A brave New World —not that you'd know it

Amazons of the avant-garde—an exhibition at the Royal Academy, London until February 6

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In the early years of this century, the Russian art world raced through a rapid self-education in the latest developments in culture. Russian artists travelled abroad, particularly to centres like Paris and Munich.

The process of assimilating new techniques and styles was carried through at a tremendous pace. By the beginning of the First World War, Russian artists had not only imitated the latest western art movements; they had adapted and developed them into something new. Genuinely innovative artistic forms, particularly in the field of pure abstraction, emerged in Russia. These artists were fighting for new ways of thinking, of representing. They therefore embraced the possibility of a New World which the Bolshevik revolution represented, and were among its most active supporters.

This latest exhibition at the Royal Academy deals with paintings by six women artists during the years 1907-21. It covers the periods of the assimilation of western techniques and styles and the earliest years of the revolution. This was clearly a period of intense evolution of artistic style, with many influences on display. It was also a period of quite conscious striving for newness. Olga Rozanova, one of the artists represented, described it as a search for “new bases of artistic creation”.

One of the problems with the exhibition is that in covering this period it shows little interest in the subsequent fate or development of the artists, or their work. There is a general tendency to see the artists as individually responding to influences, rather than as being part of a wider movement, either specifically artistic or more generally intellectual. Even where artists were known to have participated in groups (e.g. Goncharova and Udaltsova with “Jack of Diamonds”), the groups are seen almost as random collections rather than the expression of any shared perspective or intent. This leads to some distortion, as does the concentration on painting.

The careers of all six artists are representative of the Russian avant-garde of the time, both in the breadth of their influences and in the rapidity with which they developed. The earliest paintings on display by Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962), for example, still show the influence of Paul Gauguin in their treatment of figures. She quickly became fascinated by Russian iconography and peasant art, and the bulk of her work here shows this. With her partner, Mikhail Larionov, she had established the “Donkey's Tail” group of artists. Emerging from a split in the “Jack of Diamonds” group, which had concentrated its study on western models, “Donkey's Tail” looked to Russian popular art. Goncharova studied icons, peasant embroidery, popular prints and stone steles.

The large group of paintings that makes up *The Evangelists (in Four Parts)* (1911) is clearly modelled on Russian icons, as is *Apocalypse (Elder and Seven Stars)* from the previous year. These paintings, which take religious imagery as their basis, infuriated churchgoers. They are dark in colour and heavy with paint, with primitive representations of the figures at their centre. In design they bear some comparison with the iconic works of Marc Chagall, although they are more self-consciously primitive.

Within the space of a year, Goncharova was to introduce more cubist elements. The large *Peasants Gathering Grapes* (1912) shows her figures becoming more angular, painted with solid blocks of colour. The later pictures here are from her Rayist phase. The beautiful *The Weaver (Loom + Woman)* from 1912-13 portrays the threads on the loom as great rays of colour: elsewhere there are Rayist lilies and cats.

Goncharova left Russia for Paris in 1915, where she settled in 1917. The exhibition does not feature her Cubo-Futurist work, though the influence of the Italian futurists is dealt with elsewhere in the exhibition, as it pertains to other artists. The members of “Donkey's Tail” (which became “Target” in 1913), including Vladimir Tatlin, were heavily influenced by Marinetti's visit to Russia in 1914, and futurism became a key element in the forging of Russian Cubo-Futurism.

Goncharova (marginally the oldest of the artists on show here) is displayed alongside Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), the youngest by a sufficient margin, supposedly to represent, as is noted in the exhibition's guide, “a second generation of the avant-garde”. It is not true that what defined that “second generation” was that it “sympathised with the October Revolution,” which suggests that the earlier generation did not.

Stepanova was married to the noted Bolshevik photographer and artist Aleksandr Rodchenko, with whom she frequently collaborated. The earliest works here are the post-revolution illustrations for the poems “Zigra Ar” and “Rtny Khomle” (1918). They are striking small paintings, combining text and image, non-representational in their use of colours merging with the written word. Many artists were actively pursuing this type of juxtaposition at the time.

