

The Russian avant-garde book, 1910-1934 : [brochure] March 28-May 21, 2002

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THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE BOOK 1910-1934

RUSSIAN PLACARDS
PLACARD RUSSE
1917 — 1922





NATALIA GONCHAROVA. *Igra v adu (A Game in Hell)* by Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh. Moscow, 1912. Edition: 300. Lithographed cover, 7 7/8 x 5 1/2" (18.3 x 14.6 cm)

THIS EXHIBITION, THE MOST COMPREHENSIVE EVER DEVOTED TO THE SUBJECT OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE BOOK, CELEBRATES THE JUDITH ROTHSCHILD FOUNDATION'S GIFT OF 1,100 BOOKS AND 100 RELATED WORKS TO THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART.

IN THE EARLY DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, RUSSIAN avant-garde artists produced a body of work that was seminal to the development of the modern movement. In the early teens these artists formed a collaboration with like-minded poets. Rejecting the stultifying practices taught in the academies, the two groups worked in tandem to revitalize visual and poetic languages, with one result being a new form of artist's book. Under the umbrella term of Futurism, artists worked with such styles as Neo-primitivism, Rayism, and Cubo-Futurism, experimentation that eventually led to Suprematism, a resolutely abstract style made up of simple geometric shapes in a reduced palette of colors. At the same time poets created *zaum*, a transrational form of expression that focused on word fragments, letters, and sounds rather than on traditional meaning and representation.

The 1917 Revolution brought new goals to Russian society, and avant-garde artists were among the most optimistic participants in their fulfillment. Those who had previously worked in painting and sculpture began to turn toward the design of practical objects: ceramics, textiles, posters, and even packaging for manufacturing products. They believed that their new language of abstraction could symbolize future social achievements and that art could serve a broad public. Books were designed according to principles of rational organization and clarity that came to be known by the term "Constructivist." Such stylistic innovations spread, appearing in provincial publications and even in children's literature, architectural journals, and illustrated Judaica. Later, the process of photography, favored for its mechanical qualities, and the technique of photo-montage played increasingly important roles. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, when government controls on the arts tightened, avant-garde artists designed books and magazines containing propaganda touting Soviet power and achievement. By 1934, Stalin decreed that only Socialist Realism in the arts would be allowed to convey his vision for society. The period of experimentation and innovation by Russian avant-garde artists that began in 1910 with such creative freedom was effectively ended by authoritarian dictate.

DEBORAH WYE
Chief Curator, Department of Prints
and Illustrated Books

MARGIT ROWELL
Guest Curator

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A SLAP IN THE FACE OF PUBLIC TASTE

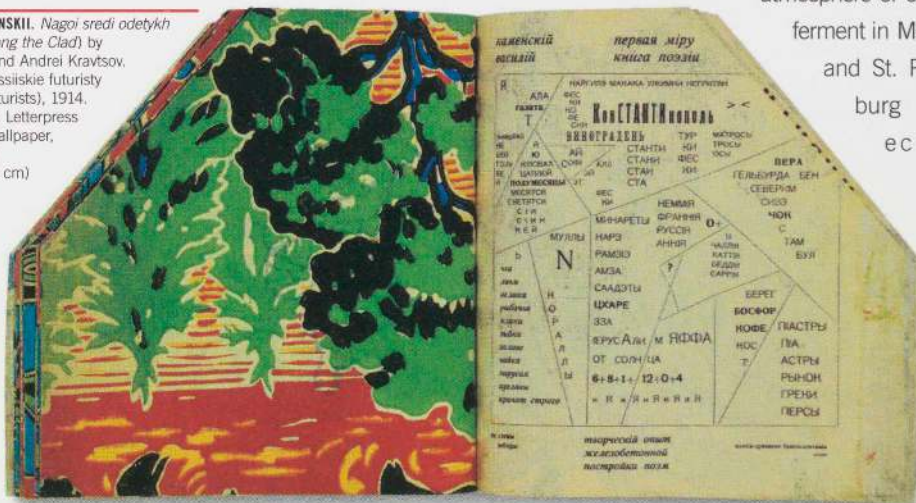
THE EARLY BOOKS MADE BY THE RUSSIAN FUTURIST

