

The forging of a new art

"New Art for a New Era: Malevich's Vision of the Russian Avant-Garde" At the Barbican Centre, London

Paul Bond
16 June 1999

The Russian Revolution of 1917 released a burst of creative artistic effort in Russia and internationally. Visitors to London currently have a chance to see both how this manifested itself and how it was ultimately strangled, in a wide-ranging series of events at the Barbican — under the collective title 'St Petersburg: Romance and Revolution'.

Its centrepiece is undoubtedly the exhibition 'New Art for a New Era: Malevich's vision of the Russian Avant-Garde' which charts the history of the Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture. Founded in 1919 the Museum of Artistic Culture was designed to be part of the avant-garde and also to demonstrate the connection that avant-garde had with other near-contemporary developments in art. It was developed under the auspices of some of the leading lights of the Russian avant-garde such as Malevich, Tatlin and Rodchenko. In the seven years before the collection was transferred to the State Russian Museum, the museum acquired over 500 works from the turn of the century onward, alongside items of Russian folk and popular art.

The aim of the museum was to demonstrate the then current trends in Russian art and to link them to others in European art. From the turn of the century Russian artists had staged some of the most important exhibitions of modern art across all of Europe. Russian artists had carefully studied and assimilated the works of the impressionists, the Fauvists, the Cubists. Many Russian artists had studied in Western Europe (Chagall in Paris, for example, and Kandinsky in Munich). French works had been studied abroad, as well as in major exhibitions and private collections in Russia. The earliest works in the collection put together by the Museum, therefore, are steeped in the techniques of the earlier masters.

What is clear is that this was no formalistic exercise. The earliest paintings displayed at the Barbican demonstrate the speed with which Russian artists seized on and worked through all new developments in art. Malevich's 1908 'Still Life' bears the mark of Gauguin; other works (like Mikhail Larionov's 'Acacias in Spring' 1904) show the influence of Impressionism. The museum was precisely to chart the development of Soviet art from that kind of reflection of influence towards the new and original abstract work that flourished in the first years of the revolution. As Malevich put it: "We, as witnesses to and creators of the New Art movement must also document it, so that its history need not be dug out of the ruins of posterity."

In 1919 the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narkompros) demanded that artists "free the art of the past from dead art historical pedantism." In showing Soviet art alongside the newest European art, as well as art of other eras and cultures, that was precisely what the museum was endeavouring to do. That is why this exhibition features many items

of Russian popular art — icons, distaffs and popular prints (Lubok). In the earlier pictures, Russian elements creep in to otherwise western-influenced paintings. This led to disagreements between Russian artists. After two important 'Golden Fleece' exhibitions in 1908 and 1909 (the latter being the first major exhibition of Braque and Matisse in Russia) the pioneering artistic group 'Jack of Diamonds' held their first show in 1910. In 1911 the group split in two. The 'Jack of Diamonds' group around Lentulov continued to explore the influence of western European, especially French, art. The 'Donkey's Tail' group, established by Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, explored the influence of Russian popular art, with the technical developments offered by the western avant-garde.

'Donkey's Tail' held its first exhibition in 1912, including works by Malevich, Chagall, Tatlin amongst others. The influence of Russian art can be clearly seen here in such pieces as Goncharova's beautifully stark 'Winter' or Larionov's 'Venus', with its naive Lubok-like draftsmanship and lettering. The traces of such influences are obvious in works specifically about rural life, like Chagall's 'Red Jew' (part of a sequence of works about Jewish life in his hometown of Vitebsk). But they can also be seen in such pieces as Vladimir Tatlin's 'Sailor', where the central figure has the same sort of iconic framing by other figures.

Although this was still figurative work, it was increasingly influenced by less representative models. In 1913, after 'Donkey's Tail' had become 'Target' (as they were to remain until the dissolution of the group in 1915), their second exhibition featured work by children as well as by signboard painters. This period, leading into the years of the First World War, saw a wide diversity of stylistic experimentation. Chagall was developing his highly individual figurative work. Petrov-Vodkin, praised by the avant-garde whilst largely removed from it, was producing Chagall-like still lifes. Nicholas Roerich, more heavily influenced by folk art and Symbolism, produced work like 'Sacred Island' (1917) in which the hard gold of the island itself, coupled with the tiny hooded figures rowing towards it, create an iconic effect. The early experiments with French Cubism fed directly into the work of Pavel Filonov, who expressed the horror of the 'German War' with his large canvas of fractured, fragmented limbs and faces.

