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The Life Of Russian Avant-Garde Works: An Essay In History



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In the 1990s, owing to the emergence on the art market of a substantial number of Russian avant-garde works (in the broad sense of the term), there arose the vital question of their provenance. Given Russia's turbulent twentieth-century history, the tortured destinies of people subjected to political and ideological repression, this theme appears in a dramatic, mysterious, and rather shadowy atmosphere for many reasons.

It is no secret that the policy of persecution of dissenting artists and their oeuvre, allegedly alien to proletarian ideology, has taken its toll of Russian avant-garde works, confined for decades to museum storerooms, as being of no artistic worth. Painters and their relatives put them safely away behind cupboards in attics or dachas, removed the canvases of the 1910s and 20s from their frames and rolled them up as "not right", dangerous, and likely to compromise their authors. Even in the early 1970s artists who were still alive showed them as "fallacies of youth". Some masters had to forget about their "formalist" and "cosmopolitan" endeavours and follow the tracks of socialist realism, others sought refuge in applied branches like theatre and book design or decorative arts where they could use their skills. But that very trend was to become "the mysterious object" which, having gone, came back to life and won international renown.

Modern art found its way to the public, as usual, through exhibitions. Their titles, however, were unusual: "Knave of Diamonds" (1910-11), "Donkey's Tail" (1912), "Target" (1913), "Tramway V", or "0. 10" (1915). So were the openly scandalous debates held in order to advertise novel views to visitors and opponents and to attract even more attention.

One literary and artistic manifesto was flagrantly called "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste". All this led to hostilities in the press, which gives few indications as to whether anyone wished to acquire such "socially inappropriate" paintings.

No doubt, this art had its own adherents, first and foremost among relatives (for instance, the wives of Piotr Konchatovsky, Ilya Mashkov and Aristarkh Lentulov who were also constant models for their husbands) as well as colleagues and a close circle of theatre, musical and literary figures. We do know that the first exhibition of the "Knave of Diamonds" group in Moscow (1910-11) was sponsored in part by the merchant. S. A. Lobachev, brother-in-law to Lentulov's wife, who initially even promised to buy some pictures. Whether he actually did or not is unclear, since the artist himself recalled the story in the 1930s with a certain irony. Some works apparently belonged to friends and acquaintances even prior to the exhibition, which was sometimes mentioned in catalogue lists. Again, Lentulov provides a typical example.

But indications of ownership are rather rare and their occurrence in catalogues reflects an author's pride for being in demand. Displaying his "Portrait of S. A. L." (easily deciphered as Lobachev's name), Lentulov says that it belongs to the sitter ("Knave of Diamonds" exhibitions, 1910-11 and 1913). An obvious case of reciprocation for support, "Portrait of Countess S. I. Tolstaya", shown at the "Knave of Diamonds" of 1913 was in the possession of Count A. N. Tolstoy, while the cubo-futuristic panel "Moscow" ("Knave of Diamonds", 1914) belonged to V. V. Labinskaya. It was later won at cards from her by the painter V. V. Kapterev and



I. Mashkov, *Portrait of a Man*, c. 1910.
Oil on canvas, 72.5 66 cm. Museum Bureau of the Department
of Fine Arts, Moscow; Yaroslavl Art Museum.

then bought back by Lentulov's daughter Marianna who, in turn, sold it to the State Tretiakov Gallery.

Labinskaya also possessed her own portrait and the canvas "Leda" ("Knaves of Diamonds", 1916) whose whereabouts are unknown. The same goes for "Portrait of S. M. V." and the drawing, "Alupka", by Lentulov, which graced the "Knaves of Diamonds" show of 1916. Both are said to have belonged to the poet S. M. Vermel who in the same year joined Lentulov in the publication, *Moscow Masters*. Again, we are in the dark as to their subsequent history. There is so far no trace of many other pieces by Lentulov mentioned in other catalogues and contemporary lists compiled by Ivan Aksionov (1918) and V. Sidorova (1926). Their owners included E. P. Lobacheva and K. P. Rukina (sisters of the artist's wife), the theatre director Alexander Tairov, the actress Alice Koonen, B. Skinder, the artists David Burluk, Alexandra Exter, B. Grigoryev, Alexander Kuprin, Robert Falk, M. Dobuzhinsky, Pavel Kuznetsov, and Alexander Gaus, the art critic Abram Efros, Lentulov's first patrons in Penza, the Zege family, the Bolshoi conductor, E. Kuper, and such obscure individuals as Trunin, Brunov, Ikonnikova, Thomson, Yesipova, Zuberbüller, and others. This list of persons who held Lentulov's oeuvres before the revolution is incomplete but it does prove that works by painters of this circle found their owners soon after completion, i.e., they aroused some interest. The famous collectors, Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov, however, openly preferred contemporary French masters, and to belong

to their collections remained an unattainable goal for Russian artists; Vasily Kandinsky commented on that with undisguised chagrin in one of his letters.

Naturally, artists sometimes exchanged their works, while others remained in studios of friends and colleagues. Thus, pieces by Malevich and Ilya Chashnik are known to have been kept at home by Nikolai Suetin, Anna Leporskaya and Konstantin Rozhdestvensky. A large collection of graphics on paper by various authors belonged to Aleksei Kruchenykh and formed a part of his albums. Works of Pavel Filonov's school were preserved by his disciple, B. Gurvich. Many pieces by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova were moved from their studio to their friend, Lev Zhegin's place, when both masters departed for Paris. Vasily Kandinsky had a collection of his own (including items by Goncharova, Larionov, Malevich etc.). More examples of this kind could be given.

In the case of the painter Ivan Puni, who owned a relief by Vladimir Tatlin, we can even guess that he bought it from his colleague, since Puni was much better off and is known to have launched the famous "0, 10" show in Petrograd with his own funds. Another "painted relief", reproduced in the leaflet of the same exhibition, belonged to the artist Alexandra Exter.

I. S. Isadzhanov, a tobacco factory owner, can be regarded as a veritable collector. For years he acquired pieces by Moscow masters, first the "impressionists" and earlier schools, then the "Knaves of Diamonds" group and modern sculptures. After the revolution his collection survived for some time as the autonomous Lunacharsky Museum in Moscow, later to be incorporated into the State Museum Fund, whence parts of it proceeded to different central and provincial museums of Russia.

Works by modern painters were also possessed by N. E. Dobychina who held exhibitions and sales in her "Art Bureau" in Petrograd. She definitely owned some things by Chagall and Lentulov.

We must also take into account the foreign tours of Russian painters (to France, Germany or Italy) and their participation in shows abroad (in London, Paris, Rome, or Berlin). All this implied the movement of works by Goncharova, Kandinsky, Lentulov, Chagall, Exter and others, which have not always been traced or are traceable.

Examples given above deal only with some individuals and their output, but they suffice to show where avant-garde works could have ended up in the 1910s. We may conclude that most of them remained in studios and only a few works (mainly portraits) made it to the households of friends and colleagues or private collections in Russia and abroad. The Tretiakov Gallery at that period had a very modest influx of modern pieces.

A great rush of activity for everything achieved by Russian artists during the pre-revolutionary decade came about in the early Soviet years despite very complicated developments in the country and modest sums spent by the state on modern art. By then, private buyers or collectors had virtually disappeared.

The well-known cultural policy followed by Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Enlightenment) aimed to acquire a great number of modern art works and to incorporate them into a single state fund. Their selection was based on the concept of "artistic culture as the culture of artistic invention". It was devised by a group of "left" artists (Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Drevin, Nadezhda Udaltsova, Vladimir Tatlin, Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaya, Vasily Kandinsky, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova and others). They compiled a list of 143 masters, whose works were given preference in making up the fund, and proposed the creation of the central Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow – later called the Museum of Artistic Culture – with a museum network all over the country. The Museum Bureau and the MPC formed a commission which, in accordance with their programme, amassed and distributed collections of modern art.

This policy played a major part in the short-lived attention paid to the avant-garde and created an illusion of its acceptance by Soviet society. State exhibitions were regularly held and widely covered by the press, works were bought en masse, museums functioned on didactic methods intended for the public and students of new educational institutions (principles of display, lectures etc.). Between September 1918 and December 1920 alone 1,926 items (paintings, graphics, sculptures and spatial compositions) were bought from 415 artists; 1,211 of them were distributed among 30 cities.

Subsequently the acquisition and distribution went on but with greater difficulties having to do with the unsettled position of the State Museum Fund and the Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow, which had to move premises five times. A document written by a deputy curator of the MPC demonstrates that many items were handed over by A. Rodchenko, former head of the Museum, in damaged condition "on account of the damp and cold room where they were kept for over a year for lack of another, and also because of the Museum's frequent change of address". Among the 112 listed works there were more than twenty canvases by Rozanova (including suprematist ones) and five by Goncharova (two later entered the Tretyakov Gallery) along with others by Strzeminski, Cherkrygin, Morgunov, Denisovsky, Ender, Menkov, Payn, etc. Sculptures suffered most during the frequent changes of venue. Not surprisingly, twenty seven sculptures and "spatial compositions" were described in the



A. Lentulov, *Family Portrait, Wife and Daughter*, 1919. Oil on canvas, 103 x 88 cm. Museum Bureau of the Department of Fine Arts, Moscow: Yaroslavl Art Museum.

sources as "utterly smashed and destroyed", and written off.