artists and poets were meant as a direct affront to the luxurious fine-art books traditionally produced for collectors. Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Kazimir Malevich, and Olga Rozanova were among the artists who joined with such poets as Aleksei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov, Vasilii Kamenskii, and Vladimir Mayakovsky to design books that intermingled text and imagery, producing a unified

and vital spirit from cover to cover. Small in size and often stapled together from coarse, randomly chosen papers of different colors and textures, these books declared their hand-made qualities. Illustrations were drawn in a crude, childlike style known as Neo-primitivism or presented with fractured and abstracted space in the Cubo-Futurist and Rayist styles. Rubber-stamped text joined manuscript text that was printed with the same lithographic technique used for the illustrations. Poets also experimented with typography, varying fonts and creating novel arrangements across the pages (for instance, Kamenskii's ferro-concrete poems in his provocatively titled books *Naked Among the Clad* and *Cloud in Trousers*, printed on pages made from wallpaper). Many of the artists also practiced poetry, and several poets had trained in art schools. There were friends, siblings, and spouses in the group. The

atmosphere of creative ferment in Moscow and St. Petersburg both echoed

VASILII KAMENSKII. *Nagai sredi odetykh* (*Naked Among the Clad*) by Kamenskii and Andrei Kravtsov. Moscow: Rossiiskie futuristy (Russian Futurists), 1914. Edition: 300. Letterpress spread on wallpaper, 7 7/16 x 15 1/4" (20.1 x 38.4 cm)



and diverged from the intense activity occurring in the arts across Western Europe during this period.

The outbreak of World War I had a sobering effect on the rather rambunctious activities of the Futurists, which had included speeches, performances in provocative costumes, and tours around the country to attract attention to their new vision. For the war effort, Malevich and Mayakovsky made posters and postcards in a style reminiscent of the popular and inex-

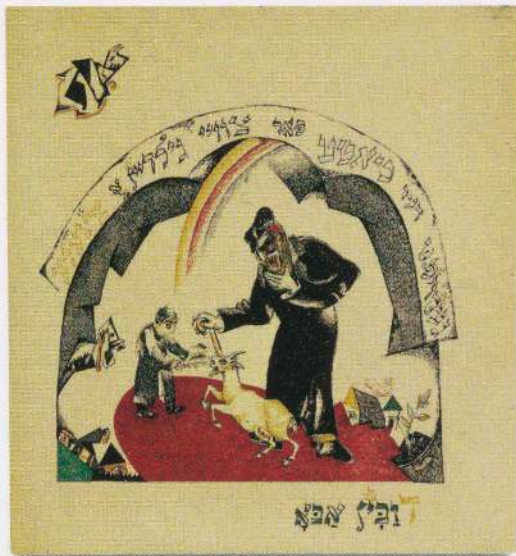
pensive *lubok* prints sold throughout the country. Others created cycles of prints, accompanied by texts, in a tradition reaching back through the centuries to artists like Breughel and Goya. In her *Mystical Images of War*, for instance, Goncharova incorporated Russian historical and religious motifs in a series of black and white lithographs that combined Neo-primitive drawing with Cubo-Futurist compositional structures. And Rozanova, in her *War* series with

Kruchenykh, took advantage of the rough, spontaneous qualities the linoleum cut technique afforded to depict battle scenes, some of which were based on newspaper accounts and included information from actual news clippings within their compositions.

In spite of the circumstances of the war, the spirit of Futurism had taken firm hold in avant-garde circles. The creative license it afforded led some artists, among them Marc Chagall and El Lissitzky, to incorporate its principles in the illustration of *Judaica* after a 1915 ban on Yiddish and Hebrew publications was lifted. An example of such artistic innovation can be seen in Lissitzky's version of *The Tale of a Goat*, a traditional children's story read at Passover. The artist placed his text in arches framing the illustrations on each page, thereby thoroughly integrating the words and images. Envisioning the design concept of the book as inextricably connected to its content, Lissitzky also devised a color-coding system that linked



