

MoMAExh\_0953\_MasterChecklist

# ALEXANDER RODCHENKO

1891 - 1956

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
NEW YORK

## Introduction

Documentation on Rodchenko's work is slender, especially in regard to the earlier part of his career as a painter and sculptor. An essential source has always been the personal archive of Alfred H. Barr, Jr., first Director of The Museum of Modern Art and subsequently Director of Museum Collections. Thanks to his pioneering interest in Rodchenko, the Museum came to possess a small but unique core of paintings and watercolors. Later, this was amplified by examples of graphic design, and recently, by the purchase of a group of photographs. This exhibition provides a rare opportunity to present, albeit imperfectly, the most important aspects of this versatile artist.

Barr made his first visit to Russia in 1928, the year before The Museum of Modern Art was founded and he became its Director. On that occasion, he found Rodchenko unwilling to answer questions about his painting, declaring himself too bored by the past to remember it. In an article written that year for *Transition*, Barr stated that Rodchenko considered it his greatest virtue to have been the first to abandon painting as an atrophied form of art.

When in 1921 Rodchenko headed a group of Constructivists who proclaimed the death of "fine art," he was preparing to renounce a career measuring less than a decade of mature work as a painter and sculptor in order to pursue branches of art more fitting to celebration of a new, technological society. At the time of his arrival in Moscow in 1914, at the age of 23, the dominant influences were Malevich and Tatlin. Rodchenko, who was born in St. Petersburg, received his early education at art school and in Moscow enrolled again in classes but soon ceased to attend, as he integrated himself into the circle of avant-garde artists in the city. That same year, he did his first abstract work and began to make compass-and-ruler drawings. The drawings are precocious in adapting technical instruments for artistic use; for later, in the 20s, both pictures and manifestos evince the peculiar significance of compass and ruler to the Russians. They symbolize rationality and the implementation of an art beyond the confines of painting as it was known in the past, and they, rather than "the frayed point of the paintbrush," in Lissitzky's phrase, become the tools of the "artist-engineer." At this time, however, the forms evolving naturally from mechanical use of these instruments -- circle and line -- are adapted by Rodchenko for his painting, and the juxtaposition of curvature and diagonal axis becomes fundamental to his work thereafter.

In the year following his arrival in Moscow, Rodchenko met Tatlin, who invited him to participate in the exhibition "The Store." He assisted in its preparation and showed several non-objective works of his own. From their first contact, Tatlin exerted great influence on Rodchenko's thought. But although in later years he avowed that Tatlin had taught him everything about art and life, it is clear that Malevich was also a major influence. In essence, as early as 1914 Rodchenko had adopted Malevich's simple geometric elements, appropriating for himself, however, the circle and arc, which were to remain subsidiary forms to Malevich. He also found useful Malevich's oblique

accents and dissolution of form and color areas, but Rodchenko tended to compound these devices into solid, structural images, the more complete of which approach Tatlin's corner reliefs in their interplay of cylindrical and planar forms clustered in space along a linear axis. The synthesis successfully achieved a personal style that distinguishes Rodchenko as one of the foremost painters among the Russians.

In 1918, in response to Malevich's *White on White*, he "declared BLACK ON BLACK in painting." (Examples of both are in The Museum of Modern Art.) A number of nihilistic quotations he used in conjunction with the exhibition of these works (e.g., M. Stirner: "As a basis for my work I put nothing") support a conjecture that the questions -- of a social as well as of an artistic nature -- raised by such refined and exclusive statements led Rodchenko to investigate three-dimensional constructions, and ultimately to a reconsideration of the role of the artist in a revolutionary society and the abandonment of the practice of "fine art."

In 1919 Rodchenko began making three-dimensional constructions in wood. The period of civil war following the 1917 Revolution brought great deprivation and a scarcity of materials of every kind, so that even the rough scraps he appropriated were probably in demand as kindling. The first *Constructions in Space* are a radical departure from the complexity, delicacy, and concern with color manifested in his paintings. Conversely, they are rudimentary in fabrication, asserting the fundamental importance of the raw material and transforming it without embellishment. They consist of a few members arranged in simple geometric configurations; for example, one piece is based on a central I with two abutting Ls; another, on a cross substructure with connecting diagonals, overlaid equidistantly at the joints. Both are composed of the repetitive use of a measured section (probably not very large -- one might regard them as table-top scale) and are thereby variable in placement, invertible and reversible. Far better known are the suspended *Constructions in Space* of 1920, which were probably made of metal, for at the time Rodchenko had taken charge of the metal workshop of the newly formed art institution, Vkhutemas. They are essentially spherical forms dissected concentrically from a disc, and employ motion as a spatial element. In spirit, the constructions bespeak Tatlin's injunctions to investigate the natural proclivities of a material, its movement and tension, in association with construction. They also evoke the reigning fervor against aesthetic criteria and for a "production art," which exhorted artists to "think less about beauty and create real things."

