

A REVOLUTIONARY IMPULSE: THE RISE OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE BRINGS TOGETHER NEARLY 300 WORKS FROM MoMA's COLLECTION IN ANTICIPATION OF THE CENTENNIAL OF THE 1917 REVOLUTION

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

December 3, 2016–March 12, 2017

South Gallery, Third Floor

Press Viewing Hour: Friday, December 2, 2016, 9:30–11:00 a.m.

NEW YORK, October 27, 2016—The Museum of Modern Art presents ***A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde***, an exhibition that brings together 260 works from MoMA's collection, tracing the arc of a period of artistic innovation between 1912 and 1935. The exhibition will be on view December 3, 2016–March 12, 2017. Planned in anticipation of the centennial year of the 1917 Russian Revolution, the exhibition highlights breakthrough developments in the conception of Suprematism and Constructivism, as well as in avant-garde poetry, theater, photography, and film, by such figures as Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Lyubov Popova, Alexandr Rodchenko, Olga Rozanova, Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg, and Dziga Vertov, among others. The exhibition features a rich cross-section of works across several mediums—opening with displays of pioneering non-objective paintings, prints, and drawings from the years leading up to and immediately following the Revolution, followed by a suite of galleries featuring photography, film, graphic design, and utilitarian objects, a transition that reflects the shift of avant-garde production in the 1920s. Made in response to changing social and political conditions, these works probe and suggest the myriad ways that a revolution can manifest itself in an object. *A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde* is organized by Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography, and Sarah Suzuki, Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints; with Hillary Reder, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints.

A series of works by artists including Natalia Goncharova and her husband and artistic collaborator Mikhail Larionov open the exhibition. Goncharova and Larionov sought to combine Western European developments such as Cubism and Futurism with a distinctly Russian character, drawing on history, folklore, and religious motifs for inspiration. One outgrowth of their efforts was Rayonism, an abstract style that derived its name from the use of dynamic rays of contrasting color, exemplified in Goncharova's *Rayonism, Blue-Green Forest* (1913). A hallmark of this period was a fertile collaboration between painters and poets that resulted in illustrated books, also on view in the exhibition. These collaborations rejected fine-art book traditions in favor of small, distinctly handmade volumes, such as the rare book *Worldbackwards* (1912), shown in an astonishing four variations, each with a unique, collaged cover.

Radical new efforts in painting and poetry are also featured, such as an unpublished, uncut

sheet from poets Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov's *Te li le* (1914), with images by Olga Rozanova. The sheet features a poetic language conceived in 1913 by the pair called Zaum ("transrational," "beyonsense," or "transreason"), which frees letters and words from specific meanings, instead emphasizing their aural and visual qualities. Painters likewise sought to push their medium to its limits, dismissing the strictures of realism and rationality in favor of advancing new abstract forms. The *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (zero-ten)*, held in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) in December 1915, highlighted two new models of abstraction. One, developed by Vladimir Tatlin, focused on a group of nonrepresentational Counter-Reliefs ("reliefs with a particular pronounced tension"). An example can be found in the exhibition in the exceedingly rare *Brochure for Tatlin's counter-reliefs exhibited at 0.10* (1915). The other, proposed by Kazimir Malevich, unveiled a radically new mode of abstract painting that abandoned reference to the outside world in favor of colored geometric shapes floating against white backgrounds. Because this new style claimed supremacy over the forms of nature, Malevich called it Suprematism. The exhibition includes Malevich's *Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying* (1915), which was featured in *0.10*, and *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918), which ranks among the most iconoclastic paintings of its day.

While Suprematism's focus on pure form had a spiritual bent, the adherents of Constructivism privileged the creation of utilitarian objects with orderly, geometric designs. In 1918, Rodchenko made *Non-Objective Painting no. 80 (Black on Black)*, one of a series of eight black paintings he conceived in direct response to the group of white paintings by Malevich. By eliminating color almost completely, Rodchenko underscored the material quality of the painting's surface. Around this time, he also produced a series of "spatial constructions" focused on kineticism, marking a significant leap from his exploration of the painted surface to three-dimensional objects. *5 x 5 = 25: An Exhibition of Painting* (1921), a brochure for an exhibition of the same title, typed by Varvara Stepanova, features contributions from Rodchenko, Lyubov Popova, Alexandra Exter, and Aleksandr Vesnin. Held in Moscow at the All-Russian Union of Poets in September 1921, the exhibition featured five works by each of the five participants, and was the Constructivist group's last presentation of painting.