In 1914 the Italian futurist Marinetti visited Russia. The following year the first futurist exhibition, 'Tramway V', was held, followed a year later by another exhibition organised by Tatlin. The influence of Futurism, combined with earlier experimentation with French Cubism, led to the development of Cubo-Futurism. Goncharova's 'Cyclist' captures the rattling, bone-shaking speed that was such a theme of futurism. This interest in mechanical developments (which remained relatively unfocussed for the futurists) became a theme of the new art. Malevich's

experimentation with juxtaposition of objects, for example in 'Alogizm (Cow and Violin)', led to the development of his own distinctive cubo-futurist style, seen clearly in 'Portrait of I.V.Klyun (The Builder)'. As he wrote later, "I accepted the dawn of futurist art's revolt. I opened myself and, smashing my skull, threw my reason of the past into its swift-moving fire." 'I.V.Klyun' is often reproduced, yet these familiar representations do not give an idea of the painting's large scale, nor of its vibrant and mechanical metallic colour.

What the exhibition makes clear is that there was not just one new art, but a widespread exploration of artistic styles. Where Boris Grigoriev was employing an almost photographic tone in his paintings of hard, unputying rural faces, artists like Altman, Lebedev and Bruni were using abstract ideas of colour and space in ostensibly figurative explorations of texture (for example, Shterenberg's 'Still Life with Cherries'). This owed much to Malevich's advocacy of juxtaposition and fragmentation of images, and continued well into the 1920s.

This intensive experimentation in art reflected a world in upheaval. The backdrop for something like half of the pieces on display here was the violent disintegration of the Great Powers' imperial division of the world and the jostling for authority and influence that led to the First World War. An interesting chronology between galleries 2 and 3 sets out the framework, not merely in terms of artistic developments (useful for seeing the speed with which Russian artists developed and expanded movements out of external influences), but also in relation to political developments. This acquires a greater resonance later in the history of the museum, but it is important to realise just how far artists were responding to a specific historical situation. It was no surprise then that many artists should welcome the Russian Revolution. In Malevich's words: "What occurred was an elemental storm amongst men ... a storm beyond comparison with any natural element."

The success of the October Revolution had an almost immediate impact in terms of the organisation of artists in the Soviet Union. The Bolsheviks established Narkompros in October 1917. Malevich joined the Federation of Leftist Artists, which had Rodchenko as its secretary, and worked for Narkompros. Other artists worked directly for the government. One of the few exhibits not from the collection of the Petrograd Museum is the series of propaganda posters by Kozlinsky, Lebedev and Rodchenko. In the words of the poet Mayakovsky, who collaborated on several of these Lubok-influenced works, "the streets are now our brushes, the squares are our palettes!" These striking and heroic posters indicate both the level of involvement of the avant-garde artists in political developments and the extent to which those artists could use the earlier influences explored in this exhibition to that end. (Without overstating the case — the examples are completely different, after all — it has certain similarities with the revolutionary movement itself: the most moving of the propaganda posters shows the martyrs of the Paris Commune living again through the Bolsheviks).

It is important to realise that many of the great abstract art movements in Russia at this time found in the Revolution a chance to achieve their fulfillment. It was not the case, as it is sometimes represented, that all this happened overnight. As Malevich put it, "The thunder of the October cannons helped to establish the innovators and to burn out the old parasites, and to set up the new screen of modernity." At a futurist exhibition in Petrograd in 1915, he had shown non-representational works like 'Red Square' with a view to forging a new direction for art. The following year he published the suprematist journal 'Supremus'.

