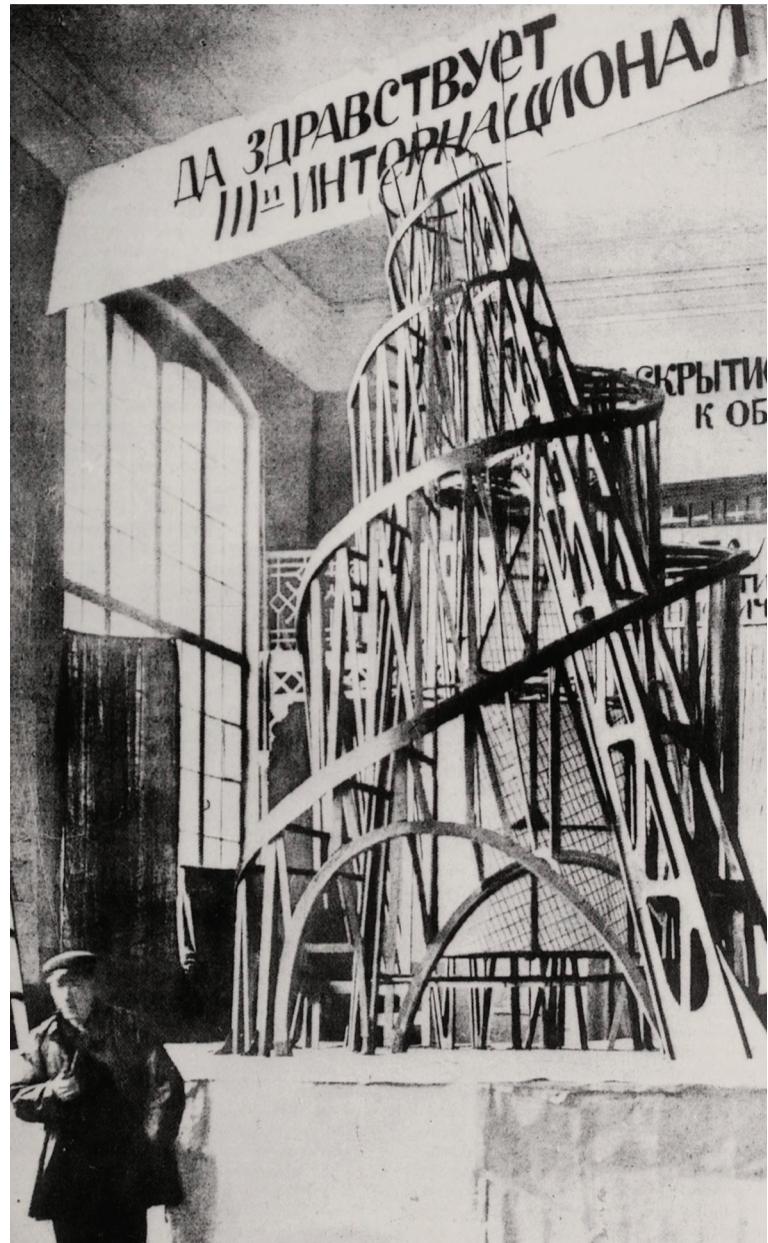


Exhibitions



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Building anew: how Constructivism sought to remake the world

In the centenary year of the Bolshevik Revolution, exhibitions survey the art of the Russian avant-garde and put its radicalism in context

20TH CENTURY

Next month marks 100 years since the abdication of the last Russian czar. Within months, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had seized power, shaking the world. In the wake of the takeover, the Russian avant-garde developed new forms of Modernism, which are the subjects of three major exhibitions in New York and London (see below).

“Construction is the goal”

On 8 November 1920, the third anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, the sculptor Vladimir Tatlin unveiled a model for his Monument to the Third International in Petrograd. The wooden structure, which stood around 20 ft high, was at that point only a dream, a fraction of the 1,300-ft-tall structure of glass and steel the artist actually imagined. The finished work, intended to house the Comintern (the international Communist organisation tasked with proselytising for Marxism worldwide), was to

The model for Tatlin's Tower (1919-20), the inspiration for Constructivism

include four layered sections that would rotate continuously at varying speeds to illustrate the dynamism of Soviet Marxism. The tower's spirals, the critic Nikolai Punin wrote, “are full of movement, aspiration and speed: they are taut like the creative will and like a muscle tensed with a hammer”.

How was art to become useful for the revolution?

Punin had got ahead of himself; the model in Petrograd was immobile and the project never developed beyond its initial phase. But “the birth of Constructivism came as a direct response to Vladimir Tatlin’s model”, the art historian Yve-Alain Bois wrote in an essay on the movement. In retrospect, it is clear why Tatlin’s tower married utopian aspiration to utilitarian ideals, but in the end realised neither. By itself, this is a neat summary of Constructivism.

