

“Seeking for Utopia”—or were they? The Russian avant-garde and Soviet modernism in posters

Exhibition at the Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo

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Ruki Matsumoto Collection—Seeking for Utopia: Russian Avant-garde and Soviet Modernism Seen in Posters, Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo, September 30-November 24, 2014.

The recent exhibition, *Ruki Matsumoto Collection—Seeking for Utopia: Russian Avant-garde and Soviet Modernism Seen in Posters*, at the Setagaya Art Museum in Tokyo, included some 180 early Soviet posters, which have both remarkable artistic and historic significance.

Such an exhibition has an intrinsic value, bringing to the attention of the public the astonishing artistic outpouring that occurred in the wake of the October Revolution of 1917. As the Soviet artist Vladimir Tatlin noted, “A revolution strengthens the impulse of invention.”

However, the impact of the Setagaya Art Museum exhibition was limited unduly by the curatorial approach and its attitude toward the Russian Revolution.

A display of early Soviet posters today could have been an opportunity to connect through this art form with a historical period of vast social upheaval. The posters—mass communication tools of the day—could have provided present-day visitors a unique window into the sharply shifting social consciousness of an era when wide layers of the population were mobilized and politically awakened by a world war and a successful socialist revolution. Unfortunately, although not surprisingly, this exhibition took a different route.

The owner of the collection, Ruki Matsumoto (1946-2012) was a “designer [and] founder of ... [an] apparel brand and a charismatic leader of the Japanese fashion world of the 1970s through 1980s,” according to the exhibition catalog. He was also “an art collector ... [with] a collection of approximately 20,000 objects ... focusing predominantly on Art Deco and Viennese Secessionist works.”

The posters exhibited at the Setagaya Art Museum were also featured from October 2013 to January 2014 at the Museum of Modern Art, Hayama in Kanagawa prefecture in eastern Japan. Matsumoto’s poster collection, although it is not clear if it was identical to this one, was also previously presented at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1997 as *Stenberg Brothers: Constructing a Revolution in Soviet Design* and at the Tokyo

Metropolitan Teien Art Museum in 2001 as *Stenberg Brothers and Russian Avant-garde by the Ruki Matsumoto Collection*.

According to the catalog, the exhibition was “patronized” by the Russian ministries of Foreign Affairs and Culture, the Russian embassy in Tokyo and other of its governmental agencies.

Various circumstances, including the involvement of the Russian state institutions, Matsumoto’s professional background and interests (Soviet material forms a small part of his collection) and the generally backward climate that prevails in official artistic circles, help account for the limited focus of the exhibition and the exclusion of any historical context.

Seeking for Utopia is presented in three parts. The first, “From the Twilight Years of Imperial Russia to October Revolution,” is the smallest, but leaves the strongest impression, undoubtedly because it is directly connected to the heroic period of the revolution.

Especially memorable here was El Lissitzky’s famous 1920 work “Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge,” which is the first poster seen upon entering. It is as if a military map, an architectural plan and a political poster have all crossbred into one powerful artistic image.

Also revealing, for different reasons, were works published by Today’s Lubok, a Moscow publishing house active for “3 months only in the autumn of 1914” (a *lubok* is a folk woodblock print). Seven posters, based on the traditional, popular “lubok” leaflet, were displayed, with images created by Kazimir Malevich and texts by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. These were crude, anti-German and anti-Austrian propaganda pieces, coupled with equally sophomoric lyrics. In fact, pro-war sentiment in European artistic circles was nearly universal at the beginning of the war.

Also on display were “news” posters placed in shop windows in Moscow and other cities after the Russian Revolution targeting the largely illiterate masses by the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA). They are indicative of the levels of deprivation and hardship during the Civil War (1918-1922), but also of the high hopes for the European revolution: for example, Mayakovsky’s 1921 inspiring series of posters, “Comrades, Join in the Trade Union Activity week! Organize Your Production not in Words, but

by Deed. Then the European Workers Will Follow Our Example." Most posters from this period have only two or three basic colours, and grain, bread, seed, harvest, hunger, famine are recurring themes.