Lenin asserted that the Revolution had freed artists from the yoke of producing marketable wares, allowing everyone who considered himself an artist to create freely, with the Soviet State as supporter and purchaser. (He added portentously, though, that the process must be guided and the results formed according to plan!) In fact, under the benevolent authority of the Commissioner of Education, Lunacharsky, many of the artists held official positions in the art institutions. In 1918, Rodchenko was made Director of the Museum Bureau responsible for placement of works of art acquired under the ambitious purchasing program of the government's Section of Fine Arts. Thereafter, he

held several administrative and teaching posts. In their commitment to the Revolution, the artists produced diverse forms of art that could propagate the political dicta and social aims of the Bolsheviks. The theater and film were natural instruments. Rodchenko worked on productions of the Proletcult Theater (his first designs date from 1919) and later did several sets for films. In architecture, too, the artists were often drawn to structures that could function in the dissemination of propaganda: Lissitzky designed a Lenin podium in 1920, Gabo a radio station in 1919-20, and of course Tatlin's famous project for a Monument to the Third International was to have housed the Communist Party's organs of information and communication. In 1919, Rodchenko made designs for kiosks that appropriated typical Suprematist devices of color planes but utilized them as placards to carry slogans.

During these years, Rodchenko continued to paint and participated in the major group exhibitions. In 1922, he stopped painting forever. He considered himself the first to discard it as an anachronistic activity, but his position reflects the ferment of the time. Alexei Gan's manifesto, written in 1920, declared that "The first slogan of Constructivism is 'Down with speculative activity in artistic work! We declare unconditional war on art.'... The artist must be a Marxist educated man who has once and for all outlived art and really advanced on industrial material."

From then on, Rodchenko worked chiefly in photography, furniture, and graphic design. He was the designer of LEF -- the journal of the Left Front of the Arts, created by the famous poet Mayakovsky -- from its inception, and subsequently of *Novy LEF*. Many of his photographs were published in the latter periodical, and he often incorporated them, too, into the cover design (No. 30). In the first issue, the critic Osip Brik wrote an essay on him which began: "Rodchenko was an abstract artist. He has become a Constructivist and production artist. Not just in name, but in practice." Rodchenko was very close to Mayakovsky and frequently collaborated with him on the design of books and political posters. In 1923, he illustrated Mayakovsky's famous love poem, *About This*, with photomontages composed of informal photographs used in conjunction with fragments of reproductions (No. 24). The elaborate iconography of one page deals with communications, and Rodchenko has wittily converted his traditional device of axis and circle into a telephone shape.

Undoubtedly many factors affected Rodchenko's determination of photography as a means beyond painting and sculpture. Russia was a backward country industrially, and the tenor of post-Revolutionary society was unremitting in its glorification of technology and extolling of any technical means. In addition, Rodchenko was close to, and collaborated with, two of the leading proponents of the concept of a realistic, factual approach to art (in opposition to art as entertainment): the writer Tretyakov and the film-maker Dziga Vertov. The photographs predictably demonstrate techniques that had their origins in Rodchenko's painting. The diagonal remains essential and is implemented through the shooting angle. The vantage point is therefore rarely frontal, with the striking exception of some of the portraits, in which, employing a straightforward, face-to-face approach, he accomplishes haunting results, as in the early portraits of Mayakovsky

(No. 9) or his mistress Lily Brik for the cover of *About This* (No. 24). In both animate and inanimate subjects, Rodchenko achieves the angle by shooting either from overhead or underneath. This approach brings about a negation of gravity and results in a centrifugal spatial impact that relates to his suspended sculptures and his interest in spiral forms in painting. In the 20s, Rodchenko often worked with non-figurative subjects, such as architecture or nature, ambivalently maintaining their identity, while achieving a view so dynamic as to result in abstraction. In the 30s, however, artistic media came to be evaluated according to their potential as Party instruments of education and agitation, and he became predominantly a sports photographer, celebrating Soviet youth in parades and displays of physical culture.

Following his rejection of painting and sculpture, Rodchenko also turned to furniture design, and for the Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Paris in 1925 did the interior of a workers club, which Alfred Barr has characterized as "conspicuously genuine in the midst of 'arts deco' confectionery." On this occasion, Rodchenko made his first trip abroad and stayed in Paris for some weeks. His letters bode evidence the loyalty and optimism the Russians felt for their new society and frequently express contempt for the decadence of Paris and the West. He denounces at length the ludicrousness of the fashionable Parisian women, who, he says, are treated not as human beings, like men, but as objects to be used. This archaic attitude must particularly have impressed Rodchenko, since many women artists were prominent in the Russian avant-garde, and his wife, Varvara Stepanova, was herself a very talented artist and designer. The forthright distaste for Western ways and the nostalgia expressed by Rodchenko during this short absence from his homeland may indicate why so relatively few intellectuals emigrated from the Soviet Union despite the political climate, in relation to art, which became threatening even before Lenin's death and worsened with Stalin's accession to power.

