# Modernism in Ukraine 1900-1930s: Revolutionary art outshines Ukrainian nationalist narrative

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The *In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine 1900-1930s* exhibition running until October 13 at London's Royal Academy contains wonderful avant-garde art works from the early twentieth century. Most were locked in the vaults of the National Art Museum of Ukraine (NAMU) as the Stalinist counter-revolution destroyed the cultural "Red Renaissance" that followed the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and prescriptions of Socialist Realism imposed on the Arts. Many of the artists were imprisoned or executed during the 1930s purges.

The UK is the fifth country where the exhibition has been staged in less than two years having visited Spain, Germany, Belgium and Austria. The curators openly admit their belief that the tour is "central to winning the war of the narrative" against Russia and the Putin regime. They note how the modernist movement in Ukraine unfolded against "a complicated socio-political backdrop" but that backdrop is barely explained. Little is said about the First World War, the collapse of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires, the revolutions of 1917, the creation of the bourgeois Ukrainian People's Republic (1918-1921) and parliament (Rada) or the civil war, portrayed as a "War of Independence" against the Soviet "occupiers." Stalinism is portrayed as the inevitable outcome of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The curators insist that the main goal of the Ukrainian modernist avant-garde was "nation-building" and creating "a recognizable national style." In seeking to detach them from their fellow artists elsewhere in the former Russian Tsarist Empire and downplay or ignore their socio-political goals, the exhibition is full of omissions, distortions and contradictions.

It is also a terrible injustice to the artists themselves who attended the same art schools as other Soviet artists, rebelled against the old conventions together, co-founded artistic movements, shared studios, debated the future of art and became friends and lovers. Many embraced the Bolshevik Party and its Ukrainization policy, based on the principle of self-determination, including the right to secession. They saw in the new workers' state the chance to practice their art freely and actively participated in the new institutions that were created after the Revolution.

The fallacy of the nationalist narrative is illustrated with Alexandra Exter, whose figurative painting *Three Female Figures* (1909-1910) is the first to be seen in the Royal Academy exhibition. Exter was born 1882 in the Polish town of Bialystok, then in the Russian Empire, and went on to study at Kyiv Art School. In 1907, she moved to Paris and immersed herself in the artist circles pioneering Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism. Gradually the narrative and figurative elements in her work give way to Cubo-Futurist abstraction as in *Composition, Genoa.* (1912).

Curator Katia Denysova admits that Exter was "a true cosmopolitan" who "never declared herself as belonging to any one nation" but then focuses on the way Ukrainian folk art influenced her. Denysova says nothing about Exter's activities between 1920 in Moscow and her emigration to Paris in 1924 where she remained until her death in 1949, poor and forgotten. But it was probably the most productive period of her life. In Moscow, Exter joined the new art groups and social organisations, dominated at the time by the Constructivists, taught in the new Moscow "Free workshops" (Vkhutemas), designed theatre sets and costumes and worked in fashion houses and movie studios.

The science-fiction film *Aelita Queen of Mars*, with its evocative depiction of workers and peasant life, for which she made the costumes, is one of the most innovative films of its day. In 1923, she also oversaw the decor for the first Pan-Russian Exhibition of Agriculture and Industry and designed uniforms for the new Red Army.

The attempts to harness Exter to the Ukrainian nationalist wagon are also pursued with Alexander Bogomazov (1880-1930), hailed as the unknown genius of the Ukrainian avant-garde and author of the theoretical treatise *Painting and Elements* in 1914, which presented the basic principles of avant-garde art.

Bogomazov attended Kyiv Art School alongside Exter. He was expelled in 1905 for "attending political rallies" but that is as far as the exhibition's description goes. The fact that 1905 was the First Russian Revolution, sparked by the massacre of workers in St. Petersburg, is ignored. A look at the history of the National Technical University of Ukraine (KPI), located minutes away from the Art School, between 1899-1917, gives some idea of the continuous tumultuous struggles during that period, imbued with a socialist, class-struggle character rather than the politics of a national movement.

As early as 1901 we learn that "in Kiev, once again, there was a demonstration of university students and other polytechnic universities… together with the workers from Kiev enterprises with red flags, singing the 'Marseillaise'."