The Museum of Painterly Culture was shut down in 1929, which signalled the end of the Russian avant-garde's "heroic" period. From a twentieth-century perspective, the least utopian of avant garde plans was its museum programme, later confirmed by the establishment of modern art galleries all over the world, especially by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Many avant-garde collections have survived in Russia (at the State Tretyakov Gallery, State Russian Museum and in provincial cities). Nevertheless, the age of oblivion brought great devastation to the movement. With the closure of the MPC many items acquired between 1919 and 1922 were written off because the special commission of the Tretyakov Gallery declared them of "no museum or market value". These lists number 127 paintings (including seven by Rozanova, pieces by Strzeminski, a counterrelief by Svetlov etc.) and 102 graphic items (Luchishkin's "Principles of Composition", Cherkrygin, Medunetsky, Stenberg, Kogan, Yudin, Triaskin, Zhegin, Rozanova, Svetlov, Prusakov, Kliun, Shterenberg, Pevsner, Grishchenko, Vesnin, Menkov, Miturich, etc.). The list of drawings comprised 237 items (Le Dentu, Udaltsova, Lentulov, Morgunov, Stenberg, Bart, Konchalovsky, etc.). All these works were transferred to the State Fund, and some put on sale at symbolic prices, including six items by Rozanova. Their fate is unknown.

The same pattern must have been followed in disposing

of some of the remains of the Leningrad museum fund after a selection of some works by the State Russian Museum. Unfortunately, few documents survive to trace the process.

Another wave of “cuts” swept provincial galleries. Today many of their collections do not correspond to archival inventories. One explanation can be found in the published documents on the “purge” of the Samara Museum in August 1953 ordered by the Arts Committee of the Russian Federation. More than 400 works were doomed to be destroyed, including the Russian avant-garde, but in this particular case they were saved by the Museum staff. Sometimes in similar situations works were hidden at homes.

Therefore unknown Russian avant-garde works quite possibly exist, surviving persecution by the totalitarian regime, apart from widely acknowledged family collections of the artists’ heirs (legacies of Rodchenko and Stepanova, Drevin, Udaltsova, Lentulov, Konchalovsky, Suetin and others), or private collections amassed in their or their relations’ lifetimes by Nikolai Khardzhiev, George Costakis, V. Semionov, Yakov Rubinshtein, Simon Shuster, N. Okunev, and A. Abramian.

As for the situation abroad, there has been a steady rise of interest for Russian avant-garde since the 1960s (after the appearance of Camilla Gray’s famous book, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922*, first published in London in 1962). In this respect an important part was also played by the collections of Russian artists who emigrated to Western Europe and the United States (I. Puni and K. Boguslavskaya, V. Kandinsky, D. Burluk, Yuri Annenkov, A. Exter and others), as well as works which left Russia due to exhibitions or sales in the 1920s and 1930s. One such landmark was the First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin of 1922, parts of which were acquired by Katherine Dreier for the Yale University Museum. Another one was the 1927 Malevich exhibition in Berlin, most of which became the property of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

A substantial increase of known Russian avant-garde works during the last decade and their emergence on the art market have led to the gradual recognition of collections unheeded by the public until the 1990s, to the establishment of new private collections and the enrichment of museums both in Russia and abroad. This process appears only natural in view of the growing demand for the vivid and distinctive Russian version of classical modernism. It was stimulated by wide publicity around successful auction sales and triumphant exhibitions of Russian avant-garde held in the world’s finest museums from the late 1970s into the 1990s.

The incredible success of Russian avant-garde art during the political struggles of the 1970s and 80s later gave

way to greater appreciation of this phenomenon in twentieth-century art from the point of view of its undoubted artistic achievements and the value of its formal and imaginative ideas as compared to parallel developments in Western classical modernism.

With the total removal of restrictions, when avant-garde art ceased to be undesirable only because of its outspoken or secret opposition to political power, while archives and works themselves became more accessible, our studies progress in three main directions:

- First, research on works held in museum collections, publication and analysis of documents, texts and memoirs, historical writing, essays on chronology and systematic facts of artistic life (different avant-garde groups, individuals, exhibitions and early museums of modern art).
- Second, interpretation of well-known and published works in connection with the latest methods of literary criticism and culturology.
- Third, a novel genre in twentieth-century art studies, attribution, and introduction of newly discovered works filling the fabric of the lively evolutionary process of modern art.

In doing this we overcome the dramatic past of the Russian avant-garde and make it relevant to the present.

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List of exhibitions: «Paris – Moscow. 1900 – 1930» (Paris, 1979), «Moscow – Paris. 1900 – 1930» (Moscow, 1981), «Art and Revolution» (Tokyo, 1982), «Russian and Soviet Art: Traditions and Modernity» (Düsseldorf, Stuttgart, 1985), «Art and Revolution» (Budapest, 1987; Vienna, 1988), «Art and Revolution: Part Two» (Tokyo, 1987), «Art Penetrating Life: Russian Constructivism in 1914-1932» (Seattle, Minneapolis, 1990), «The Great Utopia: Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde in 1915-1932» (Frankfurt on Main, Amsterdam, New York, 1992; Moscow, 1993), «Moscow – Berlin. 1900 – 1950» (Berlin, 1995; Moscow, 1996), «The 20th Century» (Berlin, 1997), «Modern German Art from Berlin Private Collections» (Moscow, 1997).