cultural policy of the country. The new political and social system confronted the artists with the new role of art. Easel painting and the concept of 'pure painting' came to be considered more and more irrelevant to the Soviet reality; art was to be put into the service of propaganda. 'Art into Life' and 'Art for the Masses' became the major slogans."

Constructivism was the new mode that embodied this essentially anti-aesthetic attitude. Constructivism's first or "laboratory" period reached fruition in the "Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism" exhibition of January 1919 where Malevich's ultimately reductionist Suprematist Painting: White on White (1918) was countered by Rodchenko's Non-objective Painting: Black on Black (1918). These two works will be on view together again.

By 1921 Constructivists were announcing the "death" of art. The artist had come to be seen as an engineer interested in modern materials, dynamics, and social utility. Many of the Constructivist group, whose work is included in this exhibition, turned their attention to attempts to join art and technology. In Magdalena Dabrowski's words, "a new Productivist phase in art began." Some of the results of this shift are to be seen in this exhibition in the industrial designs of Popova and Stepanova, Rodchenko's graphics and photography, and Malevich's designs for chinaware. These Constructivist efforts laid the very foundations for modern industrial and graphic design.

El Lissitzky's work, especially his Prouns of 1919-1927, are two central expressions of the artist-as-engineer principle. Described by Lissitzky as an "interchange station between painting and architecture and synthesizing Constructivism with Suprematism," these works joined free-floating flat color planes with the architectural representation of forms and volumes, thus resulting in a three dimensional illusionism, the use of isometric drawing and color contrast.

With the rise of Stalin, by the late 1920s, Constructivism had fallen out of favor with the Soviet authorities. But Constructivist principles had gained an international currency. Its influence may be noted in the principles of the Bauhaus and, more recently, in the work of many leading members of today's younger generation of American and European artists.

"This exhibition," observes Magdalena Dabrowski, "shows the different stages in the transition from representational painting to the non-representational, and from two-dimensional pictorial composition to the three-dimensional 'construction.' It provides an opportunity to present the Museum's holdings almost in their entirety, portraying the most important aspects of this pictorial revolution."

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For further information, please contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director (212) 956-2648 or Bruce Wolmer (212) 956-7298, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, New York 10019. Photographs available on request.