The direction taken by abstract art in Russia after 1917 built on this groundwork, as the later galleries here show in the work of suprematists like Rozanova and Senkin. The experimental research into colour, for example, continued in the works of Mikhail Matiushin. Others expanded the possibilities of suprematist composition by incorporating other elements (for example Ivan Puni in his 'Still Life with Letters, Spectrum

Flight', which uses those words in the body of the composition to create the effect they describe). In 1918 Malevich expressed it thus: "We are the limit of an absolutely new world, and declare all things to be groundless". And again: "We are the first to come to the new limit of creation".

The other element of this exhibition that was not included in the Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture was design. In 1919 Malevich had founded Unovis (the affirmers of the new art) in Vitebsk. Unovis, among other projects, collaborated with the Lomonosov Porcelain Factory in Petrograd to produce a beautiful and delicate suprematist tea set displayed here. They experimented with new forms, as well as with geometric designs and blocks of colour. The results are stunning, and a small pointer towards the new world they were aiming towards.

The last gallery highlights the shortcomings of the exhibition. Where the chronology offered earlier in the exhibition pointed to major political and artistic conflicts well into the 1930s, the displays themselves struggle to offer any explanation and context for the disagreements that arose between the artists represented in the Museum. Thus in the last gallery we are confronted with sharp disagreements between a number of abstract artists. It was Vladimir Tatlin who had come up with the concept of "Material + Handling = Construction", leading to Constructivism. Though Tatlin himself had reservations about Constructivism, Rodchenko articulated its principles as "all new approaches to art arise from technology and engineering and move toward organisation and construction." Kandinsky, who looked to an intuitive and subconscious approach to abstraction, clashed with Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova over the question of an objective outlook. Stepanova made it quite clear that she saw abstraction outside of Constructivism as not being materialist when she wrote, "This is our point of departure, taking the place of the 'soul' of idealism." In return Kandinsky and Malevich saw Constructivism as being utilitarian and positivist. Of the context to this, nothing. (This is dealt with extensively in David Walsh's important articles 'Bolshevism and the Avant-Garde Artists').

This is also the gallery in which certain weaknesses of display become apparent. Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaya is quoted as saying about her work on glass, "I ... could not break away from flat surfaces. I found a wonderful material to experiment with — glass: although flat, it also had 3-dimensional qualities when worked from both sides." Sadly this accompanies a piece shown flat against the wall and thus only visible from one side. It is as if the curators were unable to demonstrate the disagreements that took place within abstract art, for fear of suggesting that they in some way fuelled the repression of artists with the bureaucratising of the Soviet Union under Stalin. As Walsh noted, "In criticizing the conceptions of the Futurist-Constructivists, it must also be kept in mind that they had consequences not only for politics, but also for art. It is no more correct to blame 'Socialist Realism' on the Constructivists than to blame them for the Stalinist tyranny.

"Still, one must note that the reduction of art to intellect and construction, to agitation and the immediately comprehensible opened the door for a return to precisely the Naturalism and Realism that the avant-garde so despised."

In 1926 the collection of the Museum of Artistic Culture was transferred to the State Russian Museum. Kandinsky had returned to Germany, Chagall to France. The Stalinist bureaucracy was working to implement its policy of 'socialism in one country', retreating from the revolutionary internationalism of Lenin and Trotsky. Artistically the flourishing movements of the immediate revolutionary period were over. A year later Malevich would be refused permission to exhibit on the Institute of Artistic Culture (founded in 1924) in Germany. One is reminded of Trotsky's comments at the beginning of 'Literature and Revolution', written in 1922-3: "The place of art can be determined by the following general argument. If the victorious Russian proletariat had not created its own army, the Workers' State would have been dead long ago, and we

would not be thinking now about economic problems, and much less about intellectual and cultural ones.”

The manifestation of political problems within the Soviet regime led in part to a tightening of control on all forms of expression, which led to the wholesale repressions and restrictions of the 1930s. In 1926 that was still some way off, but the environment had changed. This exhibition fails to explain adequately the end of the experiment of the Museum (nor indeed the subsequent fate of the collection, some of which looks badly maintained), but this is understandable. It seeks to reproduce the collection of the Museum of Artistic Culture without having the same investment in the experiment. This is not quite the cavil it sounds: this is a superb collection of some of the most important artworks of this century. What is lacking is the theoretical framework through which to evaluate them.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact