John E. Bowlt, 1985

The Russian Avant-Garde

It is generally recognized that the collection of paintings; drawings, sculptures and constructions belonging to Mr. and Mrs. Peter Ludwig is one of the most important, most exciting representations and interpretations of modern art in our time. The collection reflects a patron's informed taste, a personal attitude towards artistic beauty, a distinctive set of esthetic criteria – and it is this private perception and supervision that makes the collection a totality and not a mere conglomerate of disparate artifacts.

The Ludwig collection contains works of great historical significance. Many countries, styles and creative principles are included; many surprising discoveries arise from the confrontations between particular works. But among the numerous artists and schools here, surely the Russian contribution has an especially sharp and lasting resonance. The Russian section of the collection contains excellent pieces by leading figures in 20th century Russian/Soviet painting and, in essence, provides a vivid panorama of the complex development of modern and contemporary art from the Russian standpoint. Although various themes could have been culled from this panorama and used as the basis for this tribute, it has seemed judicious to orient our presentation towards the personalities and ideas that constituted what has come to be called the Russian avant-garde. After all, the Ludwig collection contains unique creations by Alexandra Exter, Pavel Filonov, Vasilii Kandinsky, Ivan Kliun, Kazimir Malevich, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova and many other stellar names; and it illustrates and expands the list of *Kunstismen* that Hans Arp and El Lissitzky compiled in 1924[1] giving prominent place to Neo-Primitivism (Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov), Cubism (Natan Altman and Exter), Futurism (Rozanova), Analytical Art (Filonov), Suprematism (Ilia Chashnik, Kliun, Nina Kogan, Malevich, Nikolai Suetin), Architectonic Painting (Popova), Constructivism (Vasilii Ermilov, Konstantin Vialov), even Socialist Realism, at least in its prototypical phase (Petr Viliams). Furthermore, the collection brings to the fore a number of artists who were experimental and innovative and yet who are still unfamiliar to the public at large, e.g. Nikolai Lapshin, Nikolai Prusakov and Sergei Senkin. Not only do their brilliant resolutions in painting and construction provide a deep esthetic gratification and stimulation, but they also, inevitably, touch on a range of "philosophical" issues that are an intrinsic part of the culture of the Russian avant-garde: Was the avant-garde Russian or European? Was it apolitical or truly ideologically committed? Did it arrive just before 1910 and then depart by 1930 logically and naturally? A primary aim of this essay is to address such questions through reference, where possible, to works in the Ludwig collection. In this way, a broader context might be established whereby this unique monument to 20th century art might be brought into even sharper relief.

The Avant-Garde: Defining the Term

The term, "the Russian avant-garde", has become almost a household word thanks to the many exhibitions, publications and conferences that have taken place in Europe, the US and the Soviet Union within the last fifteen years or so, and the achievements of Goncharova, Kandinsky, Larionov, Malevich, Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin have perhaps never been discussed and sought after with such enthusiasm as now. This interest is justified and deserves to be expanded still further as we come to appreciate the full significance, the prescience, of the theory and practice undertaken by the primary and secondary artists, critics and patrons in Moscow, St Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad, Kiev and Kharkov during the 1910s and 1920s.

However, the rapid rehabilitation of modern Russian art has also stimulated some misleading generalizations, including an inaccurate categorization of all innovative Russian artists of the 20th century as "avant-garde": there was no single avant-garde and, in fact, the term "avant-garde" was hardly ever used by those artists whom contemporary history places it its ranks.[2] Moreover, the term was not favored by its protagonists and antagonists, and the "avant-garde" became a "movement" only retroactively, i.e. when it was rediscovered in the 1960s. Both Western and Soviet scholars now use. the term as a convenient rubric that accommodates many diverse talents. Needless to say, there was no substantial artistic intercourse between Altman and Kliun, Kandinsky and Tatlin, Malevich and Rodchenko, Filonov and Popova, even though such names now appear side by side at exhibitions and in catalogs dedicated to the Russian avant-garde. Malevich and Tatlin were avowed enemies, Popova and Varvara Stepanova maintained a very uneasy relationship, Kliun and Malevich, at one time friends, became bitter enemies in the late 1910s, Filonov had no time for any of them, and few of them took Kandinsky seriously. Consequently, when we use the term avant-garde", we should be aware of these distinctions, and as long as we take account of the heterogeneity of the Russian avant-garde and of its many internal dissensions and factions, we may avoid the crime of oversimplification.

It is also important to record that many members of the Russian avant-garde were not, strictly speaking, Russian. They all maintained close ties with Moscow and St. Petersburg, but often they were born in, and retained allegiances to, countries outside the geographical confines of Russia. For example, Alexander Bogomazov and Ermilov were Ukrainian; Malevich was born in the Ukraine and carried a Polish passport; Gustav Klucis and Alexander Drevin were from Latvia; Altman, Lissitzky and David Shterenberg were raised in strict Jewish families.[3]

Western or Eastern?

A number of the central artists of the avant-garde trained in Europe before the First World War, especially in Paris, but many – such as Malevich, Rodchenko and Tatlin – did not. Malevich went abroad only once, to Poland and Germany in 1927, Rodchenko spent a few miserable weeks in Paris in 1925, and Tatlin visited Berlin and Paris in the late spring of 1913, but did not take lessons in either capital. It is not surprising that there was no common attitude among the Russian avant-

garde towards Europe (or perhaps we should say the West in general, since, in some respects, the US superseded Europe as a cultural model in the 1920s). As today, most Russian artists and critics, whether they have travelled in the West or not, entertained curious preconceptions and misconceptions of European culture ranging from total rejection to obsequious adulation. An example of the latter mood is to be found in the behaviour of the critic Alexander Koiransky who reviewed the 1912 exhibition of the "Jack of Diamonds" exhibition in Moscow: he made the embarrassing mistake of praising a Russian artists there (V.V. Savinkov) simply because he thought that the paintings were by Picasso – and failed to notice the black bread and herrings in the still-lives. Koiransky praised these works for their "beauty of color" and contrasted them with those by the Russian "dilettantes" at the exhibition.[4]

Those artists who resided in the West for long or short periods before the Revolution voiced very different opinions. For example, Filonov spent six months travelling and working in Italy, France and Germany in 1912, but he passed over his experiences in a single, non-committal paragraph in his autobiography something that indicates that even then this introspective artist saw only what he wanted to see, i.e. his own cryptic, inner world.[5] On the other hand, Popova spent a fruitful, happy time in Paris in 1912-13, studying Cubism from Le Fauconnier, Gleizes, Metzinger and Segonzac. Exter the Cubist, Suprematist and Constructivist, who influenced many young Russian artists, actually maintained an apartment in Paris and spent most of her time there – even though, as the poet Benedikt Livshits recalled, she did not disdain Russian opinion, even the opinion of the loud David Burliuk, "the father of Russian Futurism":

> Burliuk looked round the walls and alighted on a picture of Exter's. This was an unfinished tempera … From the slight blush of embarrassment and momentary shadow of displeasure which flitted across her face, I could tell the extent to which Exter – that Exter who lived in Paris for several months each year and who in her art was through and through French, valued the opinion of this provincial lout.[6]

Cultural and national diversity, upsurge of creative energy, ambivalent attitude towards the West, identifiable with the Russian avant-garde, formed a combination of conditions that was by no means new in the history of Russian art. A similar coincidence occurred during the 17th century in the Kremlin workshops in Moscow, when Simon Ushakov, the great modernizer of Russian icon-painting, supervised the icon studios there. Like the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in the late1900s and 1910s, where many of the avant-garde were enrolled, the Kremlin work-shops of the 1660s-80s welcomed Ukrainian, Armenian, Greek, Polish as well as Russian students, exposed them to Western styles as well as to the domestic podlinniki (original patterns) and produced an entire generation of innovative, radical artists. Just as Malevich, Tatlin and their colleagues revolutionized 20th century Russian art and brought it up to par with Western art, even surpassing the achievements of Paris, Milan and Munich, so Ushakov and his colleagues also transformed the Russian icon and brought it into the mainstream of Western art, adjusting its covert imitation of Italian styles to a formal and open *modus operandi* – while still adhering to essential principles of the Russian school.

Since all the members of the Russian avant-garde were quite familiar with Western European art either through confrontation in Paris or through relevant collections and illustrations at home, it is not unexpected to find Russian paraphrases and extensions of French and Italian principles. The Ludwig collection enables us to perceive some of these stylistic parallels very clearly. For example, Exter's *Kubo-futurische Komposition* (ca. 1912) parallels Metzinger's Cubist digressions of the same period; the compressed, organic images of Filonov's paintings such as the *Ohne Titel* (1912-15) bring to mind the crowded visions of Bosch (whom Filonov much admired; Malevich's *Landschaft* (1909) carries illusions to Léger and even Severini; Popova's *Sitzender weiblicher Akt* (ca. 1913) betrays her apprenticeship to La Palette; Goncharova's *Akt um Ufer* (1908) bears correspondences to both Van Dongen and Kirchner.

Although such parallels are, in themselves, intriguing, and communicate a great deal about the iconographic derivations of the Russian avant-garde, they also touch on the broader question of the subsequent development of such artists. How did the Russian evolve beyond their Western mentors and colleagues? That they did is proven by their products in the Ludwig collection. It is the exaggeration, the hyperbole of the Russian artists that imbues the avant-garde with one of its salient characteristics. This quality manifested itself on various levels. Russian artists often borrowed, reprocessed and concluded Western ideas – something that can be identified with the move from Cubism and Futurism into Suprematism achieved by Malevich, Kliun, Rozanova, Popova and others in 1915-16. Alternatively, they tried to extend what originated as an esthetic or formal system to "life" or to the "cosmos", i.e. to take art into a more public space and invest it with a messianic, utilitarian purpose. Malevich and his followers did this when they began to apply Suprematism to functional ends and to design Suprematist porcelain, furniture, fabrics, even spaceships; Kandinsky did this with his elaborate explanation of "On the Spiritual in Art". Obviously, as with any additive element, the effect could be beneficial or pernicious, positive or negative.

