

LESSON TWO: Constructing Things

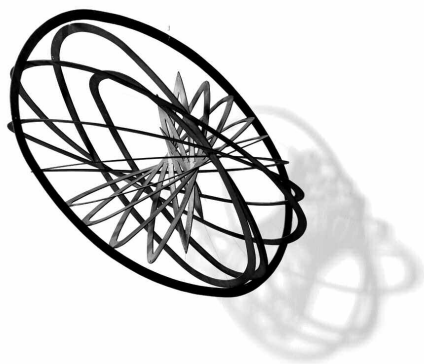


IMAGE SIX: Aleksandr Rodchenko. Russian, 1891–1956. *Spatial Construction no. 12*. c. 1920. Plywood, open construction partially painted with aluminum paint, and wire, 24 x 33 x 18 1/2" (61 x 83.7 x 47 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquisition made possible through the extraordinary efforts of George and Zinaida Costakis, and through the Nate B. and Frances Spingold, Matthew H. and Erna Futter, and Enid A. Haupt Funds. © 2006 Aleksandr Rodchenko



IMAGE SEVEN: László Moholy-Nagy. American, born Hungary, 1895–1946. *Nickel Construction*. 1921. Nickel-plated iron, welded, 14 1/4 x 6 3/4 x 9 3/8" (35.9 x 17.5 x 23.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn

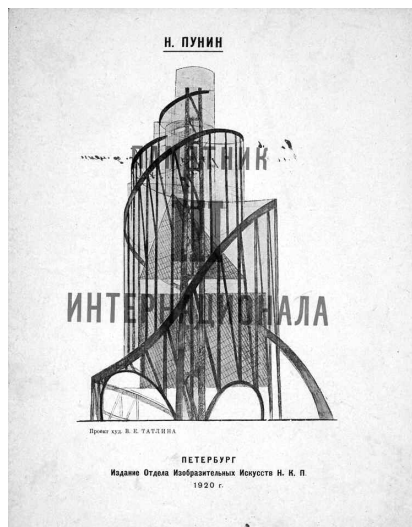


IMAGE EIGHT: Vladimir Tatlin. Russian, 1885–1953. *Monument to the Third International* by Nikolai Punin. 1920. Illustrated book with one letterpress illustration on front cover, page: 11 x 8 3/8" (28 x 21.9 cm). Publisher: Izo NKP, Petersburg. Edition: unknown. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation, 2001. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

INTRODUCTION

The years 1917 to 1922 brought both civil turmoil and possibility to Russia. Artists believed that their modernist, iconoclastic approach to art would help to create a new language for the free, Communist state. The artists discussed in this lesson, Aleksandr Rodchenko, László Moholy-Nagy, and Vladimir Tatlin, were all concerned with redefining art's engagement with life. **Constructivism**, as their movement came to be called, sought to apply aesthetic ideals to everyday material experience. These artists, along with their colleagues, thought of themselves as collaborative scientists working toward the creation of a new visual vocabulary based on their experiments with new forms and materials (they even called their art-making efforts “laboratory work”). Their artwork challenged traditional notions of form by relinquishing references to the figure and experimenting with materials. As Rodchenko later reflected on this exciting, idealistic moment in history, “We were for the new man; we felt him but did not imagine him clearly. . . . We created a new understanding of beauty, and enlarged the concept of art.”⁷

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to artists who developed new visual forms through experimentation.
- Students will consider artists' choices of material.
- Students will be introduced to the term “Constructivism.”

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to think about the kinds of choices an artist might make when creating a sculpture.
- Invite your students to discuss some differences between viewing a painting and a sculpture.
- The artists discussed in this lesson experimented with new forms and materials. Ask your students to consider what makes an experiment effective. Reflecting on their own experience in science labs at school, what are some of the components of conducting an experiment (such as a control, specified substances, specified quantities, et cetera)?

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

Begin by looking at Rodchenko's *Spatial Construction no. 12* (Image Six). Refrain from telling your students the title right away.

- Ask each student to come up with a word that they might associate with this object. Note what types of words students volunteer. Are the word choices similar? Do they differ?
- Ask your students what they notice about the shapes that make up this object. How do they think the object was constructed?
- This work hangs from the ceiling. Ask your students to imagine what it would be like to walk under and around it. Would different viewpoints change how it looks? Based on your students' initial word associations, along with their visual analysis, does the work remind them of any other object?
- Introduce the title of the work to your students. Ask them if the title seems appropriate. Ask them why or why not.

7. Magdalena Dabrowski, in *Aleksandr Rodchenko*. Dabrowski et al. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 23–4.

