

Exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City

A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde

Josh Varlin
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A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, December 3, 2016–March 12, 2017.

The ongoing exhibition at New York City’s Museum of Modern Art, *A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde*, is a fascinating cultural event. It features works in a variety of media, including painting, printing and photography, from leading artists associated with the Russian Revolution, all from MoMA’s extensive collection.

The exhibition, which covers the period from 1912 to 1935 (until the imposition of deadly “Socialist Realism” by the Stalinist bureaucracy), contains remarkable works by El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Lyubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, Dziga Vertov, Olga Rozanova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Natalia Goncharova, Sergei Eisenstein and others. It covers the major artistic movements of this period, including Suprematism and Constructivism, as well as various cinematic innovations such as montage.

The exhibition begins with a placard noting, “In Russia in the early twentieth century, far-reaching artistic innovation and intense social and political turmoil were inextricably intertwined.” Indeed, many of the artists of this period were sympathetic to socialism or anarchism, and most of the figures in the exhibition came to support the Russian Revolution and the Bolsheviks.

The placard notes the support artists lent to the revolution, which was followed by the restrictions placed on artistic expression under Joseph Stalin beginning in the late 1920s. The “restrictions,” of course, eventually led to the strangulation of artistic and cultural life in the next decade.

A Revolutionary Impulse proceeds more or less chronologically from this point, although there is some grouping by tendencies (Suprematism and Constructivism), as well as by media (film and posters).

A full investigation of the artistic tendencies and personalities at work during this period is impossible for an exhibition taking up a few rooms in a single museum, much less a single review. Nevertheless, a brief overview of some of the highlights is in order, and will hopefully encourage readers to attend the exhibition, if possible, and, in any case, learn more about the subject at hand.

Suprematism was pioneered in the years immediately preceding the Russian Revolution chiefly by Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935). Malevich, a philosophical idealist influenced by German anarchist Max Stirner, among others, hoped that, by reducing art to geometric figures on planes with a limited color palette, he could create an abstract artistic language expressing “an entire system of world-building.”

One of the most iconic examples of this school of art, *Suprematism: Airplane Flying* (1915), is on display. The piece manages to convey, using only red, yellow, black and blue rectangles, the wonders of new aviation technology as well as the possibilities of reducing painting to geometric forms and technique.

Constructivism rejected Suprematism’s emphasis on abstraction and argued that art needed to be directed toward “practical” ends. This involved an emphasis on production, technology and working with physical materials over the abstraction of Suprematism.

While reducing Suprematism to “idealism” and Constructivism to “materialism” would be a gross oversimplification, and a view that Leon Trotsky and

others rejected, many Constructivists saw this as the case.

One iconic piece in the exhibition is Aleksandr Rodchenko's *Spatial Construction no. 12* (c. 1920). It is composed of everyday materials—plywood—cut into concentric ovals and precisely suspended using wires. This piece was part of Rodchenko's transition to three-dimensional constructions, although he significantly departed from traditional sculptural norms.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is a room where clips from four early Soviet films are constantly playing, including Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926), Dziga Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), Alexander Dovzhenko's *Earth* (1930) and Sergei Eisenstein's famed *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)—specifically the Odessa Steps scene.

Filmmaking in the early Soviet Union was especially innovative, with Eisenstein in particular credited as one of the pioneers of the technique of montage, as well as montage theory. In the essay "Vodka, the church, and the cinema," first published in *Pravda* in 1923 and later republished in *Problems of Everyday Life*, Trotsky argues for the expansion of a network of cinemas and notes that they can compete not only with taverns but the church as well, combating both alcoholism and religious obscurantism while providing exceptional entertainment.

Other highlights include the entire run of the journal of the Left Front of the Arts (LEF), which was also called *LEF* and ran from 1923 until 1925, and again 1927-1928 as *Novyi LEF* (*New LEF*). LEF was a radical group of artists associated with Futurism who advocated for doing away with bourgeois art. Trotsky, along with Aleksandr Voronsky, prominent literary critic and Left Oppositionist, opposed LEF's cavalier attitude toward the art of the past.

There is also a particularly intriguing collection of Suprematist ceramics, including plates and cups, by Nikolai Suetin, all produced in or around 1923 at the State Porcelain Factory in Petrograd from unpainted ceramics originally intended for the wealthy.

All of this artistic innovation was snuffed out with the rise of Stalinism and its so-called Socialist Realism. Genuine art, with all its potentially subversive implications, frightened and threatened the Soviet bureaucracy. Socialist Realism, which falsified history and the conditions in the Soviet Union and glorified

Stalin and his cohorts, was codified and enforced by the mid-1930s. It resulted in the outlawing of various forms of critical artwork and the stifling of artistic freedom, and left many prominent artists, including Malevich, El Lissitzky, Tatlin and Rodchenko, either without work or prominence in their preferred medium.

A Revolutionary Impulse is a remarkable opportunity to see some of the most influential works from the early Soviet Union in person, and it attempts a near-impossible task: to give an adequate summing up of the art of the period. One is grateful to MoMA and the curators for putting on the exhibition.

With that said, there are definite limitations to the exhibition. Additional context, both historical and artistic, for individual pieces and movements would have been a valuable addition. The complex and often antagonistic relationship between Suprematism and Constructivism, for example, is hardly explored, nor is the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism. The intense debates regarding "proletarian culture" are likewise left unexamined.

Simplifying the October Revolution to "Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik party [taking] command and institut[ing] Marxist policies" in pursuit of "[u]topian goals," as the introductory placard does, indicates a frivolous approach to the Russian Revolution. This is the polar opposite of the attitude of the artists on display, who treated the revolution and its immense impact on Russian and international society, including and especially its impact on art, with seriousness.

Despite these limitations, *A Revolutionary Impulse* is a remarkable event. One hopes that visitors are inspired to further investigate the art of the early Soviet Union as well as the Russian Revolution with which it is inextricably bound up.



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