The Search for a Russian Ethos

The Ludwig collection is especially fortunate in its possession of master paintings by Goncharova such as *Stillleben mit Tigerfell* (1908) and Larionov such as *Porträt eines Mannes* (1910). In no small degree, these two artists were responsible for the "coming of age" of Russian art in ca. 1910, and their blending of Western influences (especially from Gauguin and Matisse) with domestic stimuli (especially folk art) is one of the most remarkable attainments in early 20th century Russian culture. In choosing to challenge Parisian supremacy, they focused attention on what they argued were esthetic concepts and objects of no less a value than those of Post-Impressionism and Cubism. They maintained that their exuberance and vitality, their cultivation of intrinsic elements such as color and texture identifiable with their new paintings, derived in part, at least, from indigenous and also from Eastern sources: "Primitive art forms – icons, *lubki*,[7] trays, signboards, fabrics of the East, etc.", they asserted, "– these are specimens of genuine value and painterly beauty".[8] Goncharova and Larionov, in particular, began to give attention to such art forms as early as 1907-08 and injected a new energy

into Russian painting just as the previous dominant trend, Symbolism, was entering a state of decline. Perhaps their concentration on folk art was also, in part, a result of the democratic impulse of the 1905-06 revolution, although, by and large, the pioneers of the Russian avant-garde were apolitical, at least before the October Revolution, and they gave little thought to ideological, social systems.

The so called Neo-Primitivist paintings of Goncharova and Larionov often manifest peculiar combinations of East and West. For example, in Larionov's *Stilleben mit Krebs* (1907) we can make out allusions to the Matisse still-lives that were already in the Shchukin and Morozov collections of Post-Impressionist art in Moscow; and the large feet and hands in Goncharova's *Jewish Family* (1912) seem close to those of Gauguin's Polynesian people (also represented in the Moscow collections); in addition, Larionov's *Rayonistische Würstchen und Makrelen* (1912) might owe as much to a local fishmonger's and butcher's signboards as to Italian Futurism.

As the Neo-Primitivist movement developed after 1908, so its proponents looked ever more intently at their domestic roots, flaunted their derision of the West and issued xenophobic claims to the effect that "Neo-Primitivism is a profoundly national phenomenon" or "The *lubok* presents other constructions that are much more complicated than the visions of Picasso and Braque".[9] This esthetic Slavophilism found dramatic visual extensions in the paintings of 1910-12 and in the propagation through societies and exhibitions organized by Larionov and his colleagues (such as the 1910 showing of the "Jack of Diamonds" in Moscow). Moreover, as this enthusiasm for "things Russian" increased, so the awareness of Russia's alleged derivation from Oriental culture also became attractive. That is why Goncharova, in the preface to the catalog of her one-woman exhibition in Moscow in 1913, could affirm that:

> The Impressionists are from the Japanese. The Synthetists, Gauguin, from India spoiled by its early renaissance. From the islands of Tahiti, he apprehended nothing, apart from a tangible type of woman. Matisse – Chinese painting. The Cubists – Blacks (Madagascar), Aztecs. As for the past –certain historians are sadly mistaken in deducing a Romanesque influence, even a German influence, on our icons.[10]

Goncharova and Larionov tried to prove their assumption by categorizing certain Russian artifacts, especially *lubki*, along with Japanese, Chinese, Persian, Hindu and Tartar works, as they did at the "Exhibition of Icons and *Lubki*" in Moscow in 1913. These artists also tended to "orientalize" Russian art for Western consumption as Goncharova and Larionov liked to do in their stage designs for Sergei Diaghilev's ballet productions. In her sets and costumes for the Paris, 1914 presentation of *Le Coq d'Or*, for example, Goncharova brought together elements of the icon and the *lubok* – strident colors, mosaic surfaces, intricacies of the Persian miniature – that confirmed the Parisian conviction that the Russians were "Asian" and "barbaric". But such episodes were actually symptomatic of a serious and direct confrontation between certain Russian artists of the avant-garde and the Orient. We remember that a primary stimulus to Popova's conception of non-figurative art – her painterly architectonics of architectonic painting – was provided

by her examination of the Shakh-i-Zinda mosque and ruins in Samarkand. Georgii Yakulov, who claimed to have developed Simultanism before the Delaunays did, elaborated his theory of light through his observations in Manchuria while on military service in the Far East in 1903-04. David Burliuk, Varvara Bubnova and Viktor Palmov were deeply impressed by Japanese art during their respective residences in Japan after the 1917 Revolution. These are just some of the many instances of the "Orientalism" of the Russian avant-garde – an important influence that, in fact, finds solid precedents in 19th century Russian art and perhaps even in the chinoiserie of 18th century Russian Rococo.

