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## The Museums of Artistic Culture – A Policy of Disseminating Modern Art



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Exhibitions of avant-garde Russian art organised at our provincial museums have now become both common and internationally known. But they always make people wonder: “how is it that such important works have become the property of museums so far from the two principal centres of art – Moscow and St. Petersburg?”

Our knowledge of the new trends of Russian art of the first and second decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is now sufficiently detailed for us to be able to provide an historically balanced answer to this question.

The works of these at first “desirables” which, during the Soviet regime became “undesirables”, were relegated to the provinces from the moment that Socialist Realism was declared triumphant and generally accepted at the end of the total war waged against “formalism” and “cosmopolitanism”. That story was one of the vivid and tragic components of the “pantheon” of the Russian Avant-Garde, which considered itself martyred and condemned to oblivion and ignominy. For, in fact, from 1918, the distribution of works of contemporary painters became the object of concerted action for the dissemination of the ideas of modern art and the progressive ousting of traditional old art, the so-called “rightest” art, a policy which fitted in perfectly with the ideological convictions of the leaders of that trend.

The Fine Arts Department, IZO (*Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo*), created by the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment of the R. S. F. S. R. – the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic – Narkompros, as soon as it came into being (January 29 – February 11, 1918) was taken over by “leftist” painters who engaged in their new activity as organisers with extreme energy and commitment. This phenomenon played a major role during

the brief apogee of the avant-garde, but it also created the illusion that the same avant-garde was accepted (and included) in a society for which to feel modern – an illusion of artistic values conceived for an elite, objectively complex and impenetrable without visual training – should quickly become accessible to “the masters of the earth”, the masses.

With the 1917 October Revolution, the private buyer-collector disappeared, although in certain isolated cases this role had been played by the “leftist” collectors such as Sergei Shchukin, Ivan Morozov, Issadianov, Labinskaïa, Natalia Dobychnina and some other sporadic art-lovers. As if by chance, the “leftist” painters who were less affected were those also considered politically “leftist”. The State became the sole buyer of art and the names of these artists were placed “on the top of the pile”. “Legalization” of the purchases, their systematization and the establishment of a well-defined circle of painters seemed to be the best reason and justification for the creation of a Museum of Contemporary Art. This idea had already been circulated among young artists before 1917. Josef Shkolnik and others in the Petersburg Union of Youth, for example, had expressed this as early as around 1912.

### Creating the Museums

On June 1, 1918, the All-Russian College of Arts and Crafts made the decision to create a special committee with members recruited from “the left” whose main function would be the collection of works of contemporary art and the setting up of a purchasing system. One of the first stages of this project was



Paintings purchased for the Art Fund of the Museum of Artistic Culture, Moscow, January 1920  
To be allocated to the cities of Ekaterinburg, Ivanovo, Penza. Photograph Rodchenko-Stepanova Family Archives, Moscow.

the establishment of a list of painters whose contributions would constitute the collection of the museum in the framework of what would become the Museum Bureau and the Museum of Artistic Culture of Moscow. The mission of purchases for the Moscow Museum, at first headed by V. E. Tatlin, and of the Section of Industrial Crafts of the IZO division were authorised to acquire works of which some part was supposed to be reserved for the Moscow Museum, whereas the other part was relegated to Petrograd. Purchases for the museum were supposed to provide a moral compensation for the indifference to modern art before the revolution. These should illustrate the initial vocation of the Museum – looking forward to the future and at the same time using the institutional weight of the Museum to instruct on modern art.

The meetings of the Section (May to November 1918) for the setting-up of the Moscow IZO Section of Narkompros, at which participated Kazimir Malevich, Olga Rozanova, Vladimir Tatlin, Sofia Dymchits-Tolstaïa, Alexander Drevin, Natan (Anton) Pevsner and Wladislaw Strzeminski were intended to satisfy an enormous public. While examining the principles of exhibitions, excursions and national conferences, they founded a network of museums of contemporary art whose base was located at Moscow.

This Section carried out its first purchases at the exhibitions in the summer of 1918. Malevich hastened to procure exhibition rooms in the State Free Art Studios, SVOMAS, for the exhibition of this new museum, but the proposal for the Museum itself only obtained its first allocation after official ratification.

In the autumn of 1918, at a meeting of the Moscow Arts College, V. E. Tatlin and S. I. Dymchits-Tolstaïa expounded their principles for the organisation of a museum.<sup>1</sup> [Document 1] For private collections as well as for museum collections, they refuted individual selection based on “taste” because, according to them, this was “typical of the past”. The new museums should keep works of art “which really and plainly obtained the best specimens, as chosen by the people”. Tatlin and Dymchits-Tolstaïa left the responsibility of organizing the museum “based on examples of living art” to the Moscow College of Arts. Only the best works of painters referred by the College of Arts should be selected. The choice of works proposed was up to the artist. Tatlin also suggested the unification of collections relating to the purposes of the Museum, including the collections of the Tretiakov Gallery. Moreover, all of the works accepted were supposed to be classed by the College according to the name of the collection mentioned at each exhibition.

For his part, K. Malevich considered that dissemination of the works by “all the artistic powers of the country”<sup>2</sup> [Document 6] as far even as the most distant centres should essentially function like the central Museum and show the immense transformations which had taken place in art. He continues:

“In this way, the living material of creative prototypes will penetrate into the country and stimulate the transformation of forms in life and images in industry.”

The ideal museum of contemporary art should visualise the main periods of painting: Cubism, Futurism, Simultaneism, Suprematism, abstract art – and, in the Department of Plastic (or Fine) Arts, “the volume of sculpture in expressing pure form, reliefs, Cubism, and the futuristic dynamics of volume.”

In December 1918, the People’s Commissar for Enlightenment, Anatoli Lunacharsky, drew up a list of one hundred and forty-three artists whose paintings and sculptures should be purchased for the national collection, the State Art Fund. This definitive list, prepared by the College, represented the opinion of the majority and rejected other proposed alternatives for a relatively wider range. [Document 2]

The painters involved included the World of Art: A. Benois, A. Gausch, E. Lanceray, S. Chkhonin, N. Krymov, N. Roerich; the Realists: A. Arkhipov, A. Moravov, S. Maliutin; the Blue Rose group: P. Kuznetsov, M. Sarian, P. Utkin, E. Beutova; those of the Knave of Diamonds group: R. Falk, A. Lentulov, V. Rozhdestvensky, A. Kuprin, I. Mashkov, P. Konchalovski, A. Osmiorkin; former members of the Union of Russian Painters: L. Turianski, K. Yuon, S. Gerassimov, K. Korovin, V. Bakcheev; the Donkey’s Tail group: M. Larionov, N. Goncharova, M. Le Dentu, A. Shevchenko, D. Burliuk, V. Burliuk and innovators of various groups and various trends: Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Natan (Anton) Pevsner, Vassily Kandinsky, Olga Rozanova, Sofia Dymchits-Tolstaïa, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Ivan Kliunkov (Kliun), Nadezhda Udaltsova, David Shterenberg, Aleksei Morgunov, Alexander Drevin, A. Grishchenko, Vera Pestel, Liubov Popova, B. Chapochnikov, Wladislaw Strzeminski, M. Menkov, A. Vesnin, P. Mansurov, A. Exter, M. Matiuchin, I. Païne, V. Ender, P. Filonov, P. Miturich, V. Baranoff-Rossiné, I. Shkolnik, V. Ermolaeva, N. Altman and others.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time rather concrete propositions were also announced concerning the nature and the organization of the Museum, propositions which were developed at the meeting of the special committee for setting up a museum in Petrograd, followed by a series of meetings of the IZO Section. Finally, a special resolution was passed concerning the Museum of Artistic Culture (or Pictorial Culture as it was initially called) which was

presented at the Museum Conference on February 11, 1919 at the Palace of Arts (formerly the Winter Palace). [Document 2]

The conference unanimously adopted the proposals concerning the Museum and ratified the concept of “artistic culture” which appeared as the criterion of selection: “Artistic culture is nothing but the culture of artistic invention”, as it was defined at the conference. This “invention” could be deployed in just one of the basic elements of “artistic activity”: material, colour, space, time, form, technique. It was also confirmed that only the concept of “artistic culture” may serve as a principle of contemporary artistic activity.<sup>4</sup>

The proposals adopted concerning the Museum, its formation, the selection of works, their acquisition, the management, and the “programme of artistic education for the country” suddenly placed the painter at the forefront.

## Beginnings of a Collection

David Shterenberg, Nikolai Punin, Osip Brik, Alexander Grishchenko and Sergei Chkhonin actively participated in carrying out these decisions. [Documents 3 and 4] After the conference, the second important phase was the election from among the College members of the Moscow Section of IZO, by the Purchasing Committee which within one year managed to acquire what became the major part of the state collection. The commission did not only purchase recent works, but also works dating from the beginning of the century. By November 1919, the commission had purchased six hundred and fifty paintings and drawings of Russian painters for a sum of 1,600,000 rubles and twenty-one sculptures for a sum of 115,000 rubles. The division of this collection among the museums of the capital and the provincial museums was carried out by the Museum Bureau of IZO. Thus, eighty paintings by thirty painters were given to the Museum of Artistic Culture (M. A. C.) of Moscow, twenty-five paintings by twenty-three painters were sent to the Museum of Astrakhan, thirty paintings by twenty-five artists were given to the Museum of Slobodskoi (Viatka region), thirty-five paintings by twenty-two artists to the Samara museum, and so on.

After the Purchasing Committee, the College formed a committee for organizing the M. A. C. which was active in April and May 1919. Among its members were Vasily Kandinsky, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Robert Falk, Natan Altman, Pavel Kuznetsov. Its protocol No. 5 of May 4, 1919, contains the result of their deliberations about the basic principles of “recruitment” by the Museum:

“The committee does not limit itself to a given quantity of works by one artist or another; it considers it indispensable



Detail of Paintings purchased for the Art Fund of the Museum of Artistic Culture, Moscow, January 1920  
 Top row, left to right: 1 • O. Rozanova, *Portrait of A. V. Rozanova (Sister of the Artist)*, 1912 (Ekaterinburg Museum of Art) 2 • N. Goncharova, *Reapers*, 1911 (Ekaterinburg Museum of Art) 3 • M. Larionov, *Jewish Venus*, 1912 (Ekaterinburg Museum of Art)



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to take from one artist all the works which introduce a new element, in keeping with the objectives of the Museum of Artistic Culture.”<sup>5</sup>

In this the committee opposed the ardent will of a good number of artists who had a very good idea of the way in which they desired to be represented at the new Museum and also an idea concerning the works which they preferred to have remain at Moscow or to be sent away to the provinces. The Committee ruled:

“Works slated to be exchanged will be returned to their authors and replaced against another work by the Committee itself within the organisation of the M. A. C.”<sup>6</sup>

Another important principle, this time concerning the painter’s profession itself and the manner in which this manifested itself in the work, was also formulated, as follows:

“The Committee entrusted with the organisation of the Museum of Artistic Culture finds it indispensable to set up a department of ‘experimental technique of painting’ attached to that museum.”<sup>7</sup>

The first official address of the Museum in Moscow was 14 Volkhonka (the ground floor of the same building was occupied by the Museum Bureau). Starting in June 1919, V. Kandinsky, a confirmed master painter, member of the artistic College of the IZO section of Narkompros, and uncontested authority in artistic circles, became the Director of the Museum. At the same time he functioned as the President of the All-Russian Purchasing Committee, attached to the Museum Bureau (from November 1919 until March 1921).

For Kandinsky, modern art was undergoing a revival of the tendency to “express pictorial content in a pictorial form”,<sup>8</sup> [Document 8] a trend which sharpened the question of form and, in the first place, maintained “that tension in the search for form which provides art with a rich arsenal of means of expression”. According to him, purely pictorial works were of the very highest importance for the formation of the Museum. Works in which formal values predominated were introduced as “marks and traces of a certain relation to the art of our time and also a stimulant driving in the search for form”. He also concerned himself with experiments in construction, in technique, including the preparation of the canvas, “everything with which the painter prepares himself and with which he experiments”.