Rodchenko's ideological commitment to the theories of Constructivism governed his vocational and personal decisions. Through his fields of artistic endeavor, he exemplifies the dedication of the Russian artists to the goals of their society. Early in the 30s, Stalin declared the only genuine art of the people to be that which functioned as a weapon and educational tool, and he instituted Socialist Realism as the exclusively acceptable form. This was indeed a travesty of the vision of the Constructivists, defined by Brik in writing of Rodchenko: "Art created by an artist with talent and a proletarian consciousness," for the benefit of a consumer who would not want pictures and ornaments. "This consumer is the proletariat. With the victory of the proletariat will come the victory of Constructivism."

Jennifer Licht  
Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture

This essay has been adapted from an article forthcoming in *Art News* and is used with the kind permission of the editors. My thanks to my colleague, Pierre Apraxine, for translating from the Russian.

## Checklist

Unless otherwise noted, all works are in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art. Dimensions are given in inches, height preceding width. Dates in parentheses do not appear on the works.

## Paintings and Drawings

1. Non-Objective Painting: Black on Black. 1918. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 31 1/4". Gift of the artist, through Jay Leyda, 1936 114.36
2. Composition. 1918. Gouache, 13 x 6 3/8". Gift of the artist, 1936 28.36
3. Non-Objective Painting. 1919. Oil on canvas, 33 1/4 x 28". Gift of the artist, through Jay Leyda, 1936 113.36
4. Composition. 1919. Gouache, 12 1/4 x 9". Gift of the artist, 1936 29.36
5. Composition. 1919. Watercolor and ink, 14 5/8 x 11 1/2". Gift of the artist, 1936 30.36
6. Line Construction. 1920. Colored inks, 12 3/4 x 7 3/4". Given anonymously, 1940 11.40
7. Line Construction. 1921. Color crayon, 14 x 10 1/2". Gift of the artist, 1936 31.36
8. Untitled (in "5x5=25" exhibition catalogue). (1921). Crayon drawing on graph paper, 6 1/4 x 3 3/4". Collection Alfred H. Barr, Jr., New York 71.140

## Photographs

An asterisk indicates that the original photograph is now circulating in the Museum's exhibition "Photo Eye of the 20s"; the print shown is a copy.

- \* 9. Vladimir Mayakovsky. 1924. The Parkinson Fund
- \* 10. Assembling for a Demonstration. 1928. Mr. and Mrs. John Spencer Fund
- \* 11. At the Telephone. 1928. Mr. and Mrs. John Spencer Fund
12. Untitled (Bridge). 1928. 8 1/2 x 5 1/2". Gift of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. 222.70
13. Untitled (Railroad Station). 1928. 9 x 6 1/2". Gift of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. 220.70
14. Untitled (Street). 1928. 8 7/8 x 6 1/2". Gift of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. 229.70
15. Untitled. 1931. 9 x 11 1/2". Gift of the artist 1.71
16. Belomorsk Canal. 1933. 17 3/8 x 11 1/2". Purchase 47.70

17. Chauffeur. 1933. 11 1/4 x 16". Mr. and Mrs. John Spencer Fund 51.70
18. Rehearsal, Belomorsk Canal. 1933. 11 3/8 x 17 1/4". Purchase 48.70
19. Rumba. 1935. 8 7/8 x 6 3/8". Purchase, Anonymous Fund 46.70
20. Varvara Stepanova. 1935. 14 7/8 x 10". The Parkinson Fund 52.70
21. Parade. 1936. 10 1/2 x 18". The David H. McAlpin Fund 49.70
22. Parade on Red Square. 1936. 11 1/8 x 18 3/4". The David H. McAlpin Fund 50.70
23. Sport Parade, Champions of Moscow. 1937. 18 5/8 x 10 3/8". The David H. McAlpin Fund 53.70

## Book Design

24. Design and illustrations for About This by Mayakovsky. 1923. Letterpress, 9 x 6". Printed by the State Publishing House, Moscow and Petrograd 50
25. Design for Altogether by Tretyakov. 1924. Letterpress, 9 1/4 x 6 1/4". Printed by the State Publishing House, Moscow 50
26. Design for advertisement for Lenin by G. Zinoviev. 1924. Poster paint over photograph, 9 3/8 x 6 7/8". Collection Alfred H. Barr, Jr. 71.139
27. Cover for China by Tretyakov. 1927. Letterpress, 8 x 5 1/4". Printed by the State Publishing House, Moscow. Collection Alfred H. Barr, Jr. NOT EXH.
28. Design for The Materialization of the Fantastic by I. Ehrenburg. 1927. Letterpress, 6 7/8 x 5 1/8". Printed by Kinopublications, Moscow and Leningrad 50
29. Cover for No. C by Mayakovsky. 1927. Letterpress (front and back), 7 x 10 1/2". Printed by Federation Editions, Moscow. Gift of Philip Johnson 50
30. Design and photographs for the magazine Novy LEF (New Left Front). Issues 1-12, 1927 and 1928. Letterpress, 9 x 6". Printed by State Editions, Moscow. Gift of Philip Johnson; and Collection Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (No. 7 1927, 71.141) others are Study Coll.
31. Inga (Theater of the Revolution). Poster. (1929). Letterpress, 29 3/4 x 41 3/4". Gift of Jay Leyda 306.37

## Documentary photographs of lost works