In October 1905 "every day there were mass demonstrations, the participants openly discussed political issues, distributed illegal literature, collected funds to purchase weapons. Rallies were attended by college students, workers, soldiers." Lectures given at the KPI included "The main points in the development of the working class", "On the tactical differences between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks" and "The Agrarian Question and agricultural policies". A general strike was called by the Soviet of Workers' Deputies and "fighting squads" were created, which "drove away the police from this region."

In 1917, the KPI timeline relates how "The victory of the February bourgeois-democratic revolution has caused a great revolutionary upsurge in the country. Kiev was swept by a powerful wave of rallies and demonstrations. Political prisoners were released... they destroyed the security and the gendarmerie offices, disarmed the police... Mass gathering of students passed a resolution to extend the revolutionary struggle together with the workers of the city." In October, the Soviet of

Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was formed in Kiev ushering in the socialist revolution.

On display in the exhibition is Bogomazov's tender Impressionist portrait of fellow student and future wife Wanda Monastyrska (1909-10). Her comments a few years later describing his development towards Cubo-Futurism and ability to capture movement as in *Landscape, Locomotive* (1914-1915) are equally tender:

"With all my being, I felt the power of your lines, persuasiveness, and steadfastness of shapes, their endless peculiar and confident life, full of colour eloquence. They never tired the eye, because you can find the immortal point of the motion, and therefore you give them eternal life."

Bogomazov welcomed the ideas of the October Revolution, joining Exter in Agitprop decoration of trains and boats. His speech to the first All-Ukrainian Artists' Congress in June 1918 is often portrayed as one of "a fiercely patriotic artist" but, in fact, he criticised those artists "who stayed in Ukraine" and "confined themselves to trivial compositions painting houses with ridged roofs." He also warned his audience that "Narrow-minded nationalism is detrimental to creativity, too, limiting its artistic potential."

We are also told that Bogomazov "keenly read articles" by Ukrainian-born Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875-1933) but not that Lunacharsky was a leading Marxist, who joined the Bolsheviks and became the first Soviet People's Commissar responsible for the Ministry of Education after the October Revolution and some of the great experimental public art projects.

Bogomazov died in 1930, aged 50, from the effects of tuberculosis and before he had finished his large triptych depicting sawyers at work. *Sharpening the Saws* (1927) is on display but it lacks the creativity of his Cubo-Futurist paintings, and with its explicit "proletarian" theme already indicates the pressures to adapt to Socialist Realism.

A section of the exhibition deals with the *Kultur Lige* (Jewish Cultural League) established in Kyiv in 1918 to promote a modern, secular Yiddish culture. The exhibition displays three ink drawings by Marko Epshtein, a founding member of the Lige, including *The Tailor's Family* (1920).

From 1923 to 1931 Epshtein was director of Kiev's Jewish School of Industrial Art. His art reflects the decline of small-town Shtetl life and the rise of a new Jewish urban working class. In 1928, he staged the satirical play *Aristocrats* in Kharkiv about the rich who dream of being aristocrats. In the 1930s. Epshtein was accused of "formalism": producing complex elitist art inaccessible to the masses. He died in poverty in 1949 with most of his works now lost.

The painting *Shtetl* (1917) by another Lige founding member, Issakhar Ber Ryback, is also on display. It is linked to his series *Shtetl. My Destroyed Home. A Recollection*, which was followed by his *Pogrom Series* (1919-1921).

After Ryback's father, an admirer of Russian culture and a follower of the Haskalah movement—which believed in adopting the customs and culture of the countries they lived in—was killed by soldiers belonging to the nationalist Ukrainian People's Army (UNA) led by Symon Petliura, he fled abroad in April 1921. In 1935, three days after his first retrospective exhibition in Paris, he died of tuberculosis, just 38 years old.

The Royal Academy exhibition whitewashes the overwhelming responsibility of the UNA and the Russian White Army in the 1918-1921 pogroms that resulted in up to 250,000 Jewish deaths, claiming it was the fault of "multiple vying parties in the Ukrainian War of Independence." It says nothing about the contemporary influence of fascist forces in Ukraine inspired by Petliura's legacy, and that of the later Stepan Bandera and his Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.