The ethos of the movement emerged amid a debate at the Bolshevik Institute

for Artistic Culture (INKhUK). There, on 1 January 1921, the sculptor Aleksandr Rodchenko gathered a group of artists to discuss their role in the unfolding revolution. The members were in agreement on their opposition to INKhUK’s director, Wassily Kandinsky, whose pictures were too “bourgeois” in their good taste. They saw his paintings as expressions of his personal vision, for which there was no room in revolutionary times. “Down with Kandinsky! Down!” Punin wrote in 1919. “Everything in his art is accidental and individualistic.” Polemics such as these brought a swift end to his tenure: in January 1921, Kandinsky resigned.

Yet the key question remained: how was art to move past the “easelism” of personal expression? How was it to become useful for the revolution? For four months, over a group of drawings (each artist in the group presented two), they argued bitterly among themselves and arrived, finally, at a simple conclusion: only constructive art would do. From now on, individual composition would be jettisoned in favour of art built by, and for, Bolshevik society.

“Construction is the goal, the necessity and the purpose of organisation,”

REVOLUTIONARY EXHIBITIONS AROUND THE WORLD



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

Museum of Modern Art, New York (until 12 March)

The Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA) led the way and opened the first of the big international anniversary shows devoted to the art of the Russian Revolution in December. A Revolutionary Impulse (until 12 March), focuses on the period 1912-35 and includes the big names of Suprematism and Constructivism: Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky and Aleksandr Rodchenko, among others. It also looks at how artists such as Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov fused Cubism and Futurism with Russian folklore and includes experiments in photography and film by Sergei Eisenstein. Around 260 of the museum’s more than 1,000 works from the period are on show in this exhibition.

Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist Composition: Airplane Flying (1915)

Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932

Royal Academy of Arts, London
(11 February-17 April)

Five years in the making, Revolution: Russian Art 1917-1932 opens this month at the Royal Academy of Arts. The exhibition documents competing ideas by showing avant-garde and Socialist Realist artists alongside each other. It draws inspiration from an exhibition organised by the art critic Nikolai Punin in 1932 that surveyed 3,000 works of contemporary Russian art. The London institution will also recreate the room devoted to Malevich, with more than 30 paintings and architectonics installed together for the first time in 85 years. “Normally, museums look at Russian art of this period in terms of the general sweep of international modern art,” says the show’s co-curator, John Milner. “We are taking a new look at Russian art in terms of the Russian context in which it was made, and the conditions at the time that united often disparate groups.”



Isaak Brodsky's painting V.I. Lenin and Manifestation (1919)



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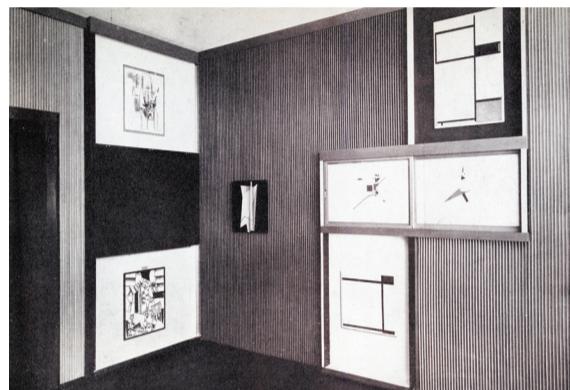


the artists Lyubov Popova and Varvara Bubnova wrote around 1920, and such construction was to make the artist anonymous. "No excess materials or elements" – no decoration, no signature flourishes – would be allowed; only what was necessary would be permitted. Constructivism emerged from the heat of these principles.

Art to make man active

Even in the early 1920s, when the movement was in its most productive theoretical phase, the project was under strain. The government support Tatlin enjoyed when his tower was commissioned by the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment quickly dried up. Officials had bigger problems: the economy was staggering toward collapse and the New Economic Policy implemented in 1921 to revive it had reintroduced free-market elements into the economy. Artists were no longer guaranteed funding, and those who completed the shift from studio art to utilitarian construction found the work gruelling and unrewarding.

Yet in some ways, the art developed in its intended direction and became even more radical. Beyond the debates at



Lenin (at centre, standing on the first step, looking down) with comrades at a May Day rally in Red Square in Moscow in 1919, and El Lissitzky's Demonstration Room (1927) at the Landesgalerie in Hannover

INKhUK, El Lissitzky was experimenting with ideas for involving audiences in his work. "Traditionally, the viewer has been lulled into passivity by the paintings on walls," he wrote in 1920. "Our construction/design shall make the man active."

In Hannover in 1927, he presented what he considered to be one of his most important works: a Demonstration Room that included paintings by Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg and Mies van der Rohe hung asymmetrically to Lissitzky's liking. Alongside the paintings were cabinets and drawers

filled with objects, which viewers were invited to move and open on their own. The installation not only forced a new way of looking at Modern painting, it also imagined a new kind of museum.