Between 1919 and 1927 El Lissitzky produced a large body of paintings, prints, and drawings that he referred to as Proun, an acronym for "Project for the Affirmation of the New" in Russian. A particular highlight is the portfolio *Proun* (1920), made during Lissitzky's short but prolific period working at the art school in Vitebsk, alongside Malevich. Lissitzky asserted *Proun* is "the station on the way to the construction of a new form," and in these lithographs, he arranges geometric forms in dynamic, overlapping relationships to create imagined spaces. It will be the first time this rare portfolio, acquired in 2013, will be on view. New developments in theater are surveyed through the example of Alexandra Exter, an artist deeply engaged with theatrical design and production, including several examples of her innovative set designs and costumes for the science-fiction film *Aelita* (1924). These are shown alongside prints from Lissitzky's portfolio *Victory Over the Sun*, which he made after seeing a 1920 restaging of the seminal Cubo-Futurist

opera of the same name, and features characters from the production transformed into “electromechanical” figurines.

As the 1920s progressed, photography and film surpassed painting and sculpture as the chosen medium for the avant-garde, moving works from the studio to the public sphere. The exhibition includes an in-depth look at Soviet avant-garde cinema, in a gallery that features clips from seminal films by Alexander Dovzhenko, Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov, highlighting a variety of strategies in montage, including disjunctive cutting, extreme close-ups, unusual angles, and image superimposition. At this time, Lissitzky began to describe his work as *fotopis* (painting with photographs), a neologism that first appeared in the title of a maquette for a mural version of *Record* (1926), a photomontage included in the show. After turning away from painting, Rodchenko also found new means to build networks of communication—in photographs and book design. He collaborated with the progressive writers Nikolai Aseev, Osip Brik, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Sergei Tret’iakov on covers and layouts for the journal *Novyi LEF* (1927–28), a complete run of which is on view. Eschewing the conventional belly-button view in his photographs, Rodchenko’s pictures of this era—such as *Mother* (1924), *Assembling for a Demonstration* (1928–30), and *Pioneer Girl* (1930)—favor dynamic camera angles. Advocating for a cinematic, fractured representation of his subjects, Rodchenko also tried his hand at film, designing intertitles for Dziga Vertov’s *Kino-Pravda* newsreel series.

The ideology of the Revolution touched all aspects of daily life, from economy to education. The most significant artists of the day, in accordance with state orders, were soon applying avant-garde tactics to create propagandistic work that would be easily comprehensible to the Soviet public at large. The final gallery of the exhibition contains this kind of material, including children’s books created by Vladimir Lebedev and Samuil Marshak, whose book designs balanced sophistication and accessibility, drawing on Cubism and Suprematism, with stories that nourished the intellectual and visual imagination. Also on view are film posters, by the brothers Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg, which feature radical uses of typography and color, underscoring the relationship between graphic arts and the burgeoning Soviet cinema. The Constructivist architect Iakov Chernikov applied his ideas to imagine a future reflecting the avant-garde culture of the new Soviet Union. His *Architectural Fantasies: 101 Compositions in Color, 101 Architectural Miniatures* (1933) featured here, however, never had a chance to materialize. Joseph Stalin’s repressive regime effectively put an end to Constructivism and other avant-garde activities in the cultural sphere by the mid-1930s.

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition is supported by the Annual Exhibition Fund.

PUBLIC PROGRAM:

The Russian Avant-Garde: Scholars Respond

Wednesday, February 8, 2017 from 6 to 8 PM in MoMA’s Celeste Bartos Theater

Organized in conjunction with the exhibition *A Revolutionary Impulse: The Rise of the Russian Avant-Garde*, this scholars’ panel will address the myriad ways in which an art object can be revolutionary.

Panelists

Masha Chlenova, art historian and independent curator

Devin Fore, Professor, German Department, Princeton University

Maria Gough, Joseph Pulitzer, Jr. Professor of Modern Art, Department of History of Art and Architecture, Harvard University

Christina Kiaer, Associate Professor, Department of Art History, Northwestern University

Kristin Romberg, Assistant Professor, Art History, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Moderated by Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator, Department of Photography, and Sarah Suzuki, Curator, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Museum of Modern Art

This program is made possible by The Renova Group of Companies.

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