OLGA ROZANOVA. "Excerpt from a Newspaper Bulletin" from *Voina (War)* by Aleksei Kruchenykh. Petrograd: Andrei Shemshurin, 1916. Edition: 100. Linoleum cut, 16 1/4 x 12 1/2" (41.2 x 30.6 cm)



EL LISSITZKY. "Father Bought a Kid for Two Zuzim" from *Chad gadya* (*The Tale of a Goat*) by Lissitzky, Kiev: Kultur Lige (Culture League), 1919. Edition: 75. Lithograph, 10 1/4 x 10 1/4" (27.4 x 25.7 cm). © 2002 Estate of El Lissitzky/ARS, New York/VG Bildkunst, Berlin

characters to their place in the story. The folding outer wrapper he made for the unbound sheets incorporated visionary Suprematist forms on its interior surface.

Creative arrangements of text could also be found in publications issued from the avant-garde outpost of Tiflis (now Tbilisi), the capital of Georgia. After the 1917 Revolution, Tiflis became a haven for artists and poets who sought to distance themselves from the civil unrest in major cities in order to work relatively

unimpeded. They gathered together at The Fantastic Tavern, where they performed, read their work, and organized a publishing enterprise called 41°, which was also the name of the avant-garde group. Books published under this imprint by leaders Kruchenykh, Igor' Terent'ev, and Il'ia Zdanevich are especially noteworthy for their inventive employment of typographic and manuscript designs, which gave visual expression to their Futurist verse. Zdanevich's apprenticeship in a printer's workshop acquainted him with the variety of fonts and symbols available to that trade. Kruchenykh explored the primitive technique of carbon copy and the little-known process of hectography for his hand-drawn poetic compositions.



IGOR' TERENT'EV. *Fakt (Fact)* by Terent'ev. Tiflis: 41°, 1919. Edition: approx. 250. Letterpress covers, 6 7/8 x 10 1/4" (17.3 x 27.4 cm)

TRANSFORM THE WORLD!

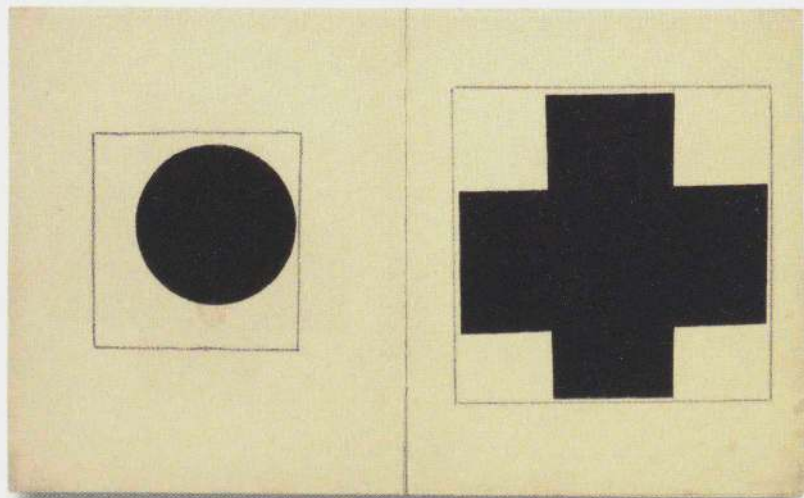
FUTURIST EXPERIMENTS EVOLVED INTO A STYLE

of geometric abstraction, most notably in the work of Malevich. He introduced the style and philosophy of Suprematism with paintings and a manifesto at the *0.10* exhibition in December of 1915. His innovations soon influenced other members of the avant-garde, particularly after he became a professor at an art school in the city of Vitebsk. It was there that his book *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, a visual primer of geometric shapes and compositional possibilities, was printed and published. It was also at Vitebsk that a group of Malevich's students and fellow professors organized themselves into a collective called UNOVIS (Affirmers of the New Art), with the purpose of

furthering the principles of Suprematism and applying them to practical art forms such as textiles, ceramics, posters, and books. Among the artists who were influenced by this new direction was Lissitzky, who ran the school's print shop. His Suprematist projects included a governmental congress brochure cover and a children's book in which the story is told through evolving abstract compositions rather than standard narration—the protagonists are a red and a black square.

