

The Museum of Modern Art

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CONSTRUCTIVISM IN POLAND 1923-1936 AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The little-known work of the major Polish artists who worked in the constructivist tradition is on view for the first time in this country in an exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art through March 25. Directed by Kynaston McShine, Curator of Painting and Sculpture, the exhibition is jointly sponsored by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo and is shown under the auspices of the Museum's International Council. After the New York showing, it will travel to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Detroit Institute of Arts, as well as Buffalo.

Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936 contains more than 50 examples of sculpture, painting, photography, and graphic design, which represent an important moment in the history of modern art. The five artists represented had strong ties with the avant-garde of Russia and Europe. Although a great deal of their work was destroyed in World War II, the majority of what has been preserved is in the collection of the Museum Sztuki in Lodz, Poland, which has lent all the works for the exhibition.

The majority of the works on view are by Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951) and her husband Wladyslaw Strzeminski (1893-1952). Kobro is represented by more than a dozen compositions and constructions of metal, wood, plastic and glass, and Strzeminski by 15 oil paintings, architectural and unistic compositions. Also included are ten photographs, called heliographic compositions, by Karol Hiller (1891-1939), three oil paintings by Henryk Stazewski (b. 1894), and one by Henryk Berlewi (1894-1967). Also shown are examples of books, pamphlets and magazines designed by the Polish constructivists, including their own periodicals, beginning with the magazine Blok.

Kobro and Strzeminski met in Russia where they were associated with various Russian constructivist groups and knew Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, and Malevich, among

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others. They moved to Vilna in 1922 and in 1924 became Polish citizens. In the 20s they were associated with successive Polish groups, such as the Blok and the Praesens. The latter group, consisting of painters, sculptors and architects, was mainly concerned with the relationship between architecture and the other visual arts.

In the early 20s Kobro made sculpture according to mathematical ratios and developed a sculpture consisting of open planes. She discarded the idea of sculpture as an isolated form or object, and believed sculpture should be concerned with spatial concepts. She wrote, "Any sculpture should become an architectural problem... it should be an expression of attempts aimed at super individualistic organizations of society."

Strzeminski's works of the 20s, called architectural compositions, are flat, abstract, geometric paintings in bright colors. They contrast sharply with his later unistic compositions, seven of which are on view. These paintings are in subtle color modulations, the canvases rhythmically filled with repeated small forms and waving lines which are highly textured. Like his wife, in addition to being an artist, Strzeminski was a theorist, writer, teacher, and organizer of exhibitions and schools.

Karol Hiller, who made photographs without a camera, which he termed heliographic compositions, was born in Lodz in 1891 and was killed there in 1939, one of the first victims of the Nazi terror. He studied architecture in Warsaw and when World War I began, he and the entire school were evacuated to Russia where he studied art history and became acquainted with Russian constructivism. After the war, back in Poland, he became involved in stage design, book illustration, and painting. Most of his paintings were destroyed in World War II. In 1928, he began work on the graphic technique he called heliography.

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Hiller's technique was different from that practiced by Man Ray or Moholy-Nagy. His negative was a transparent celluloid plate covered with white tempera which allowed for various artistic effects -- painting, scrubbing, and grinding of paint. The final print was made on photo-sensitive paper by exposure to light. Hiller said of the process, "...I wanted, without imitating the visual phenomena in nature, to create the sources from which they derive directly on a plate."

Henryk Stazewski is the only artist of the five still living. He graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1920 and as a student visited Paris where he was influenced by Cubism and Purism. Between 1929 and 1934 he visited Paris several times and became close friends with Mondrian and Seuphor. Although the majority of his work before 1939 was destroyed, it was his friendships in Paris that stimulated the formation of the collection of modern art and Polish constructivism for the Museum in Lodz.

The Museum Sztuki, in addition to its collection of Polish constructivism, contains the international collection of modern art formed by the "a.r." group (artistes revolutionnaires), Kobra, Stazewski, and Strzeminski, in 1931. The collection of about 75 objects includes works by Jean Arp, van Doesburg, Léger, Marcoussis, Schwitters, Sophie Taueber-Arp, Torres-Garcia, and Vantongerloo.

The New York showing has been made possible through the generosity of The Government of the Polish People's Republic, Aspen Center of Contemporary Art, and The American Institute of Polish Culture.

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