Stepanova was never entirely an abstract artist and her paintings return to the figure, but organised along Constructivist lines. Her 1920 painting *Five Figures on a White Background* features dancers constructed of blocks of colour. Her work is clearly figurative, but her interest in form is as a model of construction. Some of her figures, most noticeably *Figure* (1921), but even the bulky-bodied *Figure (Peasant)* of the same year, are almost reduced to the technique of their movement.

Stepanova was an active collaborator in the development of Constructivism, and spent most of her time working with textiles and on stage and industrial design. Of all the artists who turned to industrial design in the 1920s, she was the only one with any professional training. In a recent interview, her grandson Alexander Lavrentiev said, “She never painted much at all.... For her, art had to be socially useful.”

For that reason, she was at the forefront of the Constructivists' theoretical clash with Malevich and Kandinsky, but you would know none of that from this exhibition. The paintings are fascinating, but we know

nothing of the driving forces behind them, nor why they are so unrepresentative of Stepanova's work.

With the work of Olga Rozanova (1886-1918) it is possible again to see the clear movement from the early years of the century. Rozanova lived in St. Petersburg and never visited Western Europe, although she was evidently familiar with artistic developments there. From her neo-primitivist *Lady in Pink* (1911) we see a quick development towards Cubo-Futurism, for example in *Jack of Hearts*, part of a series of paintings of playing cards. She developed further towards Futurism, identifying it as a means of representing the industrial city, for example in *Fire in the City (Cityscape*) (1914), which has definite echoes of the Italian Futurists.

Rozanova's knowledge of western forms is apparent in such pieces as *Pub (Auction)* of 1914; with its collage elements of newspaper and wallpaper it owes much to French Cubism. She was also interested in other media, as her other collage-influenced piece here makes clear. *Moderne Movie Theater (in the Street)* is also significant in that we can see her continued development of space and background. The way was being paved for the turn to pure abstraction in her Suprematist paintings of 1916-18.

With the space that Cubist collages had given her, she removed all narrative elements from her paintings and worked instead on non-objective compositions. She called her pictorial system "colour painting", seeing colour as the essence of abstraction. Her death of diphtheria at the age of 32 robbed abstract art of one of its finest practitioners.

Alexandra Exter (1882-1949) was one of the most important links between the Russian avant-garde and the art world of Western Europe. She travelled regularly to France and Italy and her earlier pieces show the most openly cosmopolitan influences. *The Bridge (Sevres)* (1912) is heavily influenced by the Fauvists, with its shapes of soft grey through the painting, and there are pasted elements to her *Still Life* (1913). Like Rozanova she used the space afforded her by Cubist collage techniques to move closer to Kazimir Malevich and the Suprematists. Gradually it is possible to see narrative and representational elements being removed from her work.

Venice (1915) is built up of blocks of bright colours, although there are still recognisable bridges and roofs. In *Cityscape* (1916) she suppressed virtually all the representational elements, clearing the way for her non-objective compositions of 1917-18.

In 1921, Exter contributed to the "5 x 5 = 25" exhibition in Moscow, as did Varvara Stepanova and Liubov Popova among the other artists on display. That exhibition identified an impasse in abstract painting: the participating artists announced the death of studio painting and declared industrial design to be the future for artistic endeavour. Exter had already worked in other media—book illustration, cinema, ceramics and theatre design—but this exhibition gives no clue as to her interpretation of the conclusions of the "5 x 5 = 25" show, nor to her career subsequent to her emigration in 1924.

The best-arranged room of this small exhibition is that containing works by Nadezhda Udaltsova (1885-1961) and Liubov Popova (1889-1924). In 1912 they had travelled together to the Academie de la Palette in Paris, where they studied Cubism under Henri Le Fauconnier and Jean Metzinger. Udaltsova remained the most faithful to the Cubist aesthetic she learned there. Her 1913 *Composition* is a model of Cubist painting. On her return to Moscow she worked with Vladimir Tatlin, and exhibited with the "Jack of Diamonds" group, which had split from Larionov and Goncharova's "Donkey's Tail" group to concentrate on the works of Cézanne and Picasso. *At the Piano* (1915) has absorbed fractured points of view and differing perspectives within the same canvas, while many of her smaller works explore similar themes and styles to the work of Braque and Picasso (there are brown shades, guitars and bottles).

