


The Mystery of the Monogram



Maria Valyaeva is an art historian and has published on Russian Symbolism and the Avant-Garde. Dr. Valyaeva has been at the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, since 1986 where she has been Head of the Department of Contemporary Art and since 2001 she has been Senior Researcher of the Department of Modern Art.

 The history of artists' monograms is fantastic. On the one hand, monograms have played the role of a gentle compositional element in paintings and designs which, by its elegant straight or whimsical lines, replaced the basic form of the signature of the artist's full name. On the other hand, they sometimes hid the identity of the real author of a picture, duping the public so that an artist is protected from persecution for presenting daring subjects or dubious images. Just as in literature, the monogram was something like a pen name but artistically transformed in the style of royal and noble families of former times.

The monogram, as it has come down to our times from very ancient periods and in the contemporary practice of different people, became a combination of self-expression, graphic game, and printing logotype. Being a bridge between typography and a drawn design, the monogram should have a clear style that imitates calligraphy or a woodcut. So in a work of art it is obligatory that it be in harmony with a painting's texture or with the linear and rhythmical structure of a graphic work.

Sometimes artists marked their creations with the figure of an animal, insect, bird, flower, or an object. Thus Lucas Cranach used the image of a winged snake, Garofalo a pink, Brill a pair of glasses, Henri met de Bless an owl, and so on. As a rule, a figure remained constant throughout the life of the artist, revealing his contradictory aim to conceal his authorship and to send a message to his heirs using a code. Thanks to it, scholars are able to attribute many works by

finding monograms hidden in some barely visible place on the front or on the back of a work.

Probably the most famous in the world of art is the monogram of Albrecht Dürer. Its laconic style served as an example to generations and its lofty simplicity gave birth to a number of questions and discussions on the identity of the artist's works. In any case, these issues apply first of all to the art of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the academic tradition, less seldom found in the oeuvre of modern and contemporary artists. Their experimental pathos, provocative gestures, and formal devices – which seemed exotic to critics and to the public visiting their exhibitions – replaced any desire to play with refined hieroglyphics and the veiled puzzles of monograms. More often, they ignored calligraphic handwriting altogether, signing their works with their family names or initials in a haphazard manner. Few of them thought seriously about the harmony between graphic design and the colour of a signature in the overall plastic organization of a picture. Indeed, few of them even wanted to hide their names. On the contrary, they dreamt of the wide popularization of their authorship and unreserved primacy in inventions and innovations in artistic language.

At the same time, Cubist reform brought a new way of combining images and geometric elements together with words and their fragments within a pictorial composition. Now the word itself began to play a role as a valuable component of the image, subject, and symbolic meaning in a work of art. The artists included signatures having

an absolutely different content and origin. They might be advertisements and city names, titles of musical pieces, or addresses and telephone numbers of friends. As far as the last case is concerned, this was the only area where a mysterious content could still blossom because in fragmentary word and figure signs, the Cubist artists encoded messages to their close friends and those whose names should be concealed from the public.

Russian students of Paris studios between 1913 and 1914 followed the Cubist method of formal decomposition and in Cubist manner combined typographical elements in a particular arrangement with the images of musical instruments, still-life compositions, and portraits of their relatives or unidentified persons. This became most apparent in the works of Liubov Popova and Nadezhda Udaltsova who were faithful followers of French Cubism in the first half of the 1910s. In her *Portrait of a Philosopher*, Liubov Popova gave written hints about her younger brother's preoccupations using only the Latin alphabet; this is also found in her portrait studies of 1915. Meanwhile, in a series of *Travelling Woman* compositions she used her native Cyrillic letters, encoding the subject of the work much more completely than in previous cases.

Playing with such virtuosity on meanings, languages, and types of words in her pieces, Popova did not attach importance to the style of her signature and she did not indulge in working out a monogram, for she seldom signed her paintings and drawings and then very simply. Udaltsova did so more often, from time to time shortening her family name to a free form, which she also did in everyday documents, notes and letters. We find her writing »Н.Удал.«, »Н.Удальц.«, »Н.Уд.« or »Н.Удальцова«, and they are independent of the motif of a work, including her late realistic landscapes and still-lives. The reason for so detached an attitude towards the monogram tradition in the main body of the Russian Cubist group was the fact that the artists were indifferent to any mystical content of art. They were involved in the rational construction of a material object and a pure formal experiment with artistic means, whereas in its origin and essence a monogram is a kind of symbol having a polysemantic content. Using the image of an animal or a plant, an artist of past times wished to reflect some features of his character or fate. Choosing a mode of letter combination using their own initials, the artist also preferred a symbol instead of a signature that would openly reveal his name at the bottom or top of the painting.