“The Section has therefore the objective of collecting all the substantial and notable experiments made concerning the use and treatment of raw material. The Section will also include

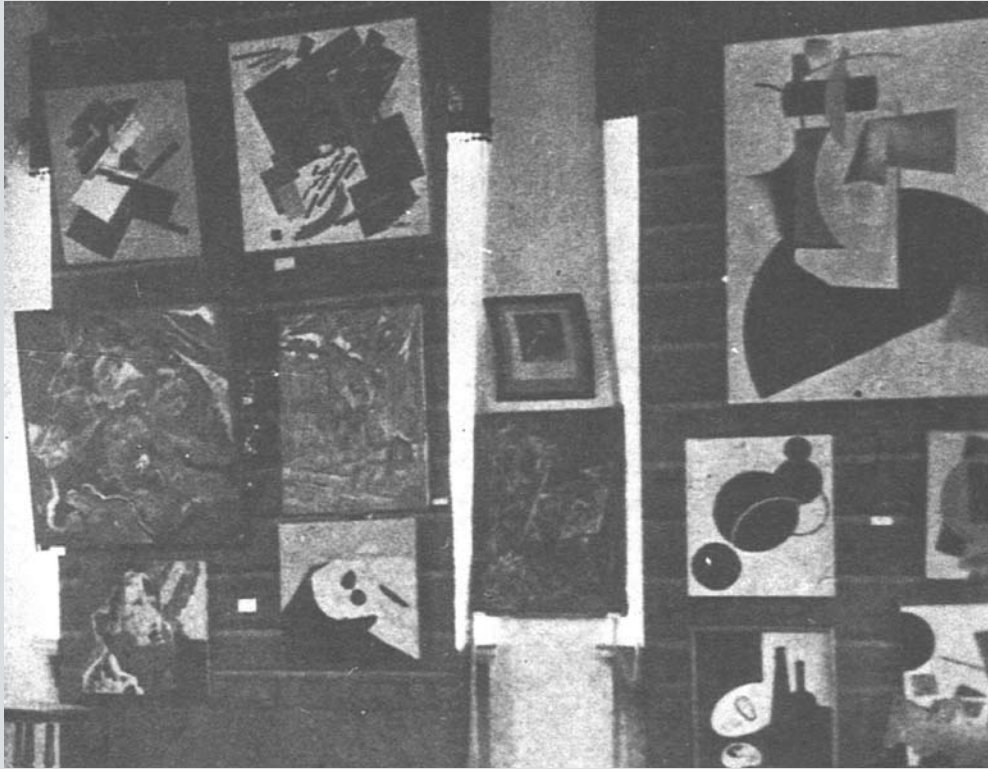
experiments in formal construction, based on the principle of contrast: the coloured and drawn plane, the relationship, the **shock**, the separation of planes, the relation plane-volume, the treatment of plane and volume as independent elements, the coincidence or isolation of planes and of painted and drawn volumes, experiments in the creation of forms in relief only, by themselves or combined with others etc.”

This collection of experiments of technical character was supposed to form a basis for a theory of painting which, to quote Kandinsky: “would be perceived separately”. Kandinsky’s ideas was based on the principle of contrasting spots, which naturally cared nothing for chronology. Kandinsky saw the setting up of the Museum and the complete liberty offered to each innovator to learn and appreciate it as “an unprecedented achievement in the history of museums”, or, more accurately, of the national action for museums, in the sense that the practice of Western museums at that time was precisely the opposite:

“Generally speaking, the state not only failed to encourage dynamism in art, but placed all kinds of obstacles even to the slightest significant new idea.”

He thought it a good thing that exhibition and studio are brought closer together so as to present art as the result of effort to the public at large.

The Museum initiated a great popularization campaign; a Bureau for Excursions was set up in which worked the painters V. Kandinsky, A. Rodchenko, L. Popova, V. Stepanova. In the service of the Museum they gave lectures on modern art at workers’ clubs. On October 20, 1920, the direction of the Museum passed to Aleksandr Rodchenko who at the same time also supervised the Museum Bureau. The expulsion of Kandinsky was a sign of disagreements and opposition from Rodchenko’s group caused his exclusion from INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture). Thanks to the multiplicity of functions of Aleksandr Rodchenko, the M. A. C. and the Museum Bureau, two institutions of limited staff, operated jointly and in unison: purchases for the Art Fund, selection for the central Museum, distribution of works among the provincial museums, the promotion of the campaign for the museums. The Museum Bureau was then composed of a Purchasing Committee (six people), a Rates Committee (six people), a Museum Committee that was directly in charge of the distribution of works and equipment among the new museums. With the support of Varvara Stepanova, Rodchenko undertook to organise the purchases and the work of the museum. Initially, works of the Art Fund, under the care of Alexander Drevin (under whom up to two thousand works were handled each year), were not included in the necessary registration and the



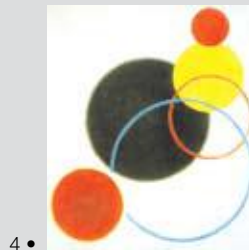
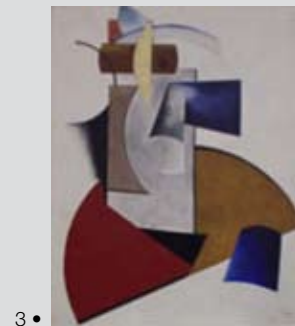
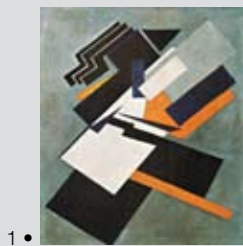
Detail of Paintings purchased for the Art Fund of the Museum of Artistic Culture, Moscow, January 1920  
 Paintings sent to Ekaterinburg Museum of Fine Arts except for Nos. 3 & 4.