The New Painterly Realism

The avant-garde pioneers borrowed and reprocessed many components – Occidental, Russian, Oriental – and, skillfully, rapidly, brought them to an extraordinary conclusion. Certainly, their activities led them to spectacular syntheses such as Goncharova's *Porträt von Larionow* (1913) or Filonov's *Kopf* (1924), but, of course, there were other sources of artistic ideas apart from Neo-Primitivism. For example, if we wish to analyze Malevich's evolution towards Suprematism in 1915, Kandinsky's interpretations of abstraction or the feverish landscapes – "spacescapes" – of Mikhail Matiushin and his group (see Ksenia Ender's *Räumliche Komposition* of ca. 1919), then Neo-Primitivism has only limited relevance, and we must look elsewhere and to additional contexts to try and explain these artistic phenomena.

Malevich's formulation of Suprematism (represented by the quintessential *Dynamischer Suprematismus* of 1916) was a remarkable departure from an artistic tradition that had generally emphasized the narrative and/or moral purpose of art, and had just experienced the dominance of 19th century Realism. In 1914-15 a crucial problem that faced many members of the Russian avant-garde was how to move from "reproduction" to "production", i.e. from the descriptive or documentary function of art to a "purely painterly work of art".[11] Artists surmised that, in order for art to become independent of literature, it had to stop depicting the world of recognizable objects and the formal methods that accompanied such depiction. Of course, as early as 1912-13 Goncharova and Larionov were approaching this concept with their Rayonist experiments reliant on the "laws germane only to painting: *colored line and texture*",[12] and both *Rayonistische Würstchen und Makrelen* and the *Porträt von Larionow* reveal the potential of their system. But artists such as Kliun, Malevich, Rozanova and Popova went further, drawing on other stimuli, and in order to explain their action, it is essential to look beyond the Neo-Primitivism – to a cultural trend that flourished in Russia at the turn of the century, Symbolism.

Opposing the Victorian, positivist worldview, the Symbolists attempted to transcend concrete reality and to reach the "ulterior" or the "essence". In many cases, the artistic explorations of the Symbolists, e.g. of Mikhail Vrubel and Viktor Borisov-Musatov, were accompanied by deep philosophical concerns, and their formal discoveries were side effects rather than primary objectives. However, in modern Russian art, it was the Symbolists and not the Impressionists (there was never a strong Impressionist school in Russia) who forestalled "creation in an end in

itself and domination over the forms of nature".[13] Their interpretation of the "real" reality, for example, as a form of movement was a simple and potential idea that recurred in both Suprematism and Constructivism. As the Symbolist poet and essayist, Andrei Bely, wrote:

> Movement is the basic feature of reality. It rules over images. It creates these images. They are conditioned by movement … Beginning with the lowest forms of art and ending with music, we witness a slow but sure weakening of the images of reality".[14]

It followed that the evocation of movement was, therefore, more important than the description of the material world and that the logical development of art was towards "non-objectivity [where] the method of creation becomes an *object in itself*".[15]

Regarded in the context of the Symbolist ideas, the emergence of the Russian avant-garde seems consistent and direct; and, indeed, a number of the Suprematist and Constructivist principles can be identified with the Symbolist worldview. For instance, the Cube-Futurists' concern with "shift" or "displacement", evident especially in the so-called transrational painting of Malevich and the transrational poetry of Alexei Kruchenykh of ca. 1913, derives in part from the Symbolists' attempt to flee the world of appearances. The Cubo-Futurists, such as Malevich and Kruchenykh, broke semantic and formal sequences and often isolated the everyday object (a spoon, a piece of fabric, a photograph), so that the viewer perceived it outside its conventional context. Still, the art of Cubo-Futurism was still a figurative one – Malevich's *Woman at an Advertisement Pillar* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1914); Alexei Morgunov's *Komposition* (1913-14) and Popova's *Relief* (1915), for example, still depend on associations with the concrete world and, in this respect, do not differ radically from 19th century Realism. Of course, in all these works colored geometric units are encroaching, but recognizable objects still relate the painting or relief to external reality.

Total Abstraction

While the Cubo-Futurist works of Kliun, Malevich, Morgunov, Popova, Rozanova (cf. her *Komposition* of 1913), etc. rely on a figurative system, they do contain clear indices to the subsequent revolution in painting and construction. First and foremost, the new art emphasized its dynamic basis: with the denial of traditional sequences, with the alienation of the object, Cubo-Futurism and then Suprematism also rejected the notion of the accepted finite order, of entry and exit, of beginning and end, of the still-life hanging in a solid, permanent, gilt frame. The avant-garde artist came to regard art as part of a continuum: Malevich began to stress the "superterrestrial" and universal impulse of Suprematism; the painter and musician Matiushin attempted to expand his vis ion to 360 degrees;[16] Popova declared abstract form – such as her *Painterly Architectonics* (ca. 1920) – to be part of a perpetual "revolutionary condition";[17] Lissitzky composed his Proun paintings of 1919-24 so that they could be entered at any point. In this respect, we should remember that a vital concern of the Constructivists during the 1920s was the total

restructuring of reality – not just of the art media. Redesigning the appearance of the city to conform to the Revolutionary psychology derived, for example, from the idea that art was a dynamic force that could be used for many objectives: "The Communist regime [?] Communist consciousness. All forms of domestic life, morals, philosophy and art must be transformed according to Communist principles".[18]