Radicalism like this, which did away with the Romantic ideal of the lone, creative artist, made a deep impression on Alfred Barr, later the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who made a visit to the Soviet Union in 1927. "I must find some painters," he wrote in a letter to his wife, but the task proved difficult. Indeed, Barr found it hard to find anyone interested in Modernism as he understood it. Seeking advice from the writer Sergei Tretyakov, Barr noted that "he seemed to have lost all interest in everything that did not conform to his objective, descriptive, self-styled journalistic ideal of art".

Yet by the time of Barr's visit, the radical phase of Russian art was coming to an end. On 23 April 1932, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a decree that summarily disbanded all cultural institutions and regrouped them under a new umbrella administration. "Alien elements", according to the text, had contaminated Russian art and literature, cultivating an "elitist withdrawal and loss of contact with the political tasks of the present". Henceforth, Socialist Realism was inaugurated as the only sanctioned style.

In different ways, Constructivism lingered on. In Italy in the 1930s, the Rationalist architect Giuseppe Terragni even used some of its forms to build Benito Mussolini's Fascist state. Here, the movement was turned against itself. But even this did not last. Like any revolution, in the historian Crane Brinton's words, Constructivism rose like a fever that peaked and then diminished, leaving the patient "in some respects actually strengthened by the experience" but "certainly not made wholly over into a new man".
Pac Pobric

Three views on the radicalism of the Russian avant-garde—and its suppression



A Bolshevik demonstration in Petrograd in June 1917

Painters and poets collaborate



The early futurist book *Worldbackwards* [1912] is emblematic of the shake-up that many artists were agitating for in the art world. It was conceived to completely undercut the bourgeois tradition of the deluxe livre d'artiste, luxuriously bound and typeset on fine-quality paper with

tipped-in full colour images. It's small, cheaply produced, resolutely handmade and turns the book from a conveyor of information into an art object in and of itself. It also dispensed with regularity: each of the books—and we're lucky enough to have four copies [at the Museum of Modern Art]—has a unique, collaged cover. It also speaks to the fertile collaborations between painters and poets that will follow during this period: Goncharova, Larionov, Rogovin, and Tatlin contributed the visual elements, while the game-changing poets of the period, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, composed the texts.

Sarah Suzuki is a co-curator of *A Revolutionary Impulse at the Museum of Modern Art, New York*

A revolution of everyday life



Abstract art was already heavily criticised in the 1920s, not least by the former abstract artists themselves, who were moving of their own volition into "useful", non-art things like design, cinema, photography and architecture. But avant-garde design and film survives well into Stalinism—it's not until 1934 or thereabouts that it is really decisively finished. There is something very Victorian about Stalinism's own aesthetics—monumental decorative architecture, narrative realist painting, and a certain horror vacui—but it does contain within it all sorts of traces of the avant-garde project, something you can see very well in, say, the architecture of the Moscow Metro, which is as much a "revolution of everyday life" as anything in the 1920s, or in the very experimental realist painting of Aleksandr Deyneka or Yuri Pimenov.

Owen Hatherley writes about architecture, politics and culture

The shadow of Stalin



From 1917 there was great diversity in Russian art. This is the subject of the exhibition [at the Royal Academy], but by 1932 an awful lot of avant-garde artists disappeared from the list of names and from the literature. Just as people like [the Socialist Realist painter] Isaak Brodsky were there at the start, but became more important, so leftist art and really lively critical debate was vanishing. Under Stalin, a different history of art was developing. Quite soon, it was risky to mention Tatlin and others. It became commonplace to speak of art as a social phenomenon, so that the hanging of museum collections and the writing of art history books became Stalinist right up to Stalin's death.

John Milner is a co-curator of *Revolution: Russian Art 1917-32* at the Royal Academy of Arts, London

Compiled by Jane Morris and José da Silva

Red Star Over Russia

Tate Modern, London (8 November–18 February 2018)

In the fall, Tate Modern opens Red Star Over Russia, which covers visual culture from the Russia-wide strikes of 1905 to Stalin's death in 1953. The bulk of the works are drawn from the collection of more than 250,000 photographs, posters and newspapers belonging to the late graphic designer and Soviet art expert David King, which are now in the Tate's collection. The show's chief curator, Natalia Sidlina, says it is the "world's most important collection of published and archival work from the turn of the century until Khrushchev". It underlines the point that the vast majority of Russia's people only experienced art through printed media, she says.

Jane Morris

Nina Vatolina's *Fascism—The Most Evil Enemy of Women* (1941)



More Revolution exhibitions

- The Advent of Abstraction: Russia, 1914–23**
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, until 12 March
- Revolutionary! Russian Avant-Garde from the Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection**
Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz, until 19 March
- 1917: Romanovs & Revolution**
Hermitage, Amsterdam, 4 February–17 September
- Russian Revolution: Hope, Tragedy, Myths**
British Library, London, 28 April–29 August
- Avant-Garde Russia**
Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, 14 October–11 February 2018
- The Currency of Communism**
British Museum, London, 26 October–May 2018

David Hockney The Complete Early Etchings 1961–1964

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