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| **Russian Constructivism** |
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| Russian constructivism was an avant-garde movement that emerged from the ferment of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Responding to the transformative potential of the Machine Age, constructivism helped to formulate an aesthetic inspired by machines and reflecting the concerns of a modern, industrial society. It thereby had a profound impact upon modernist architecture and design in the West, influencing both the De Stijl movement and the Bauhaus. Constructivists saw themselves as artist-engineers charged with building the infrastructure of a new society and the movement briefly enjoyed the support of the Soviet government, which commandeered this modern, abstract style to express its ideals. Constructivism was manifested in many cultural fields, including art, architecture, graphic design, theatre and cinema. |
| Russian constructivism was an avant-garde movement that emerged from the ferment of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Responding to the transformative potential of the Machine Age, constructivism helped to formulate an aesthetic inspired by machines and reflecting the concerns of a modern, industrial society. It thereby had a profound impact upon modernist architecture and design in the West, influencing both the De Stijl movement and the Bauhaus. Constructivists saw themselves as artist-engineers charged with building the infrastructure of a new society and the movement briefly enjoyed the support of the Soviet government, which commandeered this modern, abstract style to express its ideals. Constructivism was manifested in many cultural fields, including art, architecture, graphic design, theatre and cinema.  The origins of constructivism lay in the pre-revolutionary work of Vladimir Tatlin, an artist based in Moscow. He abandoned the romantic notion of the artist as a capricious genius and dressed in worker's overalls as a display of solidarity with the proletariat. Inspired by cubism and Italian futurism, Tatlin created abstract geometric constructions or ‘painterly reliefs’ using industrial materials such as steel, iron and glass. The sculptors Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo published a *Realistic Manifesto* in 1920, which articulated this new approach. The term ‘constructivism’ is thought to have been derived from the manifesto, although other sources have been suggested. Constructivism was consolidated as a movement at INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) in Moscow. The First Working Group of Constructivists was founded here in 1921 and included Alexei Gan, Liubov Popova, Alexandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova and Alexandr Vesnin, all of whom were committed to a materialist and politically-orientated approach. Important outlets for constructivism were the journals *LEF* (1923-5) and *Novyi LEF* (1927-9), launched by the Left Front for Artists.  The constructivists were among the first artists to embrace the new age of machinery and mass production. In this period, Russia was still largely a rural, peasant country with little heavy industry, but the Bolshevik Revolution promised a workers’ paradise built with the awesome power of modern technology. In this climate of political fervour, the machine became a metaphor for progress and constructivists established a machine aesthetic that was later developed at the Bauhaus.  Anticipating a proletarian Utopia, many constructivists devoted themselves to the ideological cause of Bolshevism. They rejected the notion of art as the preserve of a bourgeois elite and aimed to demolish the barriers between art and industry. The propaganda value of their dynamic constructions and graphics was recognised by the state, and numerous agencies were set up to cultivate it. For example, Narkompros, the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, was a cultural and educational ministry headed by Anatoliy Lunacharsky. Vladimir Tatlin was appointed director of IZO (the visual art section of Narkompros) and became a key figure in the implementation of Lenin’s Plan for Monumental Propaganda. Constructivists were recruited to create agitprop (agitation-propaganda) trains that toured the country emblazoned with striking graphic designs, thereby spreading the revolutionary message to Russia’s largely illiterate rural population.  Tatlin believed that architecture was linked to engineering and saw the architect as an anonymous worker serving society. His audacious Monument to the Third International (1919-20) was envisaged as a 396m tower of iron, glass and steel proclaiming the glory of the revolution. This visionary design represented the union of art and construction – its sculptural form of two intertwining spirals and a soaring diagonal component was rendered in a lattice construction suggestive of raw engineering rather than academic architecture. The tower also functioned as a machine, featuring four transparent volumes that rotated at different speeds (yearly, monthly, daily and hourly). These were intended to house government offices for legislation, administration, information and cinematic projection. High costs and political opposition prevented Tatlin from executing the design, and only a scale model was ever built. Tatlin subsequently directed his talents into industrial production, with only limited success, creating designs for furniture, workers' overalls and an economical stove intended for mass production.  