The situation around monograms in modern art was not straightforward, however. Despite the fact that the art of the Russian avant-garde was opposed to all the trends that had developed before it, and to the symbolism of the Russian

Silver Age too, in reality some distinguished avant-garde leaders continued in the symbolist line, thoroughly modifying the appearance of their works while relying on the principles and the philosophy of the great spiritual foundations that were appearing in the 1910s as well as at the turn of the century. On this rich soil the utopian ideas of planetary life, religion, and the transformation of the human being developed in the genius of Malevich's mentality. The Theosophy of Helena Blavatsky and the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner inspired Kandinsky's imagination and is reflected in his literary works and in the apocalyptic visions of his canvases which only partly can be considered abstract. Even the rebels of Russian Futurist poetry looked back to the philosophy of Viacheslav Ivanov and Andrei Bely whose texts, in turn, sometimes clearly resembled the a-logical forms of Aleksei Kruchenykh's Futurism.

It is quite interesting that the artists whose psychology was under the most obvious influence of Symbolist, mystical and occult philosophy, often strived to work out a special sign, hiding their names, hinting at their authorship, and seeming to make the spectator overcome a labyrinth of suppositions first of all, and only after that to reveal a real person behind a monogram. Formerly signing works with his full family name, in mature pieces Vasily Kandinsky drew an angle or a triangle inside which the K of his name was inserted and under which the two last digits of a date were written. We should remember that the triangle and the pyramid were well known occult symbols so their essence would immediately be recognized in the monogram, the more so as the symbol of the triangle was widely used in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* and other writings by Kandinsky. Kazimir Malevich also came to use a sign instead of his earlier "KM" or simply written Cyrillic family name during the last phase of his development. Founding his Vitebsk school, he introduced an emblem of his famous Black Square both as a signature and as a patch sewn on a sleeve. Now Judaic historians reveal for us its ancient symbolic meaning related to Tfillin or the Temple of Jerusalem. It is unbelievable, but Malevich did a painting of a "Black Rectangle" which was even closer to the symbol of the Temple of Jerusalem in the traditional Jewish house than the Square was. The artist presented this work to his close friend, Ivan Kliun, on his 60th birthday celebration in 1933 with a warm dedication. And at the bottom of the painting a square-within-a-square Malevich monogram was inscribed.

As far as the artists called the "Russian Avant-Garde Amazons" are concerned, at least two of them, as we previously noted, did not pay much attention to the form of their signatures, and these two were consistent Cubists. After the Cubist stage,

Liubov Popova was carried away by Suprematism for a short time, soon joining the group of Constructivists, which corresponded much more to her nature. Another Amazon among the unquestionable Constructivist leaders was Varvara Stepanova. Like Popova, she was rather far from philosophy and, being the partner of Aleksandr Rodchenko, took much from his manner. The period of painting in her avant-garde creative activity was very short because as of around 1920, she preferred to develop constructive principles in design, applied arts, and fashion.

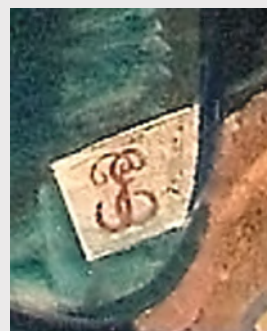
Nevertheless, for her easel creations, Stepanova devised a special signature, simultaneously combining gaudy writing and sound in the tradition of the monogram and the contemporary fashion for abbreviations. She linked the first three letters of her given name with the two first letters of her family name resulting in “Varst”, which sounds like an explosion and is a well trained Cyrillic signature, «Варст», with flourishes turned outwards.

The tendency to monogram works or to use calligraphy in signatures was characteristic for Rodchenko too. So it was a common feature for this artistic couple and it distinguished them from the majority of the Constructivists.

