

Art Issues/Book Issues: An Overview

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For the initiated viewer, an illustrated book offers among the most intimate of art experiences.¹ Holding such a book in one's hand, perusing its pages, scrutinizing its images and text, the viewer relates to this distinctive art form in an altogether personal way. Unlike a painting, which makes an initial immediate impact, a book reveals itself only in a time-related sequence. To construct such an experience, the artist may simply present images or may assume the dual role of author and create text along with them. He or she may also collaborate with authors, sometimes generating ideas in tandem, or may join groups to issue manifestoes, periodicals, and other documents in book form that spread the spirit of participation in a particular movement. Yet, whatever shape a book takes, it is clear that this creative medium has a unique set of characteristics that influences one's perception and experience of it as a work of art.

The focus of this study is the book format as produced by Russian avant-garde artists and poets from 1910 to 1934. This period saw a remarkable proliferation of books in which artists were involved, and such books played a fundamental role in the aesthetic thinking of the day. Radical new forms appearing in both painting and poetry in the teens, offered by a close-knit community of artists and poets, provided the impetus. Despite the transformation of the cultural and political climate after the 1917 Revolution, the momentum of the earlier years continued into the 1920s with new book concepts emerging in response to new goals for society.

But with Stalinist decrees, finalized by 1934 and forbidding all but the practice of Socialist Realism in the arts, this chapter of avant-garde experimentation and innovation ended. These changing developments are explored in detail in essays within this catalogue, while the present overview provides a backdrop of issues relevant to an understanding of the illustrated book medium itself, on this singular occasion of its production.

AN ARTISTIC CONTEXT

The evolution of the book medium in Russia at this time was inspired by certain broad artistic changes, particularly the rise of modernist abstraction. A common impulse in avant-garde circles throughout Europe in the early years of the twentieth century was the desire to reject stultifying academic conventions and to challenge standard notions of representation. Artists sought new and vital forms of expression, often looking for inspiration outside their customary milieus. Some frequented carnivals and cabarets, believing that those living at the fringes of society embodied an emotional authenticity lacking in polite society. Others looked to folk and children's art and that of tribal cultures. Such sources were among the influences that led artists away from verisimilitude and toward an abstracted view of reality. A focus on the basic elements of art like color, shape, and line, without strict reference to motif, offered the possibility of more direct communication between artist and viewer.

Literary figures were integral to these artistic

circles, and innovation in literature existed side by side with advances in the visual arts. The work of French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, from the late nineteenth century, is particularly relevant to this subject. In his poem *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, he distributed words across the page in an unconventional spatial arrangement and employed varying font styles and sizes, thereby adding a new dimension to poetic representation. In the first decades of the twentieth century, poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire explored the visual possibilities of poetry further, while at the same time serving as spokesperson for new movements in French painting. The verse he characterized as *calligrammes* dispensed with punctuation and presented words in pictorial configurations. His poem *Il pleut* places type vertically down the page, flowing like raindrops. Such challenges to linearity in poetry coincided with a Cubist splintering of two-dimensional space on canvas. In Italy, as well, there was a break with the old order in art and literature, as poet and theorist Tommaso Filippo Marinetti called for an embrace of modern life with its potential for speed, danger, and cacophony. His poetic experiments with typographic design emphasized vivid compositional expressiveness and were known as *parole in libertà* (words-in-freedom). He proselytized on behalf of the Italian Futurist movement even in Russia, traveling there in 1914 and meeting many of the artists and poets under consideration here.

Russian artists from Moscow and St. Petersburg shared in this atmosphere of creative ferment in which traditional conventions were overturned. Many visited Western Europe and brought back provocative ideas gleaned from Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, and Futurism. For those who did not travel abroad, there were exhibitions and private collections of Western art in Russia that enabled them to be well informed about new developments. But they also sought distinctly native solutions to the current challenges. Looking to their own rich history of icon painting and to such familiar vernacular expressions as sign painting and the popular *lubki* (prints that sold for pennies to the general populace), they established pictorial vocabularies that incorporated elements from Western European art but enlarged upon them. References to indigenous motifs, with bold, energetic drawing and brushwork, characterized an artistic style called Neo-primitivism; compositions depicting lines of emanating light were known as Rayist; and spatial investigations of fractured forms in motion contributed to Cubo-Futurism.

Russian literary figures shared in this spirit of experimentation. Many were versed in both art and literature, like the influential poets Aleksei Kruchenykh and Vladimir Mayakovsky, who began their careers in art school. Poets and artists also interacted socially, in spite of rivalries among exhibiting groups. Many of the participants were close friends, spouses, or siblings and, working together, they constituted an empowering mass. As painters sought new, abstracted forms of expression, Russian poets scrutinized language to discover *its* rudimentary components. To challenge representation, they

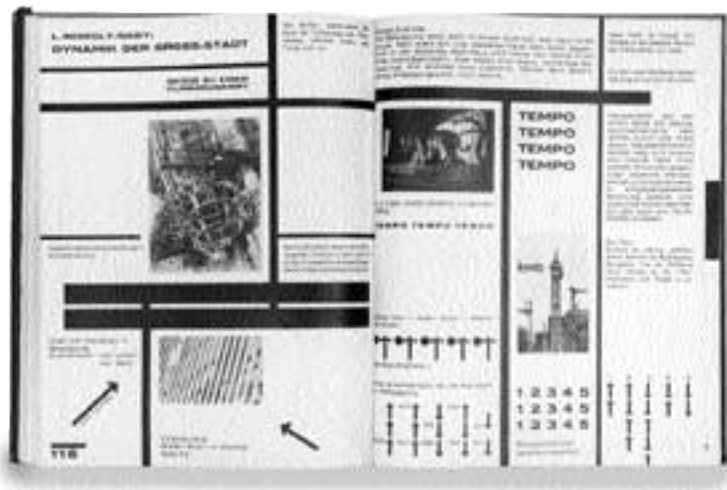
dispensed with logic and took words out of their normal contexts, often isolating word fragments and focusing on their related sounds. Even the graphic identity of letters was exploited for potential new meaning. The abstracted, rebuilt, and revitalized poetic form that resulted was called *zaum*, a word roughly translated as “beyond” or “outside of” reason.² Numerous examples of *zaum*, and other explorations of verse, can be found in book collaborations with such artists as Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Kasimir Malevich, Olga Rozanova, and others. (See “Futurist Poets and Painters”; p. 62.)