The Revolution of 1917 had brought with it a fervent desire on the part of artists and poets alike to reach out to a broader public rather than focus their efforts primarily on the artistic community, as had been the case with Futurist projects. Mayakovsky now aimed his work at the ordinary Soviet citizen. He issued books of poetry with his own illustrations in an easily understood, caricatural

KAZIMIR MALEVICH. *Suprematism. 34 risunka (Suprematism: Thirty-Four Drawings)* by Malevich. Vitebsk: UNOVIS (Affirmers of the New Art), 1920. Edition: unknown (11 to 14 known examples outside the former USSR). Lithographed spread, 8 7/8 x 14 1/8" (21.8 x 36 cm)





Constructivist graphic design, with its bold red and black geometric forms, flourished in the 1920s, and its impact on layout and typography has been felt ever since. Avant-garde artists established standardized compositional structures noteworthy for their rational organization and use of mechanical production techniques. Their aim was to rid imagery of expressive gestures referring back to the creator. The concept of collectivity replaced that of the individual

(Higher State Artistic-Technical Workshops), which focused on practical training in the industrial arts for the creation of utilitarian objects.

Recognizing the role of books as vehicles of mass communication, the government became the country's primary publisher. Although the arts were not its highest priority, editions of the work of avant-garde poets featuring bold Constructivist designs by avant-garde artists ran to as many as 3,000 copies

(in stark contrast to the Futurists' mostly artist-published editions of 300 or 400 in the early teens). When it came to popular serialized novels with Constructivist covers, edition sizes grew to as many as 25,000 copies.

Two of the most important practitioners of book design at this time were Aleksandr Rodchenko and Lissitzky. Rodchenko's covers have architectonic compositional structures that often wrap around from front to back, reinforcing the sense of the book as a rectilinear and volumetric object. Lissitzky, on the other



ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO. *Rechevik. Stikhi (Orator: Verse)* by Sergei Tret'akov. Moscow-Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo (State Publishing House), 1929. Edition: 2,000. Letterpress covers, 6 1/2 x 9 1/2" (17 x 23.6 cm)

genius. New methods were taught in government-sponsored art academies, such as the two founded in 1920 in Moscow (and with branches elsewhere) as part of the Visual Arts Department of The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment: INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture), which sponsored philosophical discussions and theoretical debates and VKhUTEMAS

hand, created cover compositions that referred back to Suprematist canvases, with typographic elements arranged on white backgrounds, evoking imaginary spaces. Lissitzky also paid close attention to the structural aspects of each book design as a whole. For Mayakovsky's *For the Voice*, he devised a tab index of symbols that allowed readers to find



EL LISSITZKY. *Dlia golosa (For the Voice)* by Vladimir Mayakovsky. Moscow-Berlin: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo (State Publishing House), 1923. Edition: 2,000–3,000. Letterpress spread, 7 7/8 x 9 1/2" (18.7 x 25 cm). © 2002 Estate of El Lissitzky/ARS, New York/VG Bildkunst, Berlin

their favorite poems quickly, for the purpose of reading them aloud. Many of Mayakovsky's best-known poems were indeed recited by children and adults throughout the country.

While Constructivist graphic design offered boldness and clarity, its focus on an abstract vocabulary of forms caused some concern in regulatory circles, because it could not easily serve as a vehicle for specific messages. In this regard, photography and photomontage offered the potential for a documentary realism that could communicate ideas to the public. In some cases, however, photographic elements were added to abstract compositions for literary works, as in Solomon Telingater's wraparound cover for

Kirsanov has the 'Right of Word,' which relates the Russian practice of photomontage to parallel artistic movements in Western Europe. In Russia, however, the cutting and reassembling of photographic elements to form a montage was particularly influenced by the cinema, which was revolutionized at this time by such figures as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, who exploited the possibilities of juxtaposition and sequencing in moving pictures.