The exhibition also displays a number of paintings by the "Boichukists," a school of muralists led by Mykhailo Boichuk (1882-1937). Boichuk was a founding member of the Ukrainian State Academy of Arts in 1917, who was appointed head of the First State Art Workshops in Kyiv in 1920 and co-founded the Association of Revolutionary Art of Ukraine (ARMU) in 1925.

The Boichukists revived tempera painting based on Byzantine and pre-Renaissance imagery and Ukrainian folk traditions—Boichuk's *Dairy Maid* (1922-23) is on display. However, the Boichukists cannot be seen simply as looking to the past, nor can it be said that they "intended modern art to restore national values in a time of social unrest."

Their intention was to produce monumental art for a revolutionary age, much like the famous Mexican muralist Diego Rivera whom Boichuk met at the IV Congress of the Red International of Labor Unions (Profintern) in 1928. They agreed that their work was based on the same principles and philosophy of art.

The Boichukists were eagerly sought after in the early Soviet period and undertook around 20 large-scales mural assignments during Ukrainization, including at a Communist Youth Club, a peasant sanatorium in Odesa, a Luhansk workers club, the Kyiv academy of science and the Red Army Theatre in Kharkiv. One of the last projects of Mykhailo Boichuk was the Kharkiv Red Factory Theatre Harvest Festival mural (1935). A photograph shows its thoroughly Socialist Realist style with one of the workers holding a banner with portraits of Stalin and Lenin. Two other banners have their portraits scratched out.

The photograph is all that remains. Following Stalin's consolidation of power in the 1930s, the Boichukists were accused of "Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism" and many executed, including Mykhailo and his wife Sofia in 1938. Their murals were painted over and their paintings locked away or destroyed.

In the catalogue accompanying the exhibition there are essayists who write about the explosion of creativity following the Bolshevik Revolution fairly objectively. Tetiana Zhmurko, Head of Modern Art at NAMU, explains how "As the capital of the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic (UkrSS) from 1921 to 1934, Kharkiv was quickly transformed into a refined cultural centre, having previously been a truly provincial city. The state policy of 'Ukrainization,' which promoted the national language and culture, stimulated advancements in art and science.

"Numerous art collectives were set up, dozens of varied literary magazines were launched, experimental theatres were founded and the film industry was rapidly growing."

Olena Kashuba-Volvach, one of the exhibition's co-curators, credits the Bolsheviks for introducing universal education, engaging with Ukrainian organisations that did not support them and creating workers facilities (Razak) to prepare workers and peasants for higher education. "These changes succeeded in broadening the local base of Ukrainian culture, many people, especially of the younger generation, who would likely have remained illiterate in previous decades, now received and had the opportunity in creative activities," she writes.

Kashuba-Volvach (in one sentence) is the only person to mention Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Bolshevik Revolution alongside Vladimir Lenin, explaining how the reorganisation of higher education institutions beginning in 1924 and the mass purges that followed were "aimed at driving out the left opposition led by Leon Trotsky." But that's all there is.

Leon Trotsky and his supporters—including many of the most important leaders of the Russian Revolution—formed the Left Opposition in October 1923. Trotsky, born in Ukraine and the most active participant in socialist politics of the early twentieth century and an insightful analyst of cultural questions, is otherwise expunged.

A reading of Trotsky's works dispels the false assertions in the exhibition that the Bolsheviks believed "Everything connected to the past had to be destroyed" and wanted to control artists and their art.

In *Literature and Revolution* (1924), Trotsky examines the various artistic movements competing with one another for cultural dominance. He criticised the Futurists' calls for a radical break with the past, arguing

the working class had to absorb all that was best in previous cultures. Without the Revolution, he explained, the avant-garde would have been absorbed into bourgeois society and rendered safe. The Revolution truly liberated these artists and allowed their ideas to permeate Soviet society.

In “Art and Politics in Our Epoch,” Trotsky wrote, “A revolutionary party is neither able or willing to take upon itself the task of ‘leading’ and even less of commanding art, either before or after the conquest of power... Art, like science, not only does not seek orders but by its very essence cannot tolerate them.”

In his fight against the later Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union, Trotsky gave substantial attention to the question of Ukraine and its future in the absence of a renewal of socialist internationalism—in writings that are indispensable to understanding the current war. The reader can find an introduction to these questions in David North’s essay “On the 82nd anniversary of the assassination of Leon Trotsky.”