Top row, left to right: 1 • O. Rozanova, *Suprematism*, 1916 2 • O. Rozanova, *Suprematism*, 1916

3 • A. Rodchenko, *Non-Objective Composition*, 1919 (State Regional Museum of Art, Ivanovo)

Middle row: 4 • A. Rodchenko, *Composition No. 88 (Still Life)*, 1918 (State Art Gallery, Perm)

Bottom row, left to right: 5 • D. Shterenberg, *Still Life with Blue Vase*, 1919 6 • K. Malevich, *Suprematism*, 1916



transmission of works was carried out without any order or discipline. Stepanova, in her capacity as assistant to the Director of the Museum Bureau, took up the technical problems, the working out of directives, and the instruction of local museums. Together with A. Mikhailova, specialist in the recording of works of art, she organized the inventory books very well, which made it much easier to carry out the most important purchases and provide the massive supply of works to the provinces.

From September 1918 to December 1920, one thousand nine hundred and twenty-six works in all were purchased from four hundred and sixteen artists (paintings, sculptures, graphic works, reliefs) of which one thousand two hundred and eleven were distributed among thirty museums. [See the following article, "Report" by A. Rodchenko.] The painters of that period really lived only by grace of the state purchases.

Just like the Central Museum of Moscow, which formed an example, the regional museums approached the State Free Art Studios, SVOMAS, and were called upon to work in concert with the Studios in a single pedagogical system. The Free Studios frequently played the more active role in assembling collections for their towns. In making up a collection, account was taken of the importance of the place and its capabilities for keeping these works. Very often the towns chosen were those which already had a museum of art or an ethnographic museum; construction of separate dedicated buildings was proposed but no collection was housed in one. Even at Petrograd and at Moscow the Museums were eventually united either within the Russian Museum or the Tretyakov Gallery.

After Kandinsky's departure from the Museum Board, the hanging at the Moscow Museum underwent changes whereby the juxtaposition of contrasting trends was replaced by a didactic exhibition which led the public easily through the chronology of outstanding Russian movements. In addition, the exhibition now served as the background for professional debates undertaken at the neighbouring Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK). At that time the Museum had on exhibition six hundred works and employed a staff of seven.

In June 1921, the Moscow Museum was closed on order of the administrative department of Narkompros, citing a worsening of the residential crisis in Moscow. The works were packed and deposited in a ruined building belonging to the Museum Bureau, which was then suppressed. They remained there until April 1922 at which time the Museum, after innumerable pleas by Rodchenko, was given premises, more cramped than the preceding one (four rooms and a corridor) in a wing of a building at 52 Povarskaia Street (now Vorovskaia Street) in the old Palace of Arts.

Practically no purchase was made during this period after the Glavnauka (Chief Commissariat of Science) assumed control of

the M.A.C. at the end of 1921 and cut the budget. The Museum staff, which numbered eight people at the beginning of 1922 and were entitled to "education rations", was reduced to five people in June. Rodchenko could not overcome the innumerable day to day difficulties and problems of organization which troubled the Museum from its inception. He was extremely concerned with the precarious condition of the Museum and the preservation of its collections, around which everything revolved. Poverty was felt even more when heating was strictly limited and there was always a difficulty in obtaining the cost of firewood from the Economics Department of Narkompros. With the change of address, it could occupy the rooms which the Institute of Literature had vacated, now assigned to the Museum with all the household problems, including the transfer of the telephone, from Volkhonka Street to Povarskaia Street. On June 1, Rodchenko demanded of IZO to be relieved of his duties and his wish was granted.

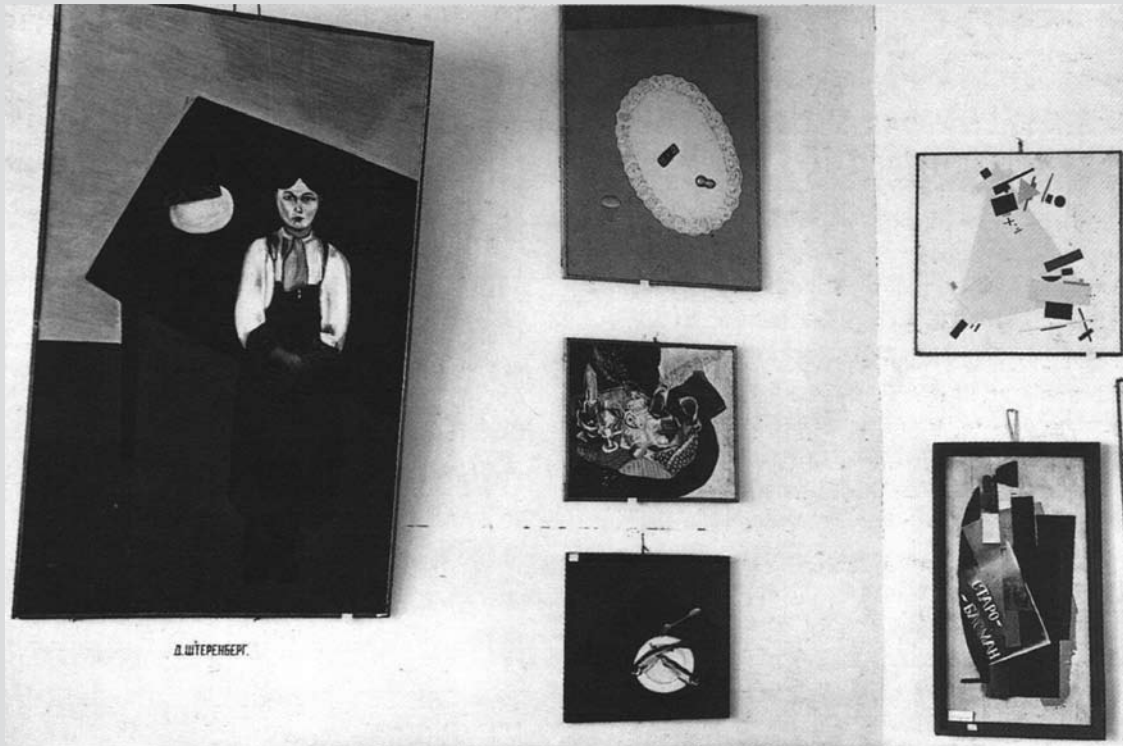
On July 7, 1922, Piotr Williams assumed the position of Director of the M. A. C. on recommendation of one of the Museum founders, ex-Director of IZO, D. Shtenberg. On August 1, Nina Kogan was appointed consultant – after she had quite recently assisted Malevich at Vitebsk. When she was a candidate, she defined her qualifications for this new activity thus:

"Having worked at the Practical Art Institute of Vitebsk for three years under the direct supervision of the painter K. S. Malevich... I have become a specialist in the theory and practice of the new art of the left, the interpretation of its meaning and the more or less strict approach which should be addressed to the masses..."<sup>9</sup>

She undertook to set up a new system of display. She organized conferences and read papers on modern art.

## New Premises, New Hangings

On 15 October 1922, the Moscow Museum of Artistic Culture was reopened to the public. The new exhibition combined the principle of contrast with the principle of chronological grouping in order to satisfy the pedagogic purpose of the Museum. A library was set up, which started to regularly receive new Soviet as well as foreign publications on contemporary art and aesthetics. A museum council was set up. Its members were N. Udaltsova, A. Tychler, S. Nikritin, N. Kogan, P. Williams and, later, also L. Weiner, A. Labas, P. Miturich, and K. Malevich. It undertook to provide an exact definition of the future approach and the plan of exhibitions as well as the project of further development of the collection. The Museum did not slacken but continued with



Hanging of Museum of Painterly Culture in VKhUTEMAS, Moscow, July 1928

- 1 • K. Malevich, *Supremus (No. 57)*, 1916 (Tate Modern, London)
- 2 • D. Shterenberg, *Still Life with Herring*, 1918 (Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow)
- 3 • V. Tatlin, *Old Basmania Street*, 1917 (Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow)



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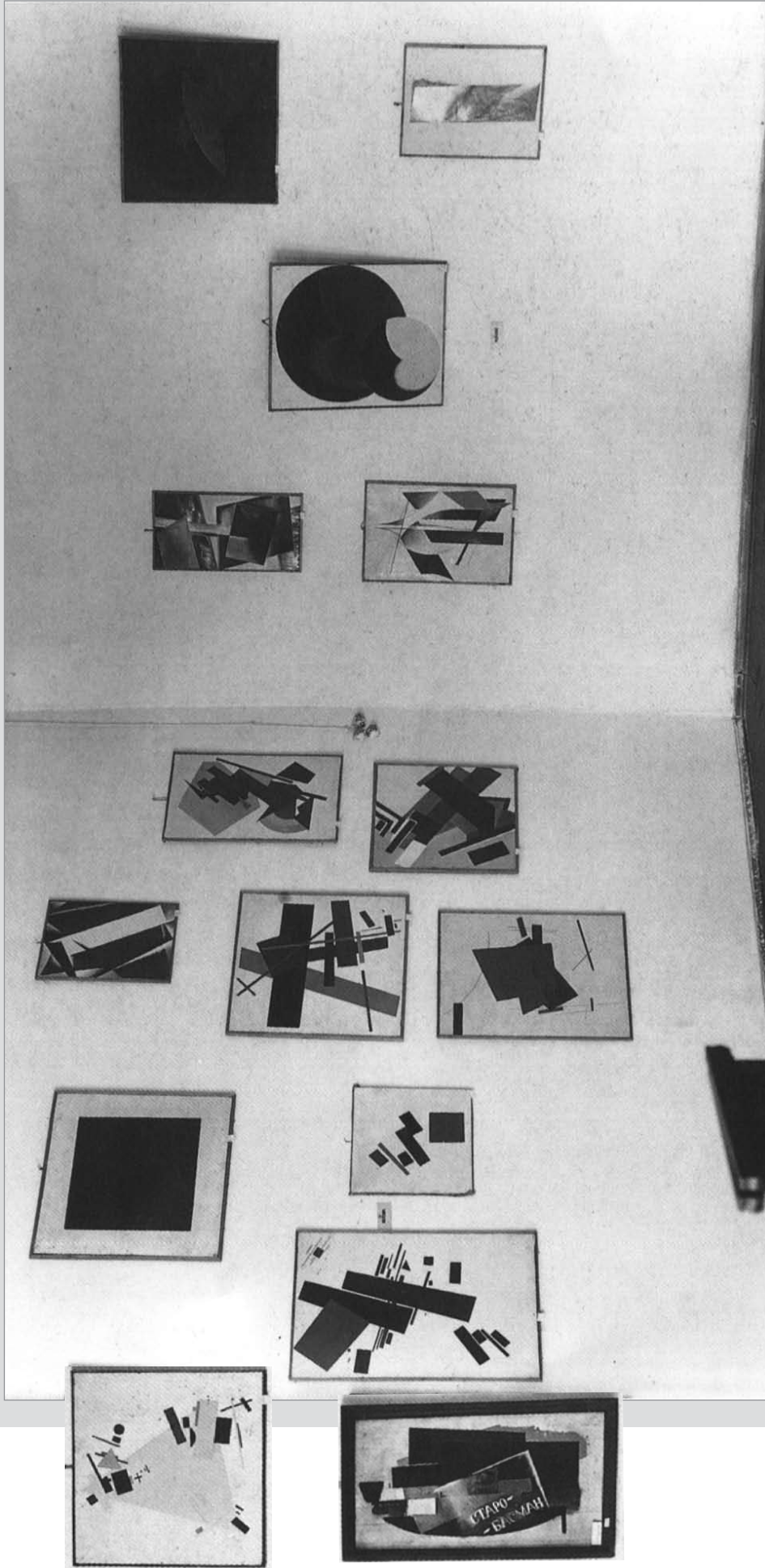


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Hanging in VKhUTEMAS, Moscow, July 1928. Malevich and Tatlin paintings as seen in previous photograph.

Left to right (all Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow apart from Nos. 4, 5, 6 and 9):

- 1 • K. Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915
- 2 • L. Popova, *Painterly Architectonics*, 1918
- 3 • O. Rozanova, *Supremus* (No. 38), 1916, (Museum Ludwig, Cologne)
- 4 • K. Malevich, *Supremus* (No. 64), 1916, (State Regional Museum of Art, Ivanovo)
- 5 • K. Malevich, *Suprematism*, 1915 (State Regional Museum of Art, Ivanovo)
- 6 • K. Malevich, *Suprematism*, 1916 (State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg)
- 7 • O. Rozanova, *Non-Objective Composition*, 1916
- 8 • I. Kliun, *Suprematism*, 1916
- 9 • A. Rodchenko, *Non-Objective Composition*, 1917 (State Regional Museum of Art, Ivanovo)
- 10 • A. Rodchenko, *Composition No. 56/75 Transformation of a Plane by Means of Working on its Texture*, 1918
- 11 • A. Rodchenko, *Non-Objective Painting, Composition No. 64 (64) Abstraction of Colour: "Discoloration"*, 1918



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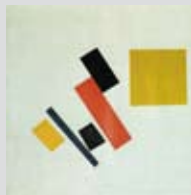
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organising excursion groups, activities by regular collaborators and by members of the Council.

On 25 December 1922, the first exhibition of the young pupils of VKhUTEMAS (Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops) opened – “The Projectionists”: A. Labas, A. Tychler, S. Nikritin, N. Triaskin, S. Luchichkin, whereby it was decided to show the works in Moscow before sending them to Amsterdam to join the *First Exhibition of Russian Art* which had already been held in Berlin. In January-February 1923, a great retrospective of the work of Malevich took up three of the largest exhibition halls; this was followed by a display of the work of P. Miturich, then an exhibition of the painter G. Borissov. In parallel with the exhibitions, lectures and conferences were held on modern art under the general title *From Cézanne to Suprematism*, Borissov: *Concerning the Rhythm of the Plane*, Nikritin: *On Projectionism*, Kogan – a lecture on Malevich, Chimanovich on the illustrations of Miturich for the work of Khlebnikov.

At the end of 1922, the Glavnauka stopped completely its subsidies for purchases by the Museum. According to the inventory, the Museum possessed then one hundred and twenty-nine paintings, one hundred and twenty-six books in its library, the Art Fund of the now-defunct Museum Bureau – five hundred and fifty-five canvases, one hundred and forty-six drawings, forty-five sculptures and five reliefs.

At the end of 1923, the Museum staff was reduced to four people: the Director, P. Williams, a consultant, N. Kogan, a scientific secretary, N. Kossman, and a mission manager, S. Nekludova.

In July 1923, the sculptor Lev Weiner was appointed Director whereas Williams was downgraded to Deputy Director. Solomon Nikritin became President of the Museum Council and concurrently embarked on an analysis of the study of pictorial methods. In June, a second consultant position was created which was first taken by the sculptor S. Aliochin, then by the painter N. Triaskin. In 1924, the two consultant positions were suppressed and replaced by two museum guards because thefts became more and more frequent.

At the end of 1924, the Moscow M.A.C. was officially merged with the Tretyakov Gallery. The Museum had closed in January 1924, but in the summer it already functioned at its new address: 11 Rozhdestvenka Street in the left wing of the VKhUTEMAS building (building of the former Stroganov Institute). The Institute of Artistic Culture was merged with the Moscow Museum of Artistic Culture, thus providing a more efficient system for educating the young generation of art students (compare Kandinsky’s ideas on INKhUK).<sup>10</sup> The collection was divided into two main departments: an exhibition department and a research laboratory for analysis of colour and form. The exhibition occupied six halls, one room was reserved

for the research laboratory while another hall served to store the Museum collection. The premises at Rozhdestvenka Street were three times as spacious as those at Povarskaia Street (one thousand five hundred and twelve cubic meters as against four hundred and eighty-three cubic meters). The six employees (three scientific workers and three guards) were joined by five positions of interns to be filled by people from the university. They carried out analysis and characterization of the exhibitions shown at the Museum.

The hanging was organized at the new premises in very methodical manner and divided into two sections: one devoted to relief (Halls A, B, C) and the others to flat work (Halls D, E, F). Brief statements by the artists were posted next to the works.<sup>11</sup>

Hall A contained works by artists of the Knave of Diamonds group: four paintings by Ilya Mashkov, three by Piotr Konchalovsky and six by Alexander Kuprin. Mashkov defined his works as “Impressionist comprehension of form and composition; illusion of space; the colour is polychrome and serves to outline the relief, the subject is deformed by the colour”. Konchalovsky: “Geometrization of the subject (Cézanne). Heavy forms. Colour builds up the relief. Unity of tone.” Kuprin’s painting, in accordance with its definition, expressed: “the moment of mutation: the reversal of subject matter... space becomes abstract”. One of his goals was “the economy of pictorial means”.

In Hall B five works by Vasily Rozhdestvensky were described by the artist as “An analysis of form” and “an introduction to time”. Four works by Robert Falk had the aim of “liberating form from randomness and going against nature”, and creating space by the means of relief. Aristarkh Lentulov was represented by five works, noted as “stripping bare the construction of the subject”, the expression of a dynamic tendency, and “a displacement of planes”. Two works by Osmorkin proposed, “A rhythmic differentiation of relief” and “an abstract interpretation of the forms of reality”. Two works by Konchalovsky were also displayed in that Hall.

Hall C displayed works by Alexandra Exter (2), Natan Pevsner (2), Liubov Popova (2), Nadezhda Udaltsova (4), Kazimir Malevich (3), essentially belonging to the Cubist period.

The “Section of Planar Works” started at Hall D with four works by Pavel Kuznetsov in which, “The line built the composition”. A work by Mashkov showed, “The subject as an ornament”. The goal of the canvases by Natalia Goncharova was, according to the affixed text, “To translate the pictorial essence of things”, to attempt “mixing styles”: Egyptian; Old Russian; popular prints, icons and other manifestations of primitive art.

Mikhaïl Larionov was represented by four primitivist works. There were also five canvases by Alexander Shevchenko who

declared he was interested “in the juxtaposition of the graphic and the pictorial” and in “the moment of reversal”.

Hall E showed two works by A. Grishchenko (“Painting of a Rack”) with affinity to an icon and “Corporeality of colour”), six works by David Shterenberg (“Deployment of the subject on the plane”, “Colour constructing the plane”), three works by Larionov (“Letters as an ornamental motif, the primitive and the grotesque”, “The symbolic drawing”), three works by Alexander Drevin (“The form is conventional”, “Study of the relations between colours”), three works by Olga Rozanova (“Stripping bare the basis of painting”, “Combination of abstract geometric surfaces”), as well as a work by Nathan Altman and one by Wladislaw Strzeminski.

The last Hall (F) showed six compositions by Vasily Kandinsky who declared that they were “the expression of his internal universe” and “the liberation of colour”, six by Malevich, two by Ivan Kliun (“Colour as an end in itself”), five by Aleksandr Rodchenko (“The potential of the colour black alone”, “The negation of the very idea of a picture”), three by Rozanova, one by Vladimir Tatlin (*Staraiia Basmanaia / Old Basmanaia Street*, 1917). The theoretical department, which was installed in a small separate room had been devoted for a long time, among other matters, to research work by Ivan Kliun on colour, form, light, handling (“Reinforcement of colour by light and contrast, influence of neighbouring colours on the modifications of form, the decomposition of the elements of colour”). It also contained the pictures: “Colour on the Plane” (Constructions in Two and Three Colours), relations of colour and light, of colour and form. The analysis laboratory was fitted out in the autumn of 1925.

In 1924 and 1925 the exhibitions organised at the M. A. C. were a Posthumous Exhibition of Liubov Popova, and the first exhibition of the Society of Rack Painters, celebrating fifteen years of “the left” in Russian art.

The Museum made no new acquisitions and the collection was completed by exchanges with the Museum of Artistic Culture of Leningrad and the Art Fund. But the Museum continued nonetheless its assistance to provincial museums (e.g., the museums of Riazan, Krasnodar, etc.). The following season (1925-1926) was noted for the exhibitions of the VKhUTEMAS of works of the IZO circles, of workers clubs of Leningrad and works produced by the analytical laboratory of the Museum. On the opening day of the last-mentioned exhibition, S. Nikritin read a report on the research work carried out in the Museum, which was of particular importance as the regular visitors to the Museum were students of VKhUTEMAS.

In August-September 1926, the M. A. C. moved to new premises in VKhUTEMAS (the first or ground floor of the building of the former Museum of Asiatic Art). On April 3, 1927

the Society of Painters of the Rack opened its third exhibition and in the spring of 1928 its fourth exhibition.

In the course of this period the M. A. C. participated in all the exhibitions of the Tretyakov Gallery and in quite a few others, and continued with its internal organisation.

In 1928 the M. A. C. was transferred to the Glaviskusstvo (Directorate of Arts) and became a branch of the Tretyakov Gallery on which it depended financially. On August 26, the Museum was closed due to moving to the new premises at the Polytechnical Museum (corner of Ilinski Passage).

## Closing the Museums of Artistic Culture

On December 22, 1928, the Glaviskusstvo ordered the suppression of the M. A. C., whereby the experimental scientific research laboratory remained attached to the Tretyakov Gallery under the responsibility of Piotr Williams. At the same time it was decided to set up again a committee to oversee the inventory of property of the M. A. C.

In February 1929, all the materials of the Museum were divided into three groups: 1 – works to be transferred to the Gallery and to the exchange collection with the Russian Museum; 2 – works to be sent to the provinces; 3 – works of students and works of artists to be handed back to them after an exhibition; commercial works were to be sold. The library and archives of the M. A. C. were transferred to the Gallery.

From that time onward begins the truly tragic history of the artists themselves and of their works, which were destroyed by a special commission attached to the Tretyakov Gallery under pretext of having no “artistic value” and so of no interest to the museums nor of any commercial value. Transfer of some of these works to the provinces saved them from this fate.

## Provincial Museum Collections

The experience of the Museum of Artistic Culture of Moscow at the height of its activity serves as a concrete model for the exhibition of contemporary works and a demonstration of a “living” museum. This experience also shows that the works of the Russian Avant-Garde can be studied on the basis of the analyses by the artists themselves. This capacity for analysing the artistic process is also preserved in the collections sent to the provinces. The present exhibition in Nantes shows mainly works gathered from these collections, which were founded in the years 1919 and 1920.

One of the first towns to receive thirty-five works by contemporary artists was Samara (Order no. 4 of August 15,

1919). The town received eleven paintings by Rozanova (part of her heritage after the posthumous exhibition of 1918, the First State Exhibition, which reflected all the phases of her evolution, from primitivism to abstraction), and four paintings by M. Le Dentu. Constructivism was represented by a single work of A. Vesnin, “Alogism”, and Malevich was represented by *The Guitarist* of 1914 (lost). The range of painters represented was quite large and featured all the post-revolution first generation: E. Bebutova, G. Yakulov, S. Dymchits-Tolstaïa, A. Grishchenko, M. Menkov, and included the youngest of all – N. Pevsner, I. Païne, V. Chekregin, W. Strzeminski, A. Ivanov.

The Astrakhan B. M. Kustodiev Picture Gallery received contributions twice – in 1919 (Order no. 5 of November 17) and in 1920 (Order no. 30 of June 15) – in all nearly forty paintings and graphic works. Practically all the groups and all the trends of the first decade of the twentieth century were represented: the World of Art (N. Krymov), the Union of Russian Artists (A. Arkhipov, S. Gerassimov), the Blue Rose (P. Kuznetsov), the Knave of Diamonds (A. Lentulov, I. Mashkov, A. Kuprin, R. Falk, V. Rozhdestvensky), the Donkey’s Tail (A. Shevchenko), a primitive work by Malevich, two abstract works by Kandinsky, two paintings by O. Rozanova, the Constructivism of A. Rodchenko, and so on.

The collection sent to Nizhni-Novgorod offered a rich panorama of the trends of the first decade of the twentieth century. Moreover, some painters were represented by several canvases of different periods. Forty-two works were sent out including canvases by P. Kuznetsov, N. Krymov, P. Utkin, A. Lentulov, I. Mashkov, A. Kuprin, R. Falk, P. Konchalovsky V. Rozhdestvensky A. Osmorkin, M. Larionov (5), N. Goncharova (3), A. Shevchenko, K. Malevich, V. Kandinsky, O. Rozanova (4), L. Popova (2), N. Udaltsova, V. Pestel, A. Rodchenko and others.

The Ivanovo Regional Museum of Art received a more modest collection in quantity (eleven works in all) but with good representation of artists and quality of works – O. Rozanova (3), M. Le Dentu, A. Vesnin, A. Morgunov (2), V. Barth, B. Chapochnikov and the less well-known V. Kisselev and N. Schifers.

The Regional Museum of Art in Tula, a town which was a very important industrial centre, received a very large number of works to display: ninety-six works of which twenty-four were paintings, seventy-one graphic works and also one sculpture. The emphasis of this collection was placed on representatives of the Knave of Diamonds group (eight works), but the great figures of the Russian Avant-Garde were equally represented with important works by V. Kandinsky, L. Popova, A. Rodchenko, K. Malevich, M. Chagall, O. Rozanova (graphic work).

In the same year of 1920, the Art Museum in Yaroslavl was also able to display the latest trends of modern art by means of the works of P. Konchalovsky, I. Mashkov, A. Lentulov, A. Kuprin, V. Lebedev, I. Kliun, L. Popova, O. Rozanova, N. Chernychev, S. Adlivankin and others. Collections were sent in that order by the Art Fund to the museums of IZO. [See, “The Avant-Garde in the Yaroslavl Art Museum”, in this issue.]

Alas, it is now difficult to analyse the effect that the transfer of these collections had on the public and on artists’ life as there are rather few testimonies at our disposal. But judging by current events, even in Petrograd where painters representing these trends dominated political life, modern art always had difficulty in finding its public. The Russian Museum, which accumulated in its collections eight years of purchases, did not exhibit them but kept them in closed halls. In order to remedy this situation, V. Tatlin, in charge of the acceptance of new trends, demanded in 1922 of the Department of Museums of the Petrograd Academic Centre, that representatives of contemporary Russian art be admitted to the board of directors of the Russian Museum, which was in turn invited to participate in the directorate of the M. A. C. Finally, the Russian Museum opened a Department of Contemporary Art in December 1922, actively run by Nikolai Punin, one of the main organisers and collaborators of the Petrograd M. A. C.

The M. A. C. itself, organised like the one of Moscow in 1919 and on the same principles, was opened to the public in April 1921. From 1923, these departments of the Museum took on an experimental character. In October 1924, people now spoke of a State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK) and finally, in December 1926, the Museum of Artistic Culture was closed down.

This project of construction of a network of museums essentially oriented towards contemporary art was revealed to be utopian in view of the historical circumstances in which our country found itself to be. But it nevertheless played an extremely positive role in that it permitted many towns throughout the country to set up a collection based on Russian art of the twentieth century. This permits us today to understand the spirit of this complex heritage.

Exhibitions drawn from the collections of these museums have brought back to light these works long since neglected by specialists and unknown to the public at large. The exhibition at Nantes could rival in importance exhibitions such as *Art and Revolution* (Tokyo 1982 and 1987), *Art and Revolution* (Budapest, 1987 and Vienna, 1988), the exhibitions of Russian Avant-Garde at the museums of Turku (1989), Düsseldorf (1990), and above all the most important exhibition of the art of that period, *The Great Utopia* (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, New York, 1992).

## Footnotes

- [1] Tsgali, F. 665, ref. 1, ch. 31, I.1, typewritten manuscript. Vladimir Tatlin, Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaya, “Report on a Museum of Contemporary Art”. Adopted 28 July 1918 by Narkompros Artistic Collegium, Moscow Artistic Collegium. In Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova, Editor, *Tatlin*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988, 237. [www.incorm.org/museum of artistic culture](http://www.incorm.org/museum-of-artistic-culture), Document 1.
- [2] K. Malevich, “Os’Tsviéta” (“The Axis of Colour and Volume”), *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo (Fine Arts, or Plastic Arts)*, Petrograd, 1919, No. 1, 27-37. The following two quotations are from the same article. French translation in, J.-Cl. Marcadé, K. Malévitch, *Ecrits II, Le Miroir suprématisiste*. Lausanne: l’Age d’Homme, 69-73. English translation at [www.incorm.org/museum of artistic culture](http://www.incorm.org/museum-of-artistic-culture), Document 6.
- [3] David Shterenberg, Museum of Painterly Culture, in “Report on the Activities of the Department of Plastic Arts of Narkompros”, No. 1, May 1919. Names are listed in the order of appearance in the published list. See *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo (Fine Arts)*, *op. cit.*, 74. At [www.incorm.org/museum of artistic culture](http://www.incorm.org/museum-of-artistic-culture) Document 2.
- [4] Protocol No. 5 of May 14, 1919. Archives of A. Rodchenko and V. Stépanova.
- [5] “Report on the Activities of the Department of Plastic Arts of Narkompros”, *op. cit.*, [3], 73-74.
- [6] Ibid.
- [7] V. Kandinsky, “Muzei Khudozhestvennoi Kultury” (“The Museum of Artistic Culture”), *Khudozhtvennaia Zhizn (Artistic Life)*, No. 1, January-February 1920, 19. V. Kandinsky, “The Museum of the Culture of Painting”, in *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art*, Vol. 1 (1901-1921). Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, Editors. London: Faber and Faber, 1982, 437-444. At [www.incorm.org/museum of artistic culture](http://www.incorm.org/museum-of-artistic-culture) Document 8.
- [8] Here and below, the quotations are from the text by V. Kandinsky, *Ibid.*, 18-19 (Russian).
- [9] N. Kogan, Official document of June 27, 1922. Central State Archive of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic, role 2307, document 3, d. 209, I. 36. Quoted from the paper “K istorii pedagogicheskoi dieiatelnosti K. S. Malevicha” (“Contribution to the History of Pedagogic Action of K. S. Malevich”), G. A. Démosfenova, Introduction. In VNIITE: “Technical Aesthetics. Pages from the History of National Design”, No. 59, 1989, 145.
- [10] See, V. Kandinsky, “Program for the Institute of Artistic Culture”, presented at the First Pan-Russian Conference of Teachers and Students at the State Free Art and Industrial Art Studios, Moscow, June 1920. In, *Kandinsky Complete Writings on Art*, Vol. 1 (1901-1921), *op. cit.* [7], 455-472.
- [11] Here and below the quotations are from the book by P. Pertsev, *Khudozhestvennye muzéi Moskvy (The Moscow Museums of Art)*. Moscow guidebook, 1925, 81-88.