This period of literary and artistic activity throughout Europe was slowed considerably by the sobering effects of World War I. In Russia Goncharova responded with her 1914 *Mystical Images of War* (pp. 95–97), in which she adopted a Primitivist drawing style and Cubo-Futurist compositional structure, also including references to motifs of Russian history. Later, in Germany, the artist Otto Dix reacted with vivid, literal renderings in his series *The War*, comprised of fifty etchings depicting horrors he had witnessed in the trenches (fig. 1). Other poets and artists focused on the irrationality of combat. A group from Switzerland and Germany banded together in a movement designated by the nonsense term “Dada.” Overtones of disillusionment, despair, and nihilism permeated this group's activities, which often took the form of performances in cabarets. The journal *Cabaret Voltaire* (1916) was one manifestation of these efforts. Dadaist artistic strategies also included an emphasis on chance occurrences—the juxtapositions of random materials in collage and merged fragments of disparate images in photomontage. This focus on systems to express irrationality can be compared to earlier experiments with *zaum* poetry in Russia. Kruchenykh, one of its leading practitioners, found new uses for this creative strategy in his *Universal War* of 1916 (pp. 103–05). Playful collages of brightly colored abstract shapes confound the viewer with titles like “Military State,” “Betrayal,” “Heavy Artillery,” and “India's Battle with Europe.” The artist called this book an example of



Fig. 1. OTTO DIX. *Shock Troop Advancing Under Gas Attack* from the portfolio *The War*. Berlin: Karl Nierendorf, 1924. Etching, aquatint, and drypoint, 7⁷/₁₆ x 11⁵/₁₆" (19.3 x 28.8 cm). Ed.: 70. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller

Fig. 2. LÁSZLÓ MOHOLY-NAGY. *Bauhausbücher 8: Malerei, Photographie, Film* by László Moholy-Nagy. Munich: Albert Langen, 1925. Letterpress, 9 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 7 $\frac{1}{16}$ " (23 x 17.9 cm). Ed.: unknown. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York



“poetic zaum shaking the hand of pictorial zaum.”³

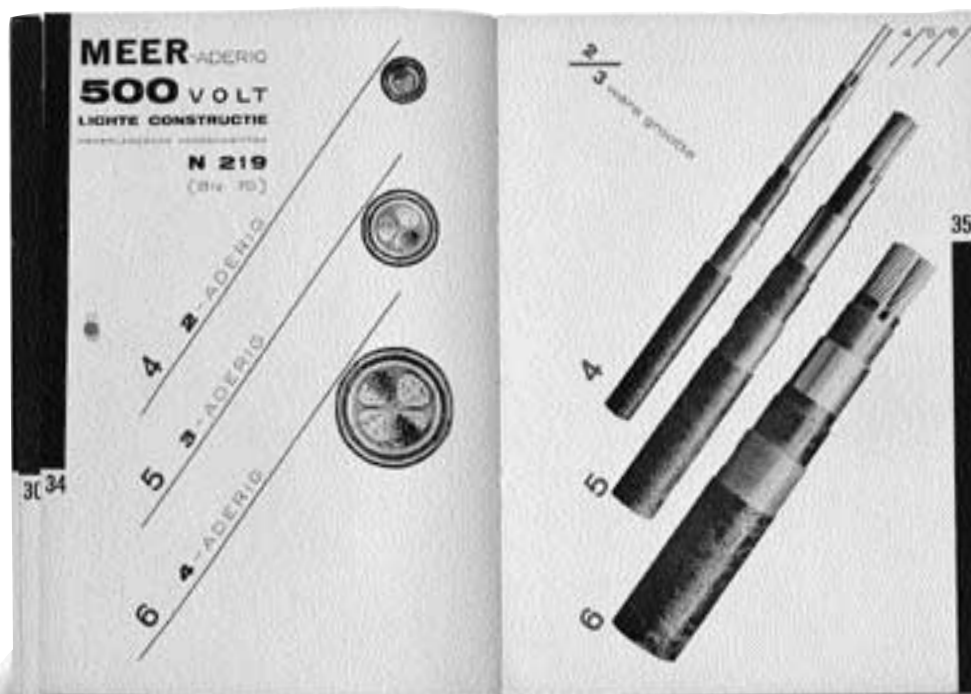
During the teens and 1920s, artists also experimented with geometricized abstraction. Piet Mondrian in Holland was a central figure in the search for a visual language of essence and purity. In Russia, Malevich exhibited paintings with a radically abstract vision he called Suprematism. He disseminated his principles not only through exhibitions but also through teaching, most importantly at an art school in the city of Vitebsk. It was there that his *Suprematism: Thirty-Four Drawings* (pp. 148–50), a small book serving as a visual treatise

of abstract imagery, was printed and published in 1920.

Later in the 1920s and 1930s, the irrational impulses of the Dada movement evolved into Surrealism, particularly in Paris. Poets and painters delved into the subconscious to acknowledge the potent force of dreams and nightmares. Such explorations, however, had little impact in Russia, where the Soviet experiment had taken hold. In a spirit of utopian idealism, many artists there used principles of abstraction to embrace progressive and utilitarian ends. The rationality of geometry merged with functionality in a new artistic direction known as Constructivism. Similar goals, without the stimulus of revolutionary changes in government, were found in other countries as well, as abstractionists sought practical outlets in typography, graphic design, weaving, furniture, and architecture. In Germany such practice was formalized in the workshops of the Bauhaus, a school established with this utopian impulse as an underlying concept. Industrial materials were favored for their evocation of machine efficiency, while techniques like photography prospered over painting. Book design achieved a highly recognizable style there built on clarity and order in the work of László Moholy-Nagy and others (fig. 2). Similar approaches emerged from the De Stijl movement in The Netherlands. The Dutch designer Piet Zwart, for example, favored layout and typography that incorporated geometric abstraction in highly ordered yet dynamic compositions (fig. 3).

In Russia, artists also turned to practical commissions, designing ceramics, fashioning textiles and clothing, devising installations for exhibitions and sets for the theater, and also planning advertising posters and

Fig. 3. PIET ZWART. *NKF: N.V. Nederlandsche Kabelfabriek Delft*. 1928. Letterpress, 16 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (42 x 29.8 cm). Ed.: unknown. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Jan Tschichold Collection, Gift of Philip Johnson



packaging for manufacturing products. In this atmosphere, book covers became a primary vehicle for visual experimentation. Aleksandr Rodchenko reaffirmed the basic rectilinear and geometric volume of the book as object by building cover compositions with interlocking forms recalling architecture, grid structures that asserted flatness, and designs wrapped around from front to back (pp. 189–93). El Lissitzky, on the other hand, maintained a connection to the imaginary spaces of Suprematist canvases with covers on which compositions of letters and shapes often played against background fields of white (pp. 196, 197). Vavara Stepanova's cover and endpapers for *Collected Poems* by Nikolai Aseev (p. 241) demonstrate how abstracted photography and layout could conjure up new kinds of representation. The reader almost has the sense of grasping a fragment of machinery while holding this small volume. Yet, at about this same time, photographic strategies would serve other, targeted goals of representation in strident examples of propaganda in book form. Principles of abstraction, however, continued to function as basic compositional underpinnings, not only for cover and page designs, but also for overall structures (pp. 235–45).

A BOOK CONTEXT

Since illustrated books offer many possibilities of format, it is not surprising that approaches to the medium have varied and defining terms have arisen among specialists.⁴ In the modern and contemporary period, there is a particular division between two phenomena: the “artist’s book” and the *livre d’artiste* (book of the artist). While these terms seem precisely the same in meaning, a clear distinction has emerged, and an exploration of the individual characteristics of each genre helps provide a conceptual framework for appreciating the complex achievement of the Russian avant-garde book.

The artist’s book is the newer concept and generally embraces those works in which primary responsibility rests with the visual artist and in which a unified conception results. Other defining factors are large editions and low cost to purchasers, both of which are aimed at reaching broad audiences and are facilitated by the use of inexpensive papers and commercial printing processes. Ed Ruscha’s *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (fig. 4) of 1962 is considered by many to be the first example of the artist’s book phenomenon, with the genre flourishing in the idealistic period of the late sixties and seventies. Incorporating a small format, Ruscha assembled a series of black-and-white photographs of gasoline stations, taken on the highway between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City, where his parents lived. These shots are arranged in a mostly geographical sequence, and there is no text other than the name and location of each station. Ruscha himself published this book, which first appeared in an edition of 400 copies, selling for just a few dollars. Second and third editions resulted in printings of nearly 4,000 copies by 1969. Copies of the first edition are now exceedingly rare and expensive, and even later editions are well beyond the modest means of the intended audience.