In December, 1915 at the "0.10" exhibition in Petrograd, Malevich declared: "I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and got out of the circle of objects".[19] To illustrate this sentiment, Malevich painted canvases on which he juxtaposed geometric forms on an unrelieved white ground. Malevich affirmed that black and white were powerful sources of energy and that color contrast in size rather than in shape generated maximum movement. Subsequently, Malevich even argued that the dynamism inherent in the Suprematist form (cf. *Dynamischer Suprematismus*) would have a practical application – it would become a "new motor of the organism, without wheels, steam or petrol" and would join with the "space of the monolithic masses moving in the planet system".[20] In spite of such visionary concepts, Malevich still arranged his forms against the white ground so that they tended to move "inwards" and actually to follow the traditional perspectival system with its orthodox vanishing-point – which makes his *Rotes Kvadrat auf Schwarz* (ca. 1922) an exceptional part of his lexicon. Kliun seemed to be alluding to this when he attacked Malevich's Suprematism in 1919:

> The nature that was ornamented by the Neo-Realists and the Neo-Impressionists was torn to pieces by Futurism. Suprematism has carefully painted these benumbed forms with different colors and presents them as new art.[21]

At least Kliun himself tried to overcome the issue of conventional recession and perspective as a remnant of traditional art by experimenting with different grounds and deliberate confusion of cool-warm sequences – as we can see in both his Suprematist compositions here .

The notion that abstract art was part of a continuous process and that a particular color or form should not be impeded or "retarded" by association with the figurative world signalled a new development – a move from surface to space, from the static pictorial plane to the more dynamic multi-dimensional construction. Consequently, the Suprematist sculpture (see Ivan Puni's *Variant No. 110* of 1915), the relief (Tatlin, Popova, Ermilov – cf. the latter's *Memorial-Tafel-21 Januar 1924* of 1924 and "*Kanatka*" of 1928), the functional design (Exter, Popova) represented an earnest endeavor to replace the contemplative art, the *nature morte*, with an active, revolutionary art. In other words, when Tatlin was "noisily removed" from Picasso's studio in 1913,[22] amazed by his discovery of the Picasso reliefs, he was also carried from mass to volume, or, to quote Lissitzky, from composition, i.e. the "combining of various factors", to construction, i.e. a "substance composed of different parts".[23] Subsequently, Tatlin began to exploit space as a formative ingredient in his assemblages of materials or, as he stated, "to put the eye under the control of touch".[24]

Yet Tatlin's reliefs of late 1913 onwards were still in the pictorial tradition for, as the critic Nikolai Tarabukin remarked, they still required a frontal standpoint and

were not open to viewing on all sides.[25] However, at the exhibition "0.10" and then at "The Store" exhibition in Moscow in 1916, Tatlin displayed corner reliefs in which he attempted to break completely with the frontal view. It was but a short step from this development to the full-fledged impact of Constructivism in the early 1920s. Perhaps, incidentally, the brilliant Suprematist Rozanova would also have moved from surface to space in this emphatic manner, if she had not died prematurely in 1918. Her abstract paper collages for the Rozanova/Kruchenykh book *Universal War* of 1916, already very different from her Futurist variations of 1913-14, are surely symptomatic of her wish to restore the tactile and systemic element to art. Here is an artifact that the viewer is obliged to touch and must perceive as a sequence of raised surfaces: somehow, in their fortuitous, but concordant interconnections this complex of collages reminds us of the ensemble of constructions on display at the second exhibition of Obmokhu (Society of Young Artists) in Moscow in 1921.[26]

October, 1917

The Bolshevik Revolution of October, 1917 exerted an immediate and profound influence on artistic life in Russia. On the one hand, the new government gave active support to the avant-garde artists, providing them with pedagogical and administrative positions within the new cultural agencies, especially within the so called Visual Arts Section of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (IZO NKP). On the other hand, Lenin and his comrades did not dictate, at least, initially, an exclusive artistic policy, and allowed artists of most persuasions to create and exhibit. Thanks to this liberal environment, many innovative theoretical programs were compiled and propagated at the chief centers of the avant-garde – Svomas (Free State Art Studios) and Vkhutemas (Higher State Art-Technical Studios), i.e. the restructured art schools in Moscow, Petrograd and other metropolitan areas, and Inkhuk (Institute of Artistic Culture) in Moscow with affiliations in other cities. A direct result of this wide dissemination of experimental ideas on the part of Malevich, Popova, Rodchenko, Tatlin, etc. was the emergence of a younger generation of leftist artists such as Chashnik, Klucis, Kogan, Suetin whose talents and inclinations were as diverse and distinctive as those of their mentors.