Initially, constructivism was concerned with three-dimensional constructions, but the aesthetic was soon extended to other media. El Lissitsky created visual propaganda drawing on the ideas of futurism and cubism. Inspired by military maps, his famous poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1920) used abstract imagery and diagonal lines of force to represent the Russian Civil War of 1917-22.  The designer Varvara Stepanova developed a powerful visual style for graphics, textiles and clothing. Her work made extensive use of photomontage, manipulating found photographic images to create jarring juxtapositions. Diagonal lines and unstable compositions conveyed the energy and dynamism associated with modernity. Her contribution to the publication *The Results of the First Five-Year Plan* (1932) mythologized the technological achievements of Stalin’s first programme of economic reform.  Embracing Bolshevik ideology, Stepanova saw clothing as a symbol of egalitarian values and a tool for social cohesion. She designed workers’ clothing, sportswear and textiles, many of which were mass-produced by the First State Textile Printing Factory from 1923 to 1924. Based on bold, geometric silhouettes and abstract patterns, constructivist clothing mechanised the human body and posited it as a biological machine working in synchronicity with industrial society.  Stepanova’s husband Alexandr Rodchenko was a painter and graphic designer who created propaganda posters, book covers and state advertising in a similarly dynamic style. His work eliminated unnecessary detail and emphasized diagonal composition. He experimented with photography and photomontage, and designed inter-titles for Dziga Vertov’s film *Kino Eye* (1924). Photomontage was analogous to editing in film and directors such as Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein began experimenting with dynamic editing techniques based on the juxtaposition of images. Films such as Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) can be regarded as constructivist works. Alongside Stepanova’s experiments in fashion design, Rodchenko explored the concept of the overall, which he saw as the epitome of working class dress. For maximum functionality, he included detachable pockets and sleeves, and stressed the construction of the garment by emphasising the components with bold seams and zips.  Architecture was a crucial area of constructivist practice as this was the medium with potential to build the new infrastructure for post-revolutionary Russia. Constructivist architecture was developed by Nikolai Ladovsky, Ivan Leonidov, El Lissitsky, Konstantin Melnikov and the brothers Alexandr, Leonid and Viktor Vesnin in buildings that emphasized functionalism and new construction techniques, while translating the dynamism of constructivist art and design into architectonic terms. Public buildings, exhibition designs and stage sets were the focus of these experiments and many projects remained un-built due to the technological limitations of the era.  Political support for constructivism waned after 1932, when Stalin outlawed abstract art and imposed the reactionary doctrine of Socialist realism. This severely curtailed constructivist activity, although some exponents continued to produce innovative work, particularly in the fields of poster design and typography. Beyond Russia, constructivism influenced a wide spectrum of artists and designers.  File: Tatlin.jpg  Figure 1. Vladimir Tatlin, Monument to the Third International (1919-20)  Source: <http://minerva.union.edu/duncanc/monuments/Vladimir%20Tatlin%20Monument%20to%20the%20Third%20International%202.jpg>  File: Lissitsky.jpg  Figure 2. El Lissitsky, Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge (1920)  Source: <http://www.theartstory.org/images20/works/lissitzky\_el\_2.jpg>  File: Stepanova1.jpg  Figure 3. Varvara Stepanova, The Results of the First Five-Year Plan (1932)  Source: <http://kayleighmahon.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/573033730\_2e65f49b7a.jpg>  File: Stepanova2.jpg  Figure 4. Varvara Stepanova, sportswear design (1923)  Source: <http://theconversation.com/sublime-design-varvara-stepanovas-unisex-sports-uniform-27587>  File: Stepanova3.jpg  Figure 5. Varvara Stepanova, Pattern for a cloth, gouache on paper (1924)  Source: not provided by author ☹  File: Rodchenko.jpg  Figure 6. Alexandr Rodchenko, Poster for a Moscow publisher (1924)  Source: <http://www.creativereview.co.uk/images/uploads/2008/08/rodchenko.jpg> |
| Further reading: (Cohen and Lodder)(Dabrowski, Dickerman and Galassi)(Gough)(Khan-Magomedov)(Lodder)(Margolin)(Milner) (Rickey) |