SOLOMON TELINGATER. *Slovo predstavliaetsia Kirsanovu (Kirsanov has the 'Right of Word')* by Semen Kirsanov. Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo (State Publishing House), 1930. Edition: 3,000. Letterpress covers, 7 1/8 x 6 1/8" (19.9 x 17.6 cm)



BUILDING SOCIALISM

CONSTRUCTIVIST GRAPHIC DESIGN BECAME

so pervasive in the Soviet Union that it appeared on even the most mundane publications, many in the service of governmental goals. The most important artists of the day were commissioned to design trade journals, industrial reports, and official documents. Architectural journals were a particularly noteworthy genre, since the Soviet government at that time was anxious to modernize its buildings as

tangible symbols of progress. From schools and communal housing to government office complexes, new structures were envisioned as providing a stark contrast to the architecture of the imperial age. Although many of these projects were never built, journals reflected the energy and vitality directed toward this industry while at the same time embodying on their covers and in their pages the most advanced thinking in graphic design. *Building Moscow: Monthly Journal of The Moscow Soviet of Workers, Peasants, and Red Army Deputies* is one such example. Its dynamic covers by Georgii Stenberg and Vladimir Stenberg are indicative of the excitement that was engendered by governmental architectural commissions.

Propaganda was yet another important government

MIKHAIL MASLIANENKO, GEORGII STENBERG, AND VLADIMIR STENBERG. *Straitel'stvo Moskvy.* *Ezhemesiachnyi zhurnal Moskovskogo oblastnogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta Soveta R., K. i K. Deputatov* (*Building Moscow: Monthly Journal of The Moscow Soviet of Workers, Peasants, and Red Army Deputies*), no. 11. N. F. Popov-Sibiriak, ed. Moscow: Moskovskii Sovet Rabochikh Krest'ianskikh i Krasno-armeiskikh Deputatov (*The Moscow Soviet of Workers, Peasants, and Red Army Deputies*), 1930. Edition: 8,000. Letterpress covers by the Stenberg brothers, 11 3/4 x 16 1/2" (29.9 x 42 cm)

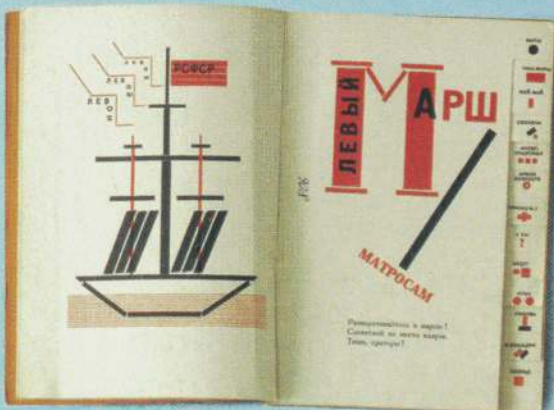
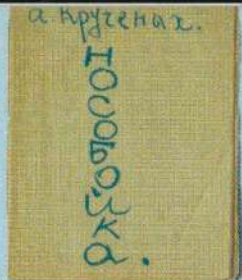


GUSTAV KLUTSIS AND SOLOMON TELINGATER. *Brigada khudozhnikov* (*Artists' Brigade*), no. 1, Pavel Novitskii, ed. Moscow: Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo (State Publishing House for Art), 1931. Edition: 6,000. Letterpress covers (left by Klutsis; right by Telingater), 11 1/4 x 20 1/4" (28.2 x 52.4 cm)



function provided by artists. A group of theorists and practitioners of agitational photomontage formed with the aim of stirring up emotions and glorifying the Soviet Union. Journals such as *Artists' Brigade* advocated for political and cultural action through art, particularly posters. *USSR in Construction* commissioned Lissitzky, Rodchenko, and others to create visual statements in magazine format that communicated loyalty to the state and the excitement of Soviet projects and events. With angled and close-up photographic images and the use of photomontage, these artists created cinematic

page-turning sequences designed to manipulate the experience of the reader. With combined national and foreign-language editions of nearly 100,000 copies, this journal was aimed at not just Soviet readers but people outside the country as well. In 1934, however, Stalin decided that avant-garde design was not the most direct way to reach his citizens and decreed that only Socialist Realism, with its sentimentalized scenes of glory, was to be employed in the service of the Soviet Union. With this decision, a period of remarkable creativity on the part of the avant-garde came to an end.



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