She broke from Tatlin in 1916, and moved closer to Malevich and Suprematism, creating textiles and teaching textile design. She had returned to figurative painting by the early 1920s and resisted pressure for a utilitarian approach to art. The bulk of the work represented here is large Cubist oils, but there are also three small Suprematist gouaches. That is probably an accurate reflection of the relative weight she attached to the art forms, but there is a concentration on painting at the expense of textiles.

Popova's early works are Cubist compositions on an even larger scale than Udaltsova's. She also produced a large canvas of a pianist, although hers is more interested in exploring the greys and whites that it uses. Popova used Cubism, as did Rozanova, to afford her the space for more probing use of colour. She reduced standard Cubist themes to much simpler colour patterns, for example her *Guitar* (1915) which takes a Cubist stock-in-trade, but has the woodgrain of the body of the instrument as the only colour effect. There are works here dedicated to the Italian Futurists, and she had joined Malevich's "Supremus" group in 1916. She had long been interested in Tatlin's work, and the most striking piece in the exhibition owes much to his reliefs.

Jug on Table, Plastic Painting (1915) is one of a number of reliefs and architectonic paintings that she created during the decade. Whilst recognisably representational, its swirl of body emerging from the canvas makes three-dimensional a cubist view of objects. It was a technique with which the surrealists were later to experiment successfully.

By the early 1920s she was producing Constructivist canvases like *Spatial Force Construction* (1921). She exhibited with Rodchenko at the "5 x 5 = 25" show and that marked the end of her painting. Thereafter, until her early death of Scarlet Fever, she concentrated primarily on stage, textile and book design. She worked with Stepanova on groundbreaking designs for the director Vsevolod Meyerhold's experimental theatrical productions.

The work on show here is as varied as one would expect from artists in a state of rapid development, absorbing and assimilating influences from all over the world. The problem is that the curators seem to have no idea of why that process of assimilation was taking place, and even less as to what the different trends that emerged from that process were all about.

London has been well served in the last year with material from this period, particularly in the Barbican's "New Art for a New Era" exhibition. I commented at the time that this exhibition lacked a theoretical framework with which to comprehend the works it displayed. But this was less of a problem because of the sheer scale of it—an attempt at reproducing the collection of the Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture. Here we are looking quite specifically at the works of six artists and we are not given sufficient background information to make them intelligible.

In the exhibition guide, Matthew Drutt claims that the show, "provides a rare opportunity to scrutinise an area of the visual arts that was marginalised in Russia in the mid-1920s; painting would have to wait nearly a decade for the advent of Socialist Realism to have its importance as the grand medium of visual art rediscovered." This poses a number of problems, not least being the equation of the merits of Socialist Realism as a form with those of the avant-garde of the revolutionary period.

There is also the problem of why, if painting was marginalised, do we then find that a number of painters on display here voluntarily gave it up to concentrate on other media? Drutt seems to be suggesting that the move away from painting was a distortion of the real values of art, but nowhere in the exhibition is there any comprehension of the motivating forces behind the artists' own decisions on these matters. There is a tendency to see the artists as all moving along the same path, from absorption of influences to embracing the revolution to ceasing to paint, yet the artists were not all working together on the same projects and with the same understanding. There are certain objective external factors (the war, the Russian Revolution) that informed their work, yet they did not necessarily come to the same conclusions.

The exhibition is thwarted by its own restrictions. In concentrating only

on painting, it ignores the body of work these artists did in other media. If we are being shown the evolution of these artists, then that other work is vital. Again, in concentrating on six artists (simply because they are female) without developing its treatment of them, it manages to skate over the influence of other artists or schools. The show manages to mention the influence of Malevich and Rodchenko, without explaining what that influence meant.

Yet I would recommend viewing the exhibition because in the works of these six artists are contained a number of the seeds of the Russian avant-garde. It is possible, even in a small display like this, to see the development and assimilation of techniques and themes that made that art movement like no other: the joyous embrace of every contemporary artistic development—Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Rayism, Neo-Primitivism—and the striving from that to produce something new that would adequately reflect a New World.

Some of the paintings referred to can be seen on the Royal Academy Website http://www.royalacademy.org.uk