Fig. 4. **EDWARD RUSCHA.** *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* by Edward Ruscha. 1962. Photolithograph, 7 x 5½” (17.8 x 14 cm). Hollywood: National Excelsior Publication (Edward Ruscha). Ed.: 400. The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The *livre d’artiste*, by contrast, is remarkable for its hand-pulled etchings, lithographs, screenprints, or woodcuts printed on specially chosen papers. With editions limited to prescribed numbers of copies, these books are expensive and aimed at the serious collector. From the point of view of concept and structure, the *livre d’artiste* is rarely the vision of a single individual. In addition to the artist, there are several other creative forces at work: in particular the publisher, the author, and sometimes even the fine art printer. Among the first examples of this tradition, which flourished in the twentieth century particularly in France (hence the French term), is Pierre Bonnard’s *Parallèlement* (fig. 5) of 1900, an illustrated book of Paul Verlaine’s poetry. Even though this book was published by Ambroise Vollard and includes lithographs printed by Auguste Clot, two of the

Fig. 5. **PIERRE BONNARD.** *Parallèlement* by Paul Verlaine. Paris: Ambroise Vollard, 1900. Lithograph, 11 5/8 x 9 3/8” (29.5 x 23.9 cm). Ed.: approx. 200. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Louis E. Stern Collection



Fig. 6. JEAN (HANS) ARP. *Vingt-cinq poèmes* by Tristan Tzara. Zurich: Collection Dada, 1918. Woodcut, 7¾ x 5⅝" (19.7 x 13.5 cm). Ed.: unknown. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase



Fig. 7. MAX ERNST. *Répétitions* by Paul Eluard. Paris: Au Sans pareil, 1922. Letterpress, 8⅞ x 5⅜" (21.7 x 13.6 cm). Ed.: 350. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York



most distinguished practitioners in their fields, it possesses a remarkable unity in its conception, with illustrations in pale sanguine ink surrounding the text. Published in an edition of 200, this *livre d'artiste* includes 10 copies on China paper with a supplementary suite of prints, 20 additional copies on China paper, and 170 on Holland paper.

The fact that a unified vision is among the most noteworthy attributes of an artist's book, and that it can be found in Bonnard's *livre d'artiste*, demonstrates immediately that these book genres are fluid notions. The work of the Russian avant-garde shows characteristics of both phenomena, as well as additional variations, underlining the complexity and rich potential of the book as a visual art medium. Something of this complexity is reflected even in the way book arts are absorbed into museum collections. At The Museum of Modern Art, for example, the library's holdings include most artists' books and artist-initiated periodicals, as well as

occasional examples of *livres d'artiste*. The Photography Department maintains those illustrated books in which photography is the dominant technique. The Department of Prints and Illustrated Books contains the primary collection of *livres d'artiste* and also artist's book titles, particularly if the artists are represented in the print collection; it also houses a few periodicals with prints. Finally, some books and periodicals featuring distinctive graphic design and typography are kept in the Department of Architecture and Design.

The Artist's Involvement

Among the variety of roles that artists assume in the production of illustrated books is that of collaborator with an author who shares aesthetic concerns. Such associations were common in the Russian avant-garde period as, for example, painter Mikhail Larionov and poet Aleksei Kruchenykh came together in 1912 and 1913 for such books as *Old-Time Love*, *Pomade*, and *Half-Alive* (pp. 66, 67, 83). With inventive page designs combining illustrations and poetry and printed in the same technique of lithography, these books underscore a sense of contact between the literary and the artistic. Similar interaction is found as Kruchenykh works with his companion, the artist Olga Rozanova, on the 1913 *A Little Duck's Nest . . . of Bad Words* (pp. 76, 77). After the Revolution, among the most fruitful collaborative relationships was that between Rodchenko and Mayakovsky (pp. 189–92, 210, 211, 213, 214), but this phenomenon is also seen in the area of children's books with artist Vladimir Lebedev joining forces with writer Samuil Marshak (pp. 171, 172, 179).

Outside Russia, the Dada and Surrealist movements stand out as fostering comparable interchanges. Among the most active poets in this regard was Tristan Tzara, who worked with Jean (Hans) Arp (fig. 6) and many other artists. Another was Paul Eluard, who frequently engaged in joint book ventures. One project with Max Ernst, entitled *Répétitions* (fig. 7), begins with a poem inspired by the artist and titled with his name.

Fig. 8. ANDRÉ MASSON. *Simulacre* by Michel Leiris. Paris: Éditions de la Galerie Simon (Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler), 1925. Lithograph, 9⅝ x 7½" (24.5 x 19.1 cm). Ed.: 112. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.



Poet Michel Leiris and painter André Masson also demonstrate how artistic thinking can be intertwined in *Simulacre* (fig. 8), with some poems, and the dreamlike compositions that accompany them, devised while the two friends were together, basing their creative efforts on the Surrealist method of automatism.⁵

Another approach to the book finds artists taking on the function of authors and providing texts as well as illustrations. Lissitzky's *Of Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale in Six Constructions* of 1922 (pp. 153–55) includes his own verbal fragments as integral components of the page compositions. As this tale for children unfolds, however, the overall effect is one of visual animation rather than narrative storytelling. Similarly, the Viennese artist Oskar Kokoschka, who wrote the text for *Die träumenden Knaben* (fig. 9), put emphasis on its visual aspects. Set in black type echoing the outlines of his illustrations, the story is confined to vertical bands at the far right of each page, focusing communication primarily on the imagery. Kokoschka called this work a “picture poem.”⁶ Other major figures of modern art, such as Vasily Kandinsky, Fernand Léger, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, employed other strategies for combining their own words and images. In the contemporary period, Louise Bourgeois continues this tradition, finding a welcoming outlet for literary endeavors in the medium of the illustrated book.

It is less common, however, for an established writer to take responsibility for the visual elements of a book. Most notable among the Russian practitioners of this approach are Kruchenykh and Mayakovsky, who, as has been noted, were adept in both modes. Kruchenykh created a series of booklets in 1917–19 in which text and design merge (pp. 112–15). In *Universal War*, cited above, his collages were so accomplished that, for a long time, they were attributed to the artist Rozanova (pp. 103–05). Mayakovsky, for his part, contributed both art and text to books of a popular nature after the Revolution. His cartoonlike illustrations are clearly aimed at a mass readership (pp. 162–65). Outside Russia, an author who set an early precedent was Alfred Jarry, a late-nineteenth-century figure whose books often contained his own woodcut illustrations. More recently, the Belgian conceptual artist Marcel Broodthaers, who began his career as a poet, created a series of artist's books in the 1960s and 1970s that is considered a vital aspect of his work.