Indeed, one important conclusion that can be reached from the Russian works in the Ludwig collection is that the ramifications and deductions inspired by Malevich's Suprematism just before and after 1920 were numerous, dynamic and potential. Chashnik's syncopated compositions of 1923-24, Kogan's anticipations of the late Mondrian such as her *Komposition* of 1920-21, and Suetin's more literal paraphrases of Malevich such as his *Suprematismus* of 1920-21 testify to the charismatic influence that Malevich exerted in Moscow, Petrograd and, of course, Vitebsk, just after the Revolution. Even artists whom we tend to associate with different areas of creative endeavor, e.g. Nikolai Lapshin (known for his Cubist exercises and book illustrations), Nikolai Prusakov (known for his propaganda posters) and Sergei Senkin (known for his typographical layouts) paid homage to the Suprematist credo in 1919-21, as we can see from their *Kompositionen* (Lapshin and Prusakov) and "*Rabis*" (Suetin).

During the period immediately following the Revolution, specific attention was given to the question of what the new proletarian art should be. Many answers were proposed, but one in particular related directly to the development of Constructivism and design in the 1920s: some theorists maintained that the Revolutionary art must be oriented towards technology – towards the proletariat; furthermore, it must be a universal, "anonymous" style, identifiable with world Communism, not just with Russia, and, consequently, such a style must be precise, scientific, devoid of local, ethnic concerns. This argument, coupled with the idea that the traditional media, especially painting, had run their course, contributed directly to the formulation of Constructivism in 1921 onwards. Industrial design soon became the primary – but not the only – area in which the avant-garde artists concentrated their creative efforts. Suddenly, everyone wanted to design, and even Malevich and his pupils helped to advance Suprematism from its pure to its applied, functional phase During the 1920s Chashnik and Suetin applied Suprematism to porcelain and architecture, Lissitzky also tried to extend "Suprematism into World Construction"[27] and to use the book, the poster, architecture and, later, the exhibition interior as recipients of geometric design. He moved, as the Constructivist architect Moisei Ginzburg, would have said, from "idealist esthetics" to "consistent artistic materialism".[28]

Liubov Popova: A Case Study

In the progression from Suprematism or, at least, non-figurative painting, to Constructivism, a key role was played by Liubov Popova whose two- and three-dimensional achievements are well represented in the Ludwig collection. To a considerable extent, Popova summarized the major impulses of the avant-garde and, in spite of her pre-mature death in 1924, managed to put into practice many of the ideas entertained by her colleagues – even when these colleagues (such as Malevich and Tatlin) seemed to be diametrically opposed to each other. In this sense, her artistic career, however brief, is worth examining in some detail.

Popova's early training in Cubism gave her a sense of discipline, deduction and rigor that Malevich sometimes lacked, and it enabled her to experiment logically and consistently with the organization of forms on the canvas, exploiting concepts such as weight, symmetry and rhythm. In her series of architectonic paintings of 1916 onwards, Popova elaborated the notion of "non-sequences" in color combinations. Consequently, she might place blue above yellow and then fuse both or place red above black and then pink underneath. Popova possessed the rare gift for thinking in terms both of two dimensions and of three and could not remain satisfied with the flatness of the plane. Popova's desire to introduce space as a creative agent was already evident in 1'915 in her cycle of still-lives and portraits which she subtitled "plastic painting"; it was also evident in her reliefs of 1915-18. Of particular interest are Popova's miniature applique compositions of colored paper in brown, blue and red of ca. 1920 and her textile designs of 1923-24. These tiny assemblages contain great energy, and, with their *trompe l'oeil* effect, anticipate the dynamic compositions of Vasarely and the Kinetic artists. Popova implied this in her painting formula published in 1919:

> Constructivism in painting = the sum of the energy of its parts … Line as color and as the vestige of the transverse plane participates in, and directs the forces of, construction … Energies = direction of volumes + planes and lines or their vestiges + all colors.[29]

However diverse her activities, Popova remained loyal to certain basic concepts of form and space. She communicated them most clearly in the theatre, a medium which, she felt, would avoid the "frontal, visual character [of art], something which hinders one from examining its function simply as a fluent and working process".[30] Popova proved to be one of the very few authentic Constructivists of the Russian theater, although we should not forget the audacious resolutions that Exter had provided for Alexander Tairov's productions at the Chamber Theater in Moscow from as early as 1916. In her simple, precise combinations of real form and real space, Popova expanded the rudimentary ideas of Tatlin's reliefs and prepared the ground for a Humber of Constructivist stagings in the mid- and late 1920s. The turning-point in Popova's career as a stage designer came in the fall of 1921 when, after her contribution to the radical exhibition "5 x 5 = 25" in Moscow, she was asked by Vsevolod Meierkhold to devise a program for a course in "material stage design" at his State Higher Producer Workshops – and it was here that Popova created her remarkable construction and costumes for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* staged by Meierkhold in April, 1922. The result was unprecedented:

> … a wooden installation … was assembled to look like a peculiar windmill and was a combination of platforms. ladders, gangways, revolving doors and revolving wheels … The wings of the windmill and the two wheels revolved slowly or quickly depending on the intensity of the action.[31]

Popova's construction represented a fundamental break with both Russian and Western stage traditions and it formed the prototype for several subsequent productions, not least Stepanova's designs for Meierkhold's *Death of Tarelkin* in November, 1922. Alexander Vesnin's mechanisms for Tairov's production of *The Man Who Was Thursday* in December, 1923 also owed something to his friendship with Popova, even though his Cubist and Suprematist training had been almost as rigorous as Popova's – as the two *Kompositionen* of the mid-1910s demonstrate very clearly.

Multiplicity as Originality

No less important than Popova in the history of the later Russian avant-garde was Alexander Rodchenko, an artist who, in little more than a decade (1912-24), mastered the principles of Jugendstil, Suprematism, abstract construction and experimental photography. As early as 1915 Rodchenko created his first compass and ruler drawings, six of which he showed at Tatlin's "Store" exhibition in 1916. As he indicated in a manifesto of 1921, Rodchenko used scientific instruments to guarantee complete precision:

> Line has conquered everything and has destroyed the last citadels of painting … Line has revealed a new worldview – to construct essence and not to depict … to build new, expedient, constructive structures in life, and not from lire or outside life.[32]

For Rodchenko line denoted a trajectory, it was the foundation of a constructive, spatial art, and he went further in his simplication and purification of constructive form than his colleagues did, including Tatlin. Rodchenko was one of the first, if not the first, to reject the single, stationary view of the artifact and to present it as a unit inter acting with space on all sides, as, for example, in his famous hanging constructions of 1921. Rodchenko was particularly concerned with the essence of form and he achieved extraordinary lightness and clarity of design in his constructions based on the repetition of the circle, the hexagon, the oval, etc., executed between 1918 and 1921. In his minimal forms, Rodchenko managed, perhaps more than any other Russian constructor (excluding Naum Gabo), to accomplish a perfect balance between material and space.

Rodchenko argued that the new, revolutionary society demanded not only new forms, but also new media, a sentiment shared by many of the avant-garde, although rarely acted upon. For his part, Rodchenko focused attention on photography after 1923, contending that, with its mechanical detail, its anonymity and its factual verisimilitude, photography would replace the lyrical delusion of art: "Every modern man must wage war against art, as against opium. Photograph and by photographed!"[33] Certainly, in concentrating on photography and the multiple image, Rodchenko endeavored to support a "non-artistic", utilitarian method where the copy was the original, but he still continued to experiment with the formal aspects of his new profession. Indeed, "Rodchenko perspective" and "Rodchenko foreshortening" became vogue terms in the 1920s, eliciting comparisons with the cinematic methods of Dziga Vertov. Even in the later photographs for the propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction* of the 1930s and in the drip paintings of the 1940s, Rodchenko expressed his constant wish to destroy the single, static impression of the surface.

A New Romanticism

The return of a more figurative, more academic art form in the late 1920s in Soviet Russia marked the end of an era, but not of artistic experiment. Throughout the 1920s many young artists, often graduates from the new schools and one-time students of Kandinsky, Malevich, Popova, Tatlin, etc., rediscovered the fascination of painting and sculpture that could report, comment and inspire in recognizable images. Ivan Kudriashev, for example, attempted to depict scientific phenomena such as luminescence (*Ohne Titel*, 1928); both Sergei Luchishkin and Kliment Redko investigated – brilliantly, but briefly abstract principles (*Abstrakte Komposition*, *Komposition*), before concentrating on a new Realism; and Petr Viliams, a leading member of OST (Society of Studio Artists), tried to adjust Expressionism to topical subjects as we can see from his rendering of a tractor factory (*Ohne Titel*, ca. 1924). This keen interest in the thematic painting which

coincided, of course, with the international shift back towards Realism, implied a growing dissatisfaction and disillusionment in the sophisticated, often elitist doctrines of the avant-garde. As the founders of the avant-garde emigrated, passed away or transferred their allegiances , so the narrative style that they had once questioned, censured and then ridiculed returned, avenging itself summarily and severely.

Opinions differ widely regarding the products of Socialist Realism – the artistic doctrine that was injected into the Soviet cultural mainstream in 1934 onwards. For some, this is an anathema, for others, a grand achievement. But, as a matter of fact, like most artistic movements in Russia – icon-painting, academic art, Realism, Symbolism, Suprematism, Constructivism – Socialist Realism still sanctifies the artistic process, imbues it with a higher mission, supplies a vision that is beyond mundane reality of the present tense. "What is it that is new in Soviet painting? What distinguishes it from the rest of modern world painting?" asked one Soviet commentator in 1939. He continued:

> The answer to these questions lies .... in the very nature of Soviet art, which is impregnated with great humanitarian ideals. It lies in the simplicity and plastic clarity of the of the pictorial language of Soviet painting, sculpture and graphic art.[34]

Such lyrical statements, banal or noble, depending on your point of view: Do they not still sound as impassioned and as earnest as the manifestoes of Malevich, Popova and Tatlin? And is Socialist Realism any more real than the intoxicating ether of Suprematism? These are just two of the great enigmas that the Ludwig collection compels us to encounter and to contemplate.