In 1920, in a move away from the confines of painting, Rodchenko embarked upon a series of three-dimensional studies that he titled *Light Reflecting Constructions*. “Construction,” noted Rodchenko, “may be defined as the system by which an object is assembled from appropriately used materials.”⁸ These constructions were made to be folded in two dimensions or suspended from the ceiling in three dimensions. The constructions were basic geometric shapes: an oval, a circle, a triangle, a square, a hexagon, and an octagon. The oval (Image Six) is the only surviving work from the series. Rodchenko painted parts of these constructions with aluminum paint, so that the suspended shapes would reflect light and cast shadows. Rodchenko’s studied approach to material and shapes in this series reveals his interest in the scientific and mathematical research of the time.

- Ask your students to look at Moholy-Nagy’s *Nickel Construction* (Image Seven). Ask them to describe in detail what they see. What shapes or elements can they describe? Ask them to compare this object to Rodchenko’s *Spatial Construction no. 12*. What similarities and differences can they find between the two artists’ methods of construction?
- In-class writing exercise (students may choose one of the following topics):
 1. Ask your students to imagine that they are archeologists who have discovered Moholy-Nagy’s *Nickel Construction* in a long-forgotten warehouse filled with various objects from the twentieth century. Ask them to write down their ideas about why this object might have been created. Who might have used the object? Based on their analysis, what title would they give the object?
 2. Ask your students to imagine that they are inventors living in the twenty-second century. They have created this object for a futuristic purpose. What will it be used for? Who would use this object? What should it be called?

Moholy-Nagy’s *Nickel Construction* reveals the Hungarian artist’s interest in Russian Constructivist principles. In 1922, a large exhibition of Russian work took place in Berlin. This exhibition would have a great impact on other major artistic projects, such as the Dutch movement *de Stijl* (“the style”) and *Bauhaus*, a German art school and movement. In his first year as professor at the Bauhaus (then located in the German city Weimar), Moholy-Nagy established a Constructivist method of teaching centered on scientific and artistic experimentation with the structural capabilities of different materials such as glass, metal, rubber, paper, celluloid, cork, and wood.

- Ask your students to look at Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (Image Eight). Let them know that the work is a print taken from a book. Ask them to look carefully at the image. Inform them that this is a proposal for a monument that was never built. Ask them to reflect on the purpose of monuments. How does the way a monument looks reflect its purpose? Ask your students to identify some important decisions Tatlin made in his design.
- Ask your students to compare *Monument to the Third International* with Rodchenko’s *Spatial Construction no. 12*. What similarities and differences do they see in the two constructions’ lines and forms?

Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* is symbolic of the aspirations of the Russian Constructivists and the young Soviet state. In 1918, the Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin launched his “Plan for Monumental Propaganda,” under which Tatlin was commissioned to create a project for a monument to the Revolution. The 1920 public unveiling of the model for the proposed tower caused a sensation.

8. Aleksandr Rodchenko, “The Line” (1921), in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–32* (New York: Rizzoli 1990). 73

In his architectural proposal, Tatlin captured an idealistic view of Russia's spiraling ascent in the world. As he stated at the unveiling, "It becomes possible to combine purely artistic forms with utilitarian goals."⁹ Comprised of glass and steel, the structure was intended to dwarf the Eiffel Tower of Paris in both height and dramatic effect. The enormous tower would straddle the Neva River in St. Petersburg, its tilting crown pointing to the North Star. Although the tower was never built it developed a cultlike following within the Soviet Union as well as in international circles.

After the unveiling of the proposal, Constructivists increasingly sought to apply their artistic efforts toward architecture, technology, and industry, as well as, inevitably, Soviet propaganda. In 1922, Constructivist Aleksei Gan would go so far as to declare, "Art is dead! There is no room for it in the human work apparatus. Work, technique and organization!"¹⁰

ACTIVITIES

1. Constructivist Laboratory

In the spirit of the Constructivist experimentation with basic materials and forms, students will create their own laboratory. Divide your students into groups, assigning each group a different material (or the entire class can work with one material). Materials can include newspapers, magazines, cardboard, wire, foam, sponges, and tinfoil. Each group should try to create a form that stands on its own and/or can be suspended from the ceiling. The students should be given just the necessary tools (such as masking tape, wire cutters, scissors, and string). Encourage your students to be creative in determining how to create strong structures (for example, newspaper rolled into tubes makes sturdy structural units).

2. Revolutionary Russia

Ask your students to research and create a timeline of the Russian Revolution of 1917. They should elaborate on key figures and moments. In creating the timeline, ask your students to employ some of the propagandistic techniques used by many of the Constructivist artists (such as Gustav Klucis, Lissitzky, and Rodchenko) including **photomontage**, collage (of both text and images), and trademark Soviet colors such as red, black, and white.

3. Discovering Russian Female Artists

Women played a major role in revolutionary Russia. Many of the most accomplished modern Russian artists were women, including Liubov Popova, Elena Semenova, and Varvara Stepanova (lifelong collaborator and wife of Rodchenko). Have your students research the artwork of some of these Russian artists on the Web.

9. Vladimir Tatlin, "The Work Ahead of Us" (1921), in *Art into Life*, 100.

10. Aleksei Gan, "Constructivism" (1922), in *Art And Theory*, 344.