Only great leaders of this trend – Vladimir Tatlin and Lazar Lissitsky – were fond of playing with their signatures. Lissitsky worked out his pen name “EL” and Tatlin practiced writing his whole family name calligraphically or in a shortened «Тл» form. In the whole group of Russian avant-garde artists only Ivan Kliun tried his hand at calligraphy, carefully working out his full signature.

Apart from Kliun, these four artists were, in general, more irrational than purely rational, the latter being characteristic of Constructivist sensibility. Rodchenko and Stepanova were truly romantics in their touching love story, letters and diaries. The quality of Romanticism can be felt in abstract compositions by Rodchenko or musical motifs by Stepanova, too. El Lissitsky dreamt of the Space towns for future people as Malevich did, and Vladimir Tatlin designed mainly unusable furniture and tableware, and he constructed a tower symbolizing a movement back from the practical Eiffel to a mythical Babylon, crowned with the totally utopian Letatlin.

Three Amazons, apart from Popova, Udaltsova, and Stepanova, were also inclined to dreams beyond the clouds and only to some extent were touched by contemporary rational tendencies like Cubism or Constructivism. They were Natalia Goncharova, Olga Rozanova, and Alexandra Exter. Goncharova created her best pieces in the style of Neo-Primitivism, moving from it to the fairy-tale world of theatrical performances. Rozanova rendered her due to the Russian modification of



Detail, Olga Rozanova,
The Tavern



Detail, Olga Rozanova,
Writing Table,
State Russian Museum,
St. Petersburg



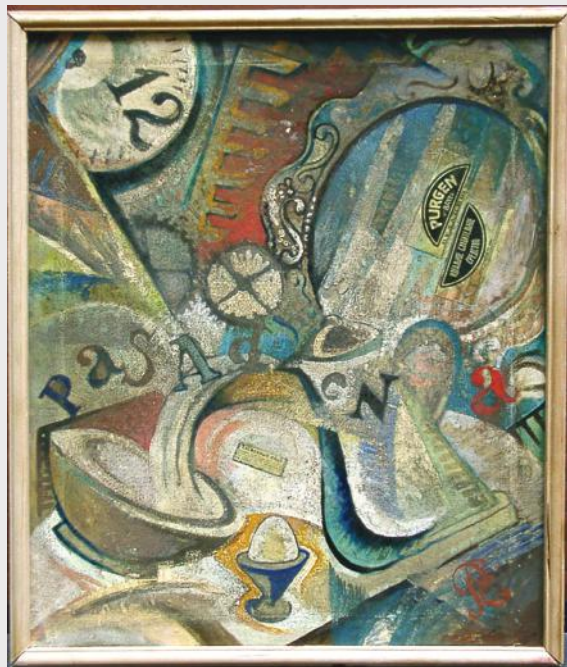
Monograms of
Empress Elisaveta Patrovna



Detail, Olga Rozanova, *Pasadena*



Olga Rozanova, *The Tavern*, Oil on canvas.
Dr. D. Milichvich Collection, Moscow



Olga Rozanova, *Pasadena*, Oil on canvas.
Private Collection, Argentina

Cubism and Futurism in the combination that received the name of Cubo-Futurism. Exter also was preoccupied with this tendency but she mostly preferred a Futurist aesthetic of urbanism with effects of the magical movement of luminous colour planes and circles. But in spite of a notable difference in manner, these three artists invented three absolutely special versions of monograms, and we can really suppose that it was their irrational, poetic and romantic mentality that were united in their efforts to bring something mysterious and symbolic not only to the subject of a work, but to its signature, too. They took up the tradition of the old masters and chose a way even more complicated and strange than Kandinsky, Malevich or Lissitsky had. Most artists implied in monograms only one thing: their own name contained in a beautiful emblematic form of interlacing letters.

Among these three ladies of the avant-garde only Natalia Goncharova restrained her fantasy by signing her early creations with two Cyrillic initials connected by a middle line that is common to both letters. Who knows, maybe she would have developed a game with a monogram if a Latin signature had not changed the Cyrillic, showing that artists will do away with the signs of provinciality in order to appear to be Europeans using a single alphabet. Anyway, by signing the works using her »HF«, Goncharova recalled the similarity of her name with the name of her charming and complex ancestor, the wife of Alexander Pushkin. But instead of a calligraphic monogram using notes and letters, after first experiments in refined manner in early works the avant-garde artist, carried away by the aesthetic of national folklore and the primitive, emphasised rawness and simplicity in the straight thick lines of her seemingly too large initials for the signature on a painting, »HF«.