Notes to the text

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[1] I.e. El Lissitzky and Hans Arp: *Die Kunstismen 1914-1924*, Erlenbach-Zürich: Rentsch, 1925.
[2] Major exceptions to this generalization are the two journals called *Avant-Garde*, i.e. *Avangard* (Moscow, 1922) and *Avangard* (Kharkov, 1929).
[3] Some attempts are now being made to redress this imbalance and to examine the particular national heritages of artists often included loosely within the "Russian" avant-garde. Mention should be made of the following books: Myroslava Ciszkewycz: *Futurism and the New Generation: Artistic Modernism in the Ukraine*, Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986 (forthcoming); M. Marzaduri: *Dada Russo*, Bologna: Il Cavaliere Azzurro, 1984 e (important sections on the Georgian contribution); V. Beridze and N. Ezerskaia: *Iskusstvo Sovetskoi Gruzii 1921-1970*, Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1975 (on modern Georgian art).
[4] Alexander Koiransky' s review appeared in the newspaper *Utro Rossii*, Moscow, 1912, No. 22. For commentary see *Russkaia khudozhestvennaia letopis*, St. Petersburg, 1912, No. 3, February.
[5] See P. Filonov: "Autobiographies" (1929-32) in N. Misler and J. Bowlt: *Pavel Filonov: A Hero and His Fate*, Austin: Silvergirl, 1984, pp. 117-34.
[6] B. Livshits : *Polutoraglazyi strelets*, Leningrad: Izdatelstvo pisatelei, 1933, p. 18
[7] The *lubok* (plural: *lubki*) was a cheap, handcolored print sold at fairs, marketplaces, etc., often dealing with topical social and ethical issues.
[8] A. Shevchenko: *Neo-primitivizm* (1913). Quoted from J. Bowlt: *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism 1902-34*, New York: Viking, 1976, p. 45.
[9] A. Shevchenko: *Printsipy kubizma i drugikh sovremennykh techenii v zhivopisi vsekh vremen i narodov*, Moscow: Shevchenko, 1913, p. 18.
[10] N. Goncharova: Preface to catalog of one-woman exhibition, i.e. *N.S. Goncharova. Vystavka kartin 1900-1913. Katalog*, Moscow, 1913, p. 3.
[11] From the first paragraph of Kazimir Malevich's manifesto on Suprematism, i.e. *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu*, Moscow, 1916, p. 3.
[12] M. Larionov: "Luchistskaia zhivopis" (1913). This description of Rayonisrn, published in the miscellany, *Oslinyi khvost i mishen*, in July, 1913, was the second text that Larionov had published that year on his new theory. For a German translation of the entire piece see W. George: *Larionow*, Lucerne and Frankfurt: Bucher, 1968, pp. 111-13.
[13] Malevich, op. cit., p. 4.
[14] A. Bely: *Simvolizm*, Moscow: Musaget, 1910, pp. 165-66.
[15] Ibid., p.452. The article in which this remark appeared, "Budushchee iskusstvo" (Future Art), was written in 1907.
[16] For information on Matiushin and his optical system see Alla Powelichina: "Der Raumrealismus Matjuschins" in *Die Kunstismen in Russland/The Isms of Art in Russia 1907-30*. Catalog of exhibition at the Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne, 1977, pp. 27-41.
[17] From one of Popova's unpublished notebooks. Quoted from E. Rakitina: "Liubov Popova. Iskusstvo i manifesty" in E. Rakitina (ed.): *Khudozhnik Stsena Ekran*, Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1975, p. 154.

[18] "Programmnaia deklaratsiia" (unsigned) in *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Petrograd, 1919, No. 8, p. 3.
[19] Malevich, op. cit., p. 3.
[20] K. Malevich: *Suprematizm. 34 risunka* Vitebsk, 1920, p. 2.
[21] I. Kliun: "Iskusstvo tsveta" in *X Gosudarstvennaia vystavka. Bespredrnetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm*. Catalog of the exhibition, Moscow, 1919. Text reprinted in I. Matsa et al.: *Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let*, Moscow-Leningrad: Ogiz-Izogiz, 1933, p. 116.
[22] According to Georgii Yakulov, Tatlin donned a brightly colored dressing gown and installed himself near Picasso's studio and began to play his *bandura*. Picasso noticed him and, as Tatlin had hoped, invited him to pose for him. In this way, Tatlin gained entry into Picasso's studio, and there he see the violin reliefs. As soon as Picasso went out, Tatlin started to sketch them, but Picasso came back unexpectedly, saw what Tatlin was doing, and threw him out. The incident is reported in V. