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The Museum of Modern Art

FIRST MAJOR U.S. RETROSPECTIVE OF THE WORK OF RUSSIAN ARTIST ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO OPENS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN JUNE

Exhibition Surveys Rodchenko's Pioneering Achievements, Including Painting, Sculpture, Drawing, Collage, Design, and Photography

Many Works from Russia On View for the First Time in the United States

Aleksandr Rodchenko
On view from June 25 through October 6, 1998

The first major U.S. retrospective of the work of the Russian artist Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956) opens at The Museum of Modern Art on June 25, 1998. Tracing the arc of Rodchenko's career--from his leadership of the Moscow avant-garde in the wake of Lenin's Revolution to the marginalization of his art under Stalin's dictatorship--*Aleksandr Rodchenko* presents a coherent overview of his accomplishments in a wide range of mediums, including painting, sculpture, drawing, collage, design (encompassing book and magazine covers, advertising, packaging, and posters), and photography. The exhibition comprises more than 300 works created between 1915 and 1939, many of which come from Russian museums and the

A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova Archive in Moscow and are exhibited in the United States for the first time.

Aleksandr Rodchenko is co-organized by Magdalena Dabrowski, Senior Curator, Department of Drawings, and Peter Galassi, Chief Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art; and guest curator Leah Dickerman, Assistant Professor of Art History, Stanford University. It remains on view at MoMA through October 6. A European tour will follow.

The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, which brought Lenin to power, inspired Rodchenko and other advanced artists to join in creating an entirely new society and culture on the ruins of the old. One of the most wrenching upheavals of the twentieth century thus fostered one of the most vibrant chapters of radical modernism in the arts, until Russia's dream of social justice was transformed into the Stalinist nightmare. As Mr. Galassi notes, "Rodchenko's work is challenging because it is so experimental and diverse, and because its diversity arose from his deep engagement with the turmoils of his time. To grasp his art means exploring the eager inventiveness of modernism; it also means coming to terms with both the idealism of the utopian illusion that inspired his creativity and the fierceness of the totalitarian regime that crushed it."

Rodchenko was one of the founders and leaders of Constructivism, the vigorous artistic movement that took shape in the aftermath of the Revolution. The initial section of the exhibition will feature abstract works dating from 1915 to 1921 in oil, gouache, watercolor, and pencil,

and the hanging sculpture *Spatial Construction no. 12* (c. 1920). In harmony with the revolutionary goal of an ordered, technologically advanced society, Rodchenko strove for an objective, depersonalized art, stripped of description, narrative, and spiritual trappings. Taking as his point of departure the abstract vocabulary of Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, Rodchenko isolated individual material qualities of painting and analyzed them in successive series: the planar surface of the work, its faktura or texture, the density and weight of color, the complete absence of color (in the Black on Black series of 1918), and line. In 1921 the driving momentum of these experiments led him to the radicalism of the monochromatic triptych: *Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color*. He later recalled, "I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue and yellow. I affirmed: it's all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no representation."

Upon reaching the "dead end" of abstraction, Rodchenko then turned in the opposite direction, aiming to dismantle the barriers between high art and ordinary life. He renounced painting as an outmoded bourgeois art and committed himself--at least in principle--to practical art in the service of the unfolding Communist society. This bold stroke led him to a broad exploration of the applied arts and to lasting innovations in graphic design, photocollage, and photography.

Emerging victorious from three years of bloody civil war in early 1921, the Communists (as the Bolsheviks now called themselves) took steps to revitalize Russia's devastated economy. Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP), which permitted limited capitalist competition, introduced a period of relative openness in Russian society and culture. Rodchenko's decision to renounce painting coincided with the advent of the NEP era, and he seized the opportunity to address a mass audience through graphic design.

Under NEP, government enterprises such as Dobrolet (the airline), GUM (the department store), and Mossel'prom (the grocery concern) were obliged to compete in the open market. The exhibition presents a rich selection of the more than 150 advertising and packaging designs created by Rodchenko between 1923 and 1925 for these and other state companies. The ads promoted products and Communist ideology simultaneously, through bold graphic forms.

A similar spirit was at work in the Workers' Club that Rodchenko created as one of the Soviet Union's contributions to the celebrated international exhibition of decorative and industrial art in Paris in 1925. *Aleksandr Rodchenko* will include an approximate reconstruction of the Club and its spare, geometric furniture, which treated communal leisure as a form of political education and projected a progressive image of hygiene and rationality.

Further broadening the scope of his art in the early 1920s, Rodchenko embraced photocollage as an alternative to painting. His masterpiece in this medium is the cover and eight illustrations he made in 1923 for Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem *About This* (Pro eto), which are shown in the U.S. for the first time. Rodchenko's photocollage work led him to make photographs of his own, beginning in 1924 with a striking series of unadorned portraits of Mayakovsky and other members of the Left Front of the Arts, or Lef, in which Rodchenko played a leading role.

Like many other artists of the 1920s, Rodchenko regarded photography as progressive because it was mechanical and objective and because, through

reproduction, it could address a mass audience. By 1927, it was his principal occupation. His signature style of mobile perspectives and oblique angles, notably in pivotal works such as *At the Telephone* (1928) and *Assembling for a Demonstration* (1928-30), made a major contribution to the development of European photographic modernism. One hundred photographs in the exhibition, selected from two dozen Russian, European, and American collections, richly represent this achievement.

Rodchenko's diverse work of the 1920s is full of wit, invention, and energy. But the climate of revolutionary optimism that inspired this work began to darken in 1928, when Joseph Stalin launched his First Five-Year Plan of forced industrialization. Rodchenko soon began to feel the pressure of Stalin's contentious cultural revolution, which by the mid-1930s had thoroughly suppressed all independent art.

Rodchenko attempted to adapt to the new regime by giving more of his energy to propaganda photojournalism, including a series on the first Soviet automobile factory, in 1929. The December 1933 issue of the monthly *USSR in Construction*, which he also designed, published his photographs of the building of a canal between the White Sea and the Baltic. This was the first of Stalin's major gulags, in which 200,000 people died.

The exhibition culminates with Rodchenko's late portraits, including *Woman with a Leica* of 1934, whose melancholy intimacy is distant from his contemporaneous photographs of grand Stalinist parades, the bold forms and sweeping lines of which project an image of indomitable state power. Ironically, as Rodchenko was relegated to the margins of Soviet culture in the 1930s, his modernist vision was forming the basis of Stalinist photographic propaganda. He died in 1956, the year that Nikita Krushchev denounced Stalin's crimes.

"Rodchenko's art is central in the history of Russia's utopian experiment, and in the evolution of the most progressive art of the twentieth century," Ms. Dabrowski writes in her catalogue essay. "The richness of his artistic inventions and their impact on the work of younger generations in many areas, including advertising, book design, and photography, continue to surprise us to this day."

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Publication

Aleksandr Rodchenko: Russian Revolutionary Modernist, by Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi. With essays by Aleksandr Lavrent'ev, the artist's grandson, and Varvara Rodchenko, the artist's daughter. Selected bibliography; illustrated chronology. 431 illustrations, including 221 in full color, 114 in duotone.

336 pages, 9 1/2 x 12". Clothbound, $65, distributed in the United States and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, and paperbound $32.50; both available in the MoMA Book Store.

Tour

After its New York showing Aleksandr Rodchenko will travel to the

Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (November 6, 1998-January 24, 1999) and the Moderna Museet, Stockholm
(March 6-May 24, 1999), under the auspices of The International Council of
The Museum of Modern Art.

Public Programs
A program of Soviet films to which Rodchenko contributed or which otherwise are related to his work will be presented at the Museum in September.

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