Group efforts are another category of artistic involvement. In Russia, early anthologies of art and poetry now seem like the incubating laboratories for the emerging avant-garde (pp. 63–65). The small volume *Victory over the Sun* (p. 74), documenting a 1913 performance, shows yet another conception. As a kind of souvenir of an event that included a musical score by Mikhail Matiushin, text by Kruchenykh, and sets by Malevich, it continues to evoke an air of excitement as one recalls this seminal event. Likewise, one can grasp something of the energy and volatility of the Dada movement by perusing the ephemeral pamphlets and periodicals its members produced. Kurt Schwitters's publica-

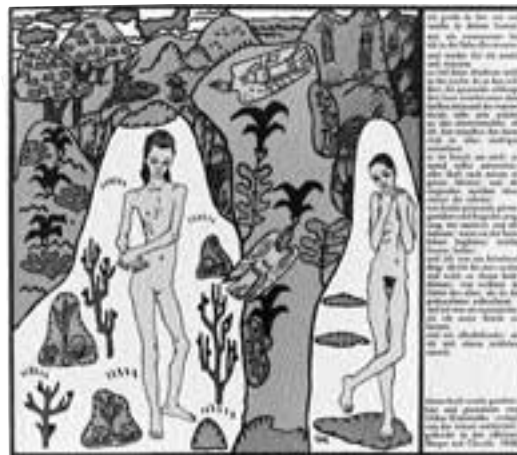


Fig. 9. OSKAR KOKOSCHKA. *Die träumenden Knaben* by Oskar Kokoschka. Vienna: Wiener Werkstätte, 1908 (distributed by Kurt Wolff, Leipzig, 1917). Lithograph, 9 ⁷/₁₆ x 10 ¹³/₁₆” (24 x 27.5 cm). Ed.: 275. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Louis E. Stern Collection

tions, under the umbrella term “Merz” (figs. 10, 11), are important examples. Similarly, the Surrealists took full advantage of the periodical format with *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, *Documents*, and other titles providing platforms for their rival agendas.⁷ Meanwhile, Constructivist artists from various countries were issuing journals espousing their positions. In Czechoslovakia, *Red* (fig. 12) reflects the utopian world views of artists there, while in Russia, issues of *LEF* (pp. 190, 209) and *New LEF* (p. 236) capture the avant-garde's attempts to adapt artistic practice to new Revolutionary ideals.

The Role of the Publisher

Following collaborations of artists and writers, the significance of another contributor—the publisher—must be noted, since the production of an editioned book requires many decisions that are routinely handled by such a person or entity. Questions regarding the number



Fig. 10. KURT SCHWITTERS. *Merz*, no. 11. Kurt Schwitters, ed. Hannover: Merzverlag, 1924. Letterpress, 11 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 8 ⁵/₈” (30.4 x 22 cm). Ed.: unknown. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

Fig. 11. KURT SCHWITTERS. *Die Kathedrale* by Kurt Schwitters. Hannover: Paul Steegemann, 1920. Lithograph and collage, 8 ¹³/₁₆ x 5 ⁵/₈” (22.4 x 14.3 cm). Ed.: approx. 3,000. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr.

Fig. 12. **KAREL TEIGE. *Red***, no. 1. Karel Teige, ed. Prague: Odeon, 1927. Letterpress, 9 1/8 x 7 1/8" (23.3 x 18.2 cm). Ed.: unknown. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York



Fig. 13. **PABLO PICASSO. *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*** by Honoré de Balzac. Paris: Ambroise Vollard, Éditeur, 1931. Etching and wood engraving, 12 15/16 x 9 15/16" (33 x 25.2 cm). Ed.: 340. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Louis E. Stern Collection

Fig. 14. **ANDRÉ DERAIN. *L'Enchanteur pourrissant*** by Guillaume Apollinaire. Paris: Henry Kahnweiler, 1909. Woodcut, 10 7/16 x 7 7/8" (26.5 x 20.0 cm). Ed.: 106. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Louis E. Stern Collection

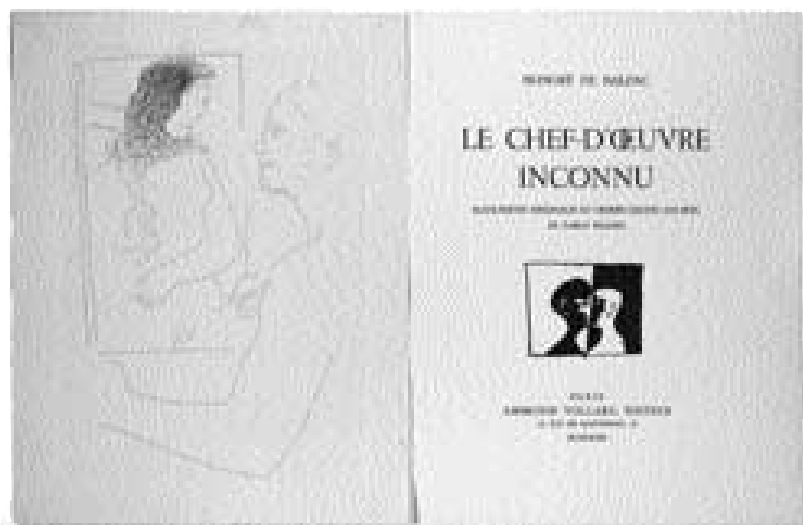
of copies, the costs and means of production, and the ultimate distribution of the book, for instance, are often decided by the publisher, who provides initial funding for the project and shares in profits from sales. Given the fundamental nature of these questions, it is not surprising that this decision-maker may have substantial influence over a book's concept. Such a mediating role for the publisher should be kept in mind, since the artwork that results no longer constitutes the direct communication between artist and viewer that one expects in painting and other mediums.

Within the tradition of the artist's book genre, if a publisher other than the artist is involved, this person or organization usually remains in the background. Since such books are often produced in the most inexpensive way possible, funding is not a major impediment. Financial support may come from museums, alternative

spaces, and other non-profit organizations, or from general art book publishers who encourage this kind of creative work as a sideline. Such supporters hope to facilitate rather than influence the artist in the realization of his or her concept, and they rarely expect financial remuneration.

For the *livre d'artiste*, the domain of publisher has been more complicated. Working with many of the most important artists of the modern period, these publishers have initiated projects that might never have come into being without their daring and imagination and that have since become essential to an understanding of the artists' oeuvres. In view of the fact that sales of such relatively luxurious books are to a small and rarified market, publishers have made this effort primarily as a labor of love and not as a significant business investment. Usually connected to the art world in one way or another—many as gallery owners or print publishers—these creative individuals have harbored visions of their own for this medium, and their biases show through in the books that have resulted.

In the distinguished twentieth-century French tradition of this medium, the art dealer Ambroise Vollard is perhaps the most celebrated publisher. He spared nothing for the sumptuous volumes he issued. Often choosing texts by historic figures rather than contemporaries, Vollard usually invited artists to respond with full-page, handpulled prints, as well as additional, small-scale illustrations that enlivened text pages. *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* by Honoré de Balzac, with illustrations by Picasso (fig. 13), is a typical example of this model. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, like Vollard a gallery owner, was closely linked to both artistic and literary figures of his day and relished bringing them together for book projects. An example from the Fauve and Cubist circles is *L'Enchanteur pourrissant* (fig. 14), with the first published text of Guillaume Apollinaire and woodcuts by



André Derain; a Surrealist volume of note is *Soleils bas* (fig. 15), with the first published poems of Georges Limbour and etchings by André Masson. The eminent publisher Efstراتيجος Tériade, known simply as Tériade, was initially associated with periodicals such as *Cahiers d'art* and *Minotaure*. For illustrated book projects, he gave artists primary responsibility, even fostering the uses of their handwritten texts. Matisse's *Jazz* (fig. 16) is a remarkable example of this approach to the medium.

In Russia, the publishing tradition of the *livre d'artiste* did not take hold among avant-garde artists, even though ornate art books had filled a market position in the earlier years of the century and continued to be produced into the 1920s.⁸ In fact, it was in part a reaction against such deluxe productions that the artists of the early teens created their small handmade books. Most of these were published by the artists themselves or by friendly patrons in their immediate circle, in editions of about 300 to 400. Under such circumstances, the conception of the book stayed firmly in the hands of the artists and authors, and the resulting communication with viewers was direct and without the mediating sensibility of an opinionated publisher.

The poet Kruchenykh, who had a consuming interest in books throughout his life as author, illustrator, collector, and bibliographer, was a driving force in production. Choosing the publishing imprint EUY, which derives from the word for lily,⁹ he was responsible for such early examples as *Forestly Rapid* (p. 72), *The Poetry of V. Mayakovsky* (p. 75), and other titles. Another active participant in artistic circles at that time who helped ensure that such publications appeared was the musician Mikhail Matiushin. His imprint Zhuravl' (crane) can be found on several anthologies of poetry and art, including *Roaring Parnassus*, *The Three*, and *A Trap for Judges* (pp. 71, 75, 63). Although not contributing members in these artistic undertakings, Georgii Kuz'min and Sergei Dolinskii also served as patrons when they agreed to publish *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, *Pomade*, *Half-Alive*, and *Hermit, Hermitess: Two Poems* (pp. 63, 67, 83, 78). This was a friendly gesture rather than a business venture, and the two men were only guaranteed, in the words of historian Vladimir Markov, "the gratitude of posterity" for their efforts.¹⁰

After the 1917 Revolution, such artist-initiated books continued to appear in the outpost of Tiflis, the capital of Georgia, where many members of the avant-garde sought refuge from the upheavals of civil war. Kruchenykh was among this group, and it is not surprising that he continued to issue books on his own and also joined in publishing activities with artists and poets who formed the 41° group.¹¹ Their imprint appears on publications that were often noteworthy for typographic elements, due in part to the influence of one of the group's leaders, Il'ia Zdanevich, who had apprenticed in a printer's shop. Some examples from 1919 are *Fact*, which displays the 41° publishing logo (p. 119); *Lacquered Tights* and *Milliork* (p. 125), with distinctive cover designs; and the elaborately conceived volume, *To Sofia Georgievna Melnikova: The Fantastic Tavern* (p. 122).



Fig. 15. **ANDRÉ MASSON.** *Soleils bas* by Georges Limbour. Paris: Éditions de la Galerie Simon (Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler), 1924. Drypoint, 9½ x 7½" (24.2 x 19 cm). Ed.: 112. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Walter P. Chrysler, Jr.

During the period just before and immediately following the Revolution, illustrated books also appeared from publishers of specialized subjects. Raduga in Moscow and Leningrad was among those that issued children's books, while several others, such as Kultur Lige and Idisher Folks Farlag in Kiev, published Judaica. Since these publishers, some arising from artists' groups, had specific content and markets, they obviously influenced the conception of books under their imprints. Books of Judaica were sometimes published in editions of several thousand, while children's books routinely found as many as 10,000 readers. This is a dramatic turn of events for illustrated books now considered

Fig. 16. **HENRI MATISSE.** *Jazz* by Henri Matisse. Paris: Tériade, 1947. Pochoir. 16½ x 12¼" (42 x 32.2 cm). Ed.: 270. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Louis E. Stern Collection

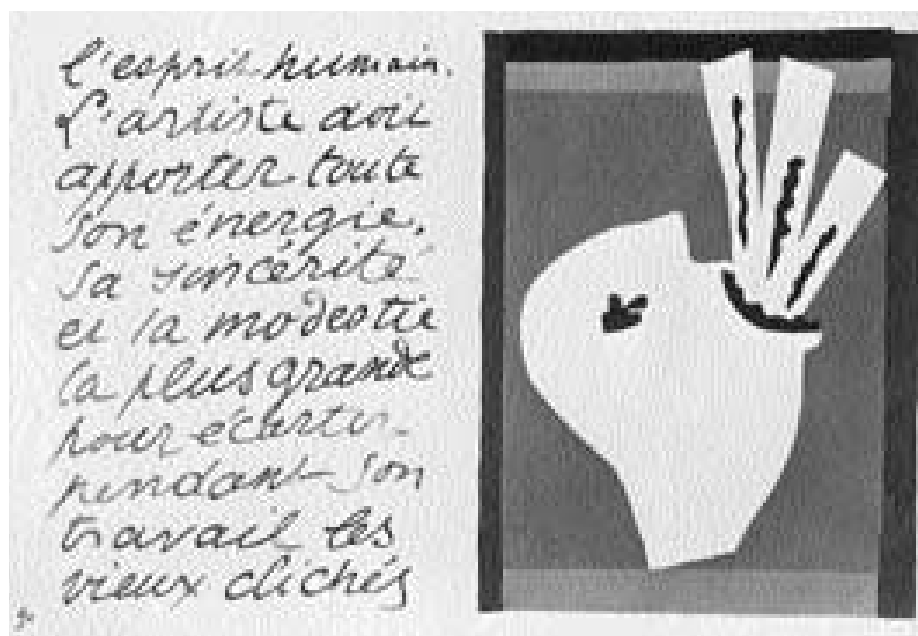


Fig. 17. **SOL LEWITT. *Geometric Figures & Color*** by Sol LeWitt. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1979. Letterpress, 7¹⁵/₁₆ x 7¹⁵/₁₆" (20.3 x 20.3 cm). Ed.: unlimited. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

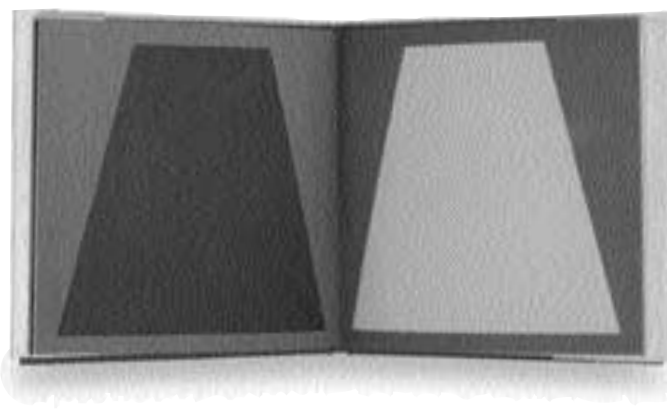
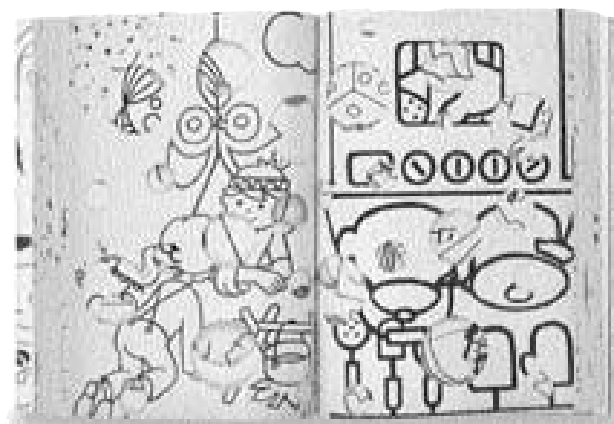


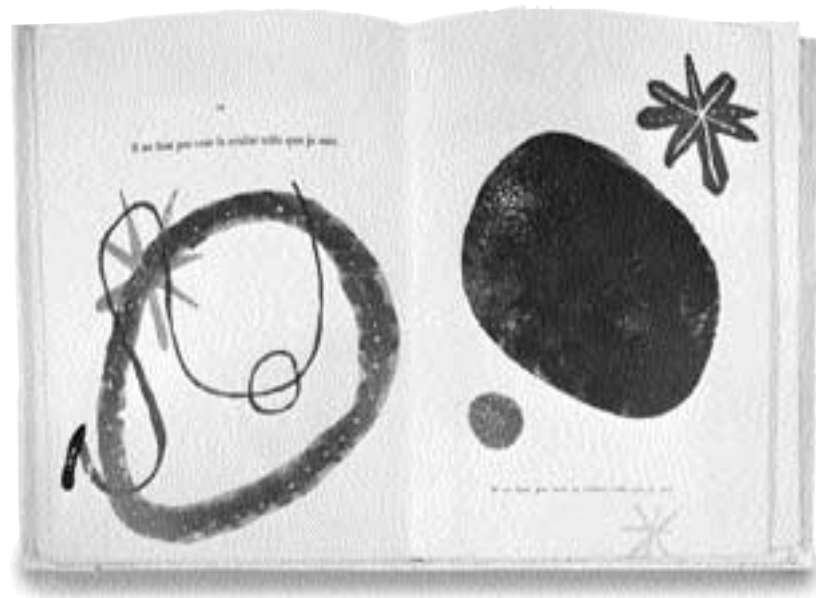
Fig. 18. **DIETER ROTH. *bok 3b und bok 3d (gesammelte werke, no. 7)***. Stuttgart: hansjörg mayer, 1974. Letterpress, 9¹/₁₆ x 6¹¹/₁₆" (23.1 x 17 cm). Ed.: 1,000. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York



modernist works of art, and a broad outreach continued when the official apparatus of the government took over most publishing activity.¹²

Even though the arts were not a high priority for Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, the state publisher, the work of avant-garde artists and poets found a vast audience through its sponsorship when compared to the self-publishing ventures of the earlier period. The collaborative work of Mayakovsky and Rodchenko for *About This: To Her and to Me* in 1923 (p. 210), as well as that of Semen Kirsanov and Solomon Telingater for *Kirsanov has the 'Right of Word'* in 1930 (p. 217), for example, were issued in editions of 3,000 copies. The scope of pulp novels like those in the *Mess Mend or Yankees in Petrograd* series by author Jim Dollar [Marietta Shaginian] in 1924, with covers by Rodchenko (p. 212), was 25,000

Fig. 19. **JOAN MIRÓ. *À toute épreuve*** by Paul Éluard. Geneva: Gérald Cramer, 1958. Woodcut, 12³/₁₆ x 9¹³/₁₆" (32 x 25 cm). Ed.: 130. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Louis E. Stern Collection



readers. Broader yet was the purview of the government's propaganda magazines, which appeared in several languages primarily for distribution beyond the country's borders. In the 1930s, accomplishments of the Soviet regime were touted in issues of *USSR in Construction* (pp. 242, 243) designed by Lissitzky and Rodchenko, and published in combined foreign-language editions that grew to over 100,000 copies. By this late period, the influence of the government publisher over content was absolute, providing a highly unusual level of outside mediation over the resulting artworks.

The Concept of Unity

Among the most visually and conceptually satisfying illustrated books are those in which the viewer experiences a sense of wholeness from start to finish. For many of the reasons cited above, this has been central to the definition of the artist's book and sometimes more difficult to achieve in the *livre d'artiste*. Ruscha's work has been previously singled out, but others who work in the artist's book medium also demonstrate this singularity of vision because they alone shape the overall concepts involved. Sol LeWitt and Dieter Roth, each of whom has created a major corpus of artist's books, have taken full advantage of the unique nature of this format to create sustained dialogues with their viewers (figs. 17, 18). For the *livre d'artiste*, on the other hand, the model that most often provides a unified vision is one in which author's text and artist's illustrations are integrated. Outstanding examples are *À toute épreuve* (fig. 19), with Joan Miró's woodcuts encircling the poems of his friend Paul Éluard, and *Le Chant des morts*, with Picasso's illuminations serving as a dual form of writing as they interact with Paul Reverdy's manuscript text (fig. 20).

One book of a hybrid form which succeeds in creating a remarkably unified statement is *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* of 1913, with text by Blaise Cendrars and illustrations by Sonia Delaunay-Terk (fig. 21). Delaunay-Terk was a Russian living in Paris, and this book, self-published there by Cendrars, was immediately made known to fellow artists

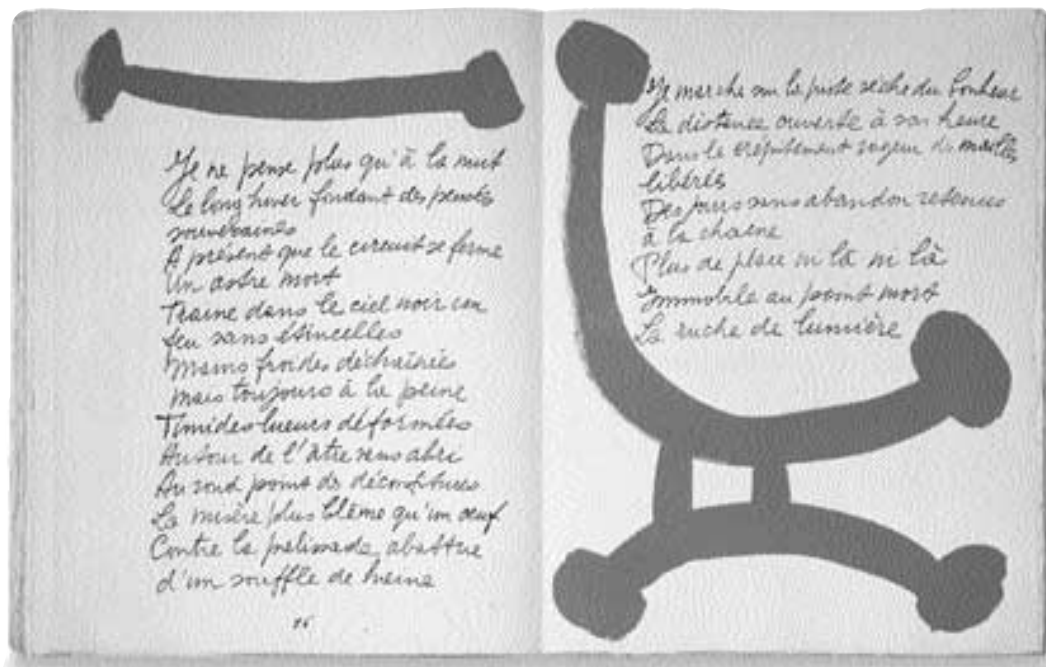


Fig. 20. PABLO PICASSO. *Le Chant des morts* by Pierre Reverdy. Paris: Tériade, 1948. Lithograph, 16 ½ x 12 ¼" (42 x 32 cm). Ed.: 270. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Louis E. Stern Collection

in Russia when they also were beginning to create books in earnest. While the abstract designs, lively colors, and fusion of text and imagery of this book can be compared to Russian examples like *A Little Duck's Nest . . . of Bad Words* of 1913 (pp. 76, 77) and *Te li le* of 1914 (pp. 84, 85), its structure actually defies the sequential reading and viewing that is so central to the book experience. The artist's and author's goal of simultaneity is fully attained only when the book is unfolded vertically to dimensions of 78 ⁵/₁₆ x 14 ¹/₄ inches and becomes, in effect, a wall piece. The level of refinement in the production of its edition further separates this book from Russian examples. Its creators planned for copies on parchment, Japanese paper, and imitation Japanese paper, all enclosed in painted, handmade covers of goatskin or parchment.¹³

Using strategies of their own, Russian avant-garde artists also created books that are noteworthy for their evocation of conceptual unity. Such unity persisted from the early period, when artists and poets were entirely in control of production; it continued when some specialized publishers were involved; and it was still in evidence even in the late stage of government control. In all these instances, visual aspects of the book remained firmly in the hands of the artists, and this was the underlying factor in their cohesiveness.