In turn, the monogram of Olga Rozanova represents an absolute contrast in comparison to Goncharova's »HF«. First of all it looks like an earlier-style calligraphic interlace of two graceful letters, immediately reminiscent of something gentle and noble coming from the past. Secondly and most amazing, it does not coincide with her real initials. Anticipating Cyrillic »OP« (OR), that we find once or twice, in some pieces this is substituted for »EP«. This strange monogram is used by the artist in several Cubo-Futurist paintings done around 1915 such as *Writing Desk* (State Russian Museum), a version of *Tavern* (Dr. D. Milichvich collection), *Pasadena* (Private collection, Argentina), a number of Cubo-Futurist canvases and one Suprematist work from a private collection in France. In each case, Rozanova emphasises this monogram making its elegant ornamentation a significant element and a heraldic attribute having a formal structure.

Looking at this enigmatic monogram, the historian's

eye starts to mentally reconstruct something very familiar but at first glance having nothing in common with Rozanova and her art. Turning the pages of old documents and photographs we find a source which is absolutely similar to the »EP« calligraphy: it is the monogram of the Russian empress, Elizaveta Petrovna, daughter of Peter the Great! So in a group of her works, Rozanova copied one of the versions of the empress's monogram, surely not by chance, so associating herself with one of the most romantic and determined female persons in Russian history.

Olga Vladimirovna Rozanova was born in 1886 in the little town of Melenky near Vladimir into the aristocratic family of a Russian nobleman. Her mother came from the family of a priest and was called Elizaveta Vassilievna Orlova. In 1897, the Rozanovs left their native town for Vladimir and throughout her short life, Olga often visited it and deeply loved its ancient sights. At the present time we cannot say exactly where and when the artist would have seen the empress's monogram for the first time. But we know that a unique crystal cup in Baroque style with engravings and an elegantly drawn »EP« monogram of the empress surrounded by military attributes and the State Russian Emblem of the Two-Headed Eagle was kept for many years in the Vladimir Historical Museum-Reserve. In addition to it there are a number of applied art objects and buildings in Saint Petersburg with the same symbol which Rozanova could have seen when she came to the capital city in 1911. The empress's monogram has two initials in the Latin alphabet: E for Elizaveta and P for Petrovna, as traditionally the Russian Tsars were called, and it was widely represented on the officers' insignia of rank in the Russian army in the time of the governance of Elizaveta Petrovna (1741-1761). It also was engraved on hunters' weapons, an example of which is kept at the Ekaterina Palace of Tsar Village near St. Petersburg. The gun from this collection was a gift from the empress to Earl Rasumovsky. The monogram also appears on tapestries, church plates, and on tableware of that time. For instance, a baptismal chalice of 1754 with the »EP« monogram, created in honor of the birth of Pavel the First, is an exhibit in the famous Hermitage collection which had become a public museum in the 1850s.

The blossoming of Russian glass engraving in the period of the reign of Elizaveta Petrovna led to her balanced monogram appearing on serial production in Russian factories including on cups and goblets. One of these was acquired by a well known Russian collector at the beginning of the 20th century, Aleksei V. Morozov, who was interested not only in applied arts but in contemporary painting, too. He had bought Natalia Goncharova's works as early as 1913, the date of the dawn of the Russian avant-garde when very few people paid



A. Exter, *The Town*, 1912. Oil on cardboard.
Private Collection, France

any serious attention to this art of the future.

Another group of objects also having the monogram were copper coins produced in the 1750-1760s. Many kinds of these coins – not only copper but gold and silver, too – have this very monogram of the empress. And, finally, this monogram decorated the Tsar's seat in front of the Holy Gates in the Nicolas Navy Cathedral which was built in 1753-1762 by a distinguished Russian architect, S. Tchekavinsky. Fond of the romanticism of sea voyages, dreaming of far away travels, Olga Rozanova would visit this outstanding cathedral that was one of the most beautiful buildings of the St. Petersburg Baroque. She might have thought of the brilliant »EP« monogram as containing a deep historical content and as an echo of her own mother's name, found in museums and private collections in the capital or in her almost-native Vladimir. Disposed to poetic fantasies, surprising in her reactions, she might have compared herself to one of the most mysterious tsarinas of the past. On the other hand, we know about her inclination to play with names and nicknames: i.e., she called her beloved sister Anna by different sobriquets.

Olga Rozanova was a well-educated person who knew several foreign languages. She wrote poems, both romantic and symbolic, in her youth, then Futurist non-objective ones later

on. She was interested in the heraldic and transcendent forms for the expression of ideas as they are embodied in her unique series of playing card paintings and prints. This complex of attributes could easily incline her to imitations of monograms that contained double meanings, the key to which would be accessible only to the initiated. Thus the fact of using an extraordinary monogram, which at first sight might not seem to be very important, can throw light on the deep coherence of the artist's evolution. If we begin at this point we can try to decipher the signs and symbols which might be hidden within the Cubo-Futurist structure of Rozanova's works. We will soon find that none of them is a simple formal exercise but that each of them is part of a chain of hints and reminiscences which make up a whimsical and mysterious story.

Olga Rozanova signed »EP« on only a few paintings. Otherwise, she used a simple family name signature or did not sign her works at all, evidently changing her attitude according to the content of the motifs. Looking at the body of Alexandra Exter's creations we can also collect a group of different signatures, both Cyrillic and Latin, either connected to precise periods of her activities or appearing independently of them. And only in a couple of early works by the artist do we find a sign that can be interpreted as a carefully thought-out monogram. It is AE written in big block letters and joined into a single figure. It is found in the *Landscape* of 1911 from the Saint Etienne Modern Art Museum and in *The Town* of 1912 from a private collection, France. In my experience I have also seen a *Colour Dynamics*, circa 1915, from a Swiss private collection that was signed in the same way using a special technique: the artist depicted her monogram by squeezing the paint from the tube so that it formed a kind of relief on the surface of the canvas.



You might say, "there's nothing strange in that: "AE" are the artist's initials written in Latin. Of course they are but again, as with the Rozanova's EP, we can connect it to something that has already been found in artistic culture.

The magical process of looking for a source leads us to at least two results. One of them is the monogram of an anonymous German artist of the 15th century who signed his works as "AE". On visiting Germany in her early years and for a while joining a group with Aleksei Jawlensky, as Dr. Georgii Kovalenko recently discovered, Exter might have seen rare examples of German Medieval art and could have been inspired by their special beauty. This bridge over the epochs corresponds to Exter's keen interest in works of international art. (Sometimes an "AE" monogram can also be seen on applied art objects of different times and schools,

but it mostly looks like a casual coincidence in the case of the avant-garde oeuvre of Exter.)

The other example may appear to be too far from the previous one and from Russian avant-garde painting, in spite of the fact that it comes almost at the same time in Exter's artistic development. The "AE" monogram with the two letters connected into one was the pen name of the distinguished Irish Theosophical writer, George William Russell (1867-1935). Today we hardly remember his literary works but at the turn of the century, Russell, together with W. B. Yeats, played a leading role in the Irish national spiritual and intellectual Renaissance. Becoming an adherent of Theosophy through Helena Blavatsky's philosophy, "AE", as everybody called him, was carried away by ideas of the fundamental unity of the Universe. But preoccupation with mysterious spiritual problems did not prevent him from wide social activity and, by the way, he was also known as an artist. According to his merits, Russell obtained the recognition of being the most loved and one of the greatest persons in Ireland. In artistic circles of the first third of the 20th century, the AE monogram was immediately associated with this outstanding man.

Choosing and modifying a signature, Alexandra Exter would have recognized the similarity of her initials – the second of which was received from her husband – with the pen name of the romantic person who conducted a popular policy of national self-identification. So for a while she identified her "AE" monogram with a symbolic AE sign borrowed from the most powerful philosophical trend of the age, and from the attractive far away culture of a rising nation living in a misty romantic land.

Summarizing these introductory notes on Russian avant-garde artists' monograms, we should state that the impulses of their activities were soaked with a varied conglomeration of symbolic and mystical ideas, that unexpected associations can be found in their images, and that the content of their creations is much more complex and rich than just a formal experiment in Cubo-Futurist or abstract style. Probably in the future we will be able to discover many new aspects about their art as a whole, as well as a number of its individual details.