The second part of the exhibition, "NEP [New Economic Policy] and Film Posters of the Russian Avant-garde," has the most posters, making up some two-thirds of all the works on display. While many of the works were striking, this part of the exhibition left the least impression, primarily due to the lack of historical and intellectual background.

Compared to the rudimentary sketches of the Civil War period, the multicoloured film posters of the late 1920s open up a whole new world. Visitors suddenly find themselves in the midst of more than 100 film posters demonstrating that every genre of film imaginable was screened in the USSR, with many films imported from the West.

But that is about all one learns. The posters are deprived of any social context and provided with confusing or misleading texts such as, "Russian avant-garde film posters flourished in the NEP period, a brief respite from socialism, a time when the avant-garde with its high ideals stumbled."

A large number of film posters by the Stenberg brothers (Vladimir and Georgii) were on display. Some of the most memorable include the almost three-meter high "October," designed for Sergei Eisenstein's famed film released to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the revolution in 1927, a poster which is imposing by its sheer size, and one for Dziga Vertov's "Man with a Movie Camera", for a 1929 semi-documentary shot in Odessa, Ukraine, which had the city itself as its central hero. Bold diagonal lines, spiral motifs, collage or montage of photos and drawings characterize many works.

The final section, "The First Five-Year Plan and Political Posters," is likewise thrust upon visitors, in a sink-or-swim fashion, with little explanation of the political background.

This reviewer found especially effective, at least in form if not in content, the 1926-27 series, "History of VKP(b) in Posters", by Alexander Rodchenko. The posters combine newspaper clippings, photos, maps, etc., to recreate the most important points in the history of the Bolshevik Party [VKP(b)]. However, the process of Stalinist falsification was already so advanced that the piece "1919 Soviet Russia Surrounded by the White Guard" omits Leon Trotsky, then Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs and directly responsible for organizing the Red Army.

The rest of section three is dominated by works of Gustav Klutssis. His ultimate fate, however—arrest and then death in a Stalinist prison in 1938—is not raised. Little artistry remains at this stage, with crude political propaganda holding sway. "The USSR Is the Shock-Worker Brigade of the Proletariat All Over the World", "Labor in the USSR Is a Matter of Honor, Glory, Devotion, and Heroism", and "Victory of Socialism in Our Country Is Guaranteed", are just some of the titles. Klutssis's "Raise Higher the Banner of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin!" was apparently printed in hundreds of thousands of units and translated into more than 20 languages.

Many of the works on view at the exhibition hint at the enormous outburst of creative artistic energy unleashed by the

October Revolution. The museum's presentation ultimately disappoints due to its failure to offer any serious explanation of the social basis for the revolution in 1917 and its degeneration at the hands of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

The very title of the exhibition, *Seeking for Utopia*, suggests futility and naïve idealism. This is the attitude of the contemporary "intelligentsia," cynical and attached for the most part to the existing social order.

However, this view is both socially retrograde and inaccurate. The Russian Revolution arose out of the same irreconcilable contradictions of the imperialist system as the First World War. Tens of millions of workers and rural poor in Russia and internationally were responding to the historical dead end of capitalism and, under the leadership of Marxists, seeking a way out. To suggest that some misplaced idealism or naïveté impelled the artists who came over, with inevitable confusion, to their side is also false.

While there was undoubtedly a utopian element in the work of artists such as Marc Chagall (who worked loyally as an art teacher for a number of years in Bolshevik Russia), much of the outstanding artistic work produced was directed to practical tasks confronting the revolution. Leading artists such as Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Tatlin and others devoted much of their activity to tasks like raising the general educational level of the population, designing practical and affordable clothing and developing plans for a revolutionary new architecture.

It was a period when the most advanced and conscious layers of artists sided with the working population in the project of building a better, socialist world. The best elements in the artistic world were drawn to the revolutionary perspective of the Bolsheviks, and their subsequent evolution and often tragic fate were inextricably linked with the destiny of the revolution itself. That is why every attempt to deal with the legacy of early Soviet art that ignores or obscures the great historical issues involved is bound to be one-sided or toothless.



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