In early examples such as *A Game in Hell* of 1912 (p. 70) by Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, Natalia Goncharova's illustrations invade the manuscript text pages, asserting their presence and adding an artistic voice seamlessly to the poetic one. Efforts by groups of

artists, such as *Explodity* (p. 72) of 1913, achieve an effect of wholeness through a sense of spontaneous interaction among individual contributors. In *Futurist Sergei Podgaevskii's Easter Egg* of 1914 (p. 79), unity is derived by appropriating the model of the personal scrapbook, with snippets of text, odd bits of collage, and potato cuts creating a sense of immediacy throughout.

Later, Lissitzky demonstrated a unified approach to the book in two distinctly different projects: *The Tale of a Goat* (pp. 138–40), issued in 1919 by a publisher of Judaica and illustrating a Passover tale; and *For the Voice* (pp. 194–95), issued in 1923 by a branch of the state publishing house and presenting poems by his contemporary, Mayakovsky. An unfolding wrapper immediately engages the reader in *The Tale of a Goat* by means of an interior design of abstract forms that suggest the otherworldly and find echoes in abstracted figural compositions on individual pages. In addition, texts are placed in arches integral to the compositions, with a color-coding system that links characters to their places in the story.¹⁴ A few years later, Lissitzky depended on physical structure, typographic design, and color to serve as organizing forces in *For the Voice*. An ingenious thumb-index allows readers to quickly find favorite poems, while signs and symbols constitute an accompanying visual "conversation" as texts are read aloud. Lissitzky would characterize such a concept as "a unity of acoustics and optics."¹⁵

As the effects of the Revolution evolved into more defined social practice, artists began using new methods involving photography and graphic design to

Fig. 21. SONIA DELAUNAY-TERK. *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* by Blaise Cendrars. Paris: Éditions des Hommes Nouveaux (Blaise Cendrars), 1913. Pochoir, 78⁵/₁₆ x 14¹/₄" (199 x 36.2 cm). Ed.: approx. 60–100. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase



create a sense of wholeness in their book formats. In the service of propaganda, *USSR in Construction* (pp. 242, 243) has been cited by some specialists as “the most highly developed and consistent achievement of Soviet graphic design.”¹⁶ Both Rodchenko and Lissitzky produced extraordinary issues of this magazine by exploiting close-up and angled photography and dramatic layouts to achieve a cinematic effect as pages are turned. Lissitzky said of the project: “We are approaching the book constructed like a film: plot, development, highpoint, dénouement.”¹⁷

The Position of Text

The fundamental role of literature in the avant-garde book cannot be adequately addressed in this essay, but should be more fully acknowledged here. The aesthetic thinking of writers and artists is related in movements throughout the modern period, with important examples from the time of the Symbolists in Paris in the late-nineteenth century to the more recent New York School of the 1950s. Such bonds were particularly strong in the first half of the twentieth century, as sympathetic figures joined together to issue manifestoes or edit periodicals that proclaimed their beliefs. As has been noted, Surrealist poets and painters, in particular, shared concerns and methods, as they plumbed the unconscious as a source for art. Miró, for one, has said that he learned more from the poets with whom he was acquainted than from the artists, and other examples of such rapport are manifested in the many illustrated book collaborations from that time.¹⁸ The Russian avant-garde period, as well, was striking in this regard even though the artistic milieu of Moscow or St. Petersburg was very different from that of Paris, a city where art galleries, a publishing apparatus, and a ready audience encouraged the development of the *livre d'artiste* among leading painters.

Still, the role of literature in the development of modern art, generally, and the role of the illustrated book in particular, have not received the attention they merit. Academic specialization in one or the other fields of art history or literature, for example, has proved a hindrance for most scholars and curators. Books have also been an anomaly in art museums that have traditional collection departments and audiences expecting painting and sculpture to be on display. And, while literary interpretation is not the expertise of curators, even standard cataloguing procedures need to be stretched to accommodate the requirements of books. For the Russian material, additional issues arise. Knowledge of the Russian language is rare, making even basic information regarding titles and authors difficult to transcribe in records. But, most importantly, the extraordinary visual distinctiveness that artists and authors brought to bear on the textual portions of these books requires special attention. Going well beyond standard design formats and font choices, their inventive effects are accomplished through the use of printed manuscript texts, printed manuscript designs, typographic designs, and lettering that contribute as much to the definition of these books as artworks as do their illustrations.¹⁹

In *Half-Alive* (p. 83), for example, the printed manuscript text is aligned closely to illustrations in the margins, with the reader responding to both almost simultaneously. The use of lithography throughout contributes to this integration. When Rozanova splashes watercolor additions over the printed manuscript text of *A Little Duck's Nest . . . of Bad Words* (pp. 76, 77), one critic calls the achievement "a unique colorpoetry, analogous to colormusic."²⁰ With similar distinctiveness, the text of *The Adventures of Chuch-lo* (p. 168), a children's book, seems painted with the same brush as that used for the illustrations, and its distribution across facing pages provides a sense of visual equality with them.

In the remarkable pamphlets Kruchenykh published in Tiflis, printed manuscript designs occupy every page and there is no standard text or illustrations (pp. 112–15). The blurry purple achieved with the hectographic technique, the soft blue of carbon paper printing, and the occasional irregularity of rubber stamp, are used to depict letters, numbers, and signs that stand in stark contrast to the rationally organized words one expects in books; even those fluent in Russian are not meant to decipher conventional meanings here. Conflating poetry and visual art, Kruchenykh utilizes the page as a backdrop for abstract compositions arranged by inner laws and rhythms issuing from both literary and artistic realms.

Typographic elements available in a printer's shop offer other artistic possibilities for texts. In Kamenskii's "ferro-concrete" poems (pp. 92, 93), segments of verse are portioned off into irregularly shaped and delineated areas of the page, in reference to structural molds for poured concrete. Created in 1914, these visual poems serve as precursors of the extraordinary range of typographic designs found in later years. In 1919–20 in Tiflis, for example, treatises published by members of the 41° group include letters of various sizes and shapes that take on characteristics of individual personalities and hint at the pitch of voice in the spoken word (pp. 118, 120). Still later, in the Constructivist period, lettering and typographic design were employed to stress the clear and functional delivery of information. Geometry served as a tool with boxes, underlines, and arrows to direct the reader. *October: The Struggle for a Proletarian Class Position on the Visual Arts Front* (p. 232), a publication of 1931 that sought to adapt artistic goals to proletarian concerns, is one example. Yet avant-garde uses of typography and design were also employed in official reports on Soviet industry and for state-run architectural competitions (pp. 230, 231).

The Question of Function

In addition to comprising noteworthy conceptual structures and visual attributes, the Russian avant-garde book also fulfilled distinctive roles for its audiences. From the period of the early teens to the time of the Revolution and after, there is an abrupt shift in emphasis from goals aimed at private aesthetic experience to those geared to public consumption. The audience for the early works was a small intellectual elite, consisting of those with a

keen interest in the visual arts and poetry that is typical for illustrated books elsewhere. The audience after the Revolution continued to include those interested in artistic endeavors, but the focus shifted to a much wider readership. Later, when the government had a specific message to deliver to its citizenry, or wanted to reach out beyond the boundaries of the country to propagandize, it chose as a vehicle the illustrated book or magazine, conceived by means of avant-garde visual principles.

Small format books from the early period now seem like personal offerings from the artists and writers to their readers. Their homemade qualities communicate the idea that each volume is in some way unique, aimed at a coterie of friends, and created simply for the sake of one's imagination and in the spirit of contemplation. Since these small books can be held in one's hand and perused in a matter of minutes, absorbing their illustrations and texts is an intense and intimate experience. Upon finishing, the reader feels included in a private world made up only of initiates.

This desire to communicate a private aesthetic experience remains in literary works of the later period, as poets and artists continued to collaborate. Mayakovsky and Rodchenko's work on joint projects during these years, for instance, recalls the personal relationships of the earlier period. However, a larger proportion of the material after the Revolution reflects a turnabout in the function of the book. Artists and writers contributed to volumes that contained educational materials, practical information, and, finally, propaganda. Lissitzky's cover for the *Committee to Combat Unemployment* (p. 151), a report to an official congress in 1919, reflects the optimism of the early years. It makes use of compositional devices that thrust upward and carry a message of progress and hope for a society based on rational ideals. The placards of Vladimir Lebedev, designed for windows of the telegraph office and meant to communicate even to the illiterate through colorful abstract shapes, are brought together in a charming book designed for export (pp. 160, 161).

Such hope and enthusiasm are also conveyed in books for children, which depend on visual signs rather than conventional representation. Many had social agendas, such as Lissitzky's *Of Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale in Six Constructions* (pp. 153–55), which tells the tale of a victorious red square over black chaos, and Lebedev's *Yesterday and Today* (p. 171), which shows technical advances in everyday products. *Ice Cream* (p. 172), seemingly purely for pleasure, has social and satirical dimensions as well, yet its illustrations reflect the pure geometry of Suprematism.

Abstract design principles spread to the structures of architectural journals and also to those aimed at the trades. An easy-to-reference thumb index was included in the 1927 catalogue *All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition: Guidebook* (p. 228) and wraparound covers with a bold photograph of a plentiful field of wheat provide inspiration in the journal *Let's Produce* of 1929 (p. 237). Interior page layouts, purposeful sequencing of pages, and devices like foldouts and cover flaps also

became tools for avant-garde artists to create myth and assert power in book formats. While such visual concepts and structures are typically exploited by artists to manipulate the viewer's experience, they were used here expressly for government directives. Through the conceptual potential of photography and the principles of abstraction, artists succeeded in creating enhanced forms of representation that aggrandized Soviet power and accomplishments (pp. 238–45). While in the early teens artists had struggled to create a visual language that dispensed with conventional motifs and focused instead on a vital, new language of abstraction, artists in the 1930s used these abstract principles to create yet a new form of fictive representation.

A Trajectory of Experience

All the Russian books discussed and illustrated in this catalogue can be spread out together in an area the size of a classroom. By studying them, preferably in chronological order, one can begin to grasp some sense of this highly significant chapter in the art of the twentieth century. The excitement of early avant-garde experimentation in the teens, the utopian idealism of the post-revolutionary years, and finally the militant power and oppression of the Stalinist regime, are all captured in these pages as a potent historical record. Through these books one has an intimate glimpse of an extraordinary trajectory of artistic innovation and human experience.

Books of all kinds have this power to offer one-to-one communication, but illustrated books offer the additional insights of the visual artist. Using the possibilities inherent in printed pages bound together and issued in editions, artists have contributed a further dimension to the multifaceted story of modern art. Since these books are not as widely known and appreciated as other mediums of the visual arts, gathering them together here not only offers a unique opportunity to broaden our understanding of the Russian avant-garde, but also underlines the fact that by breaking down hierarchies and seriously considering so-called minor art forms like illustrated books, unique insights can be drawn. The complexity of an historical period is truly revealed when as many as possible of its cultural artifacts are examined.

NOTES

- 1 The term “illustrated book” is adopted here because it is the designation used by The Museum of Modern Art’s Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, where The Judith Rothschild Foundation gift of Russian books will reside. While those with a keen interest in books in which artists have been involved often disagree about terminology relating to them, the Department uses “illustrated book” as an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of book formats. This essay on Russian books refers to some of the issues arising from variations in book terminology.
- 2 Gerald Janecek, *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1996), p. 1.
- 3 Quoted in Patricia Railing, *More About Two Squares/About Two Squares*, facsimile ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), p. 36.
- 4 In a large body of literature on the subject of illustrated books, several titles are recommended for important overviews. Three that combine various book genres in their discussions are Riva Castleman, *A Century of Artists Books* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994); Carol Hogben and Rowan Watson, eds., *From Manet to Hockney: Modern Artists’ Illustrated Books* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1985); and Jaroslav Anděl, *The Avant-Garde Book: 1900–1945* (New York: Franklin Furnace, 1989). Two titles that focus on the artists’ books genre are Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists’ Books* (New York: Granary Books, 1995) and Stefan Klima, *Artists Books: A Critical Survey of the Literature* (New York: Granary Books, 1998).
- 5 Lawrence Saphire and Patrick Cramer, *André Masson, The Illustrated Books: Catalogue Raisonné* (Geneva: Patrick Cramer Publisher, 1994), p. 24.
- 6 Hogben and Watson, eds., *From Manet to Hockney*, p. 118.
- 7 A remarkable study from the 1970s that remains essential for information regarding the periodical format in the Dada and Surrealist periods is Dawn Ades’s *Dada and Surrealism Reviewed* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978).
- 8 John E. Bowlt, “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste: The Art of the Book and the Russian Avant-Garde,” in Charles Doria, ed., *Russian Samizdat Art* (New York: Willis Locker and Owens, 1986), pp. 14–18.
- 9 Gerald Janecek, *The Look of Russian Literature: Avant-Garde Visual Experiments, 1900–1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 88.
- 10 Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1969), p. 45.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 338.
- 12 For a discussion of state publishing house activities, see Susan P. Compton, *Russian Avant-Garde Books, 1917–34* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 20–26.
- 13 See Monica Strauss, “The First Simultaneous Book,” *Fine Print* 13 (July 1987): 139–50.
- 14 Nancy Perloff and Eva Forgacs, *Monuments of the Future: Designs by El Lissitzky* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1998), p. 2.
- 15 Quoted in *El Lissitzky 1890–1941* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 1987), p. 62.
- 16 Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 50; see also p. 20. For a page-by-page analysis of the design achievement of *USSR in Construction*, see Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 166–213.
- 17 Margarita Tupitsyn, “Back to Moscow,” in Tupitsyn, *El Lissitzky; Beyond the Abstract Cabinet: Photography, Design, Collaboration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 43.
- 18 For a discussion of Surrealist illustrated books, see Renée Riese Hubert, *Surrealism and the Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and Robert Rainwater, “Au rendez-vous des amis: Surrealist Books and the Beginning of Surrealist Printmaking,” in Gilbert Kaplan, ed., *Surrealist Prints* (New York: Atlantis, 1997).
- 19 The subject of book texts as visual art in themselves has also been explored under the rubric of “visual poetry,” which has its own body of literature.
- 20 Evgenii Kovtun, “Experiments in Book Design by Russian Artists,” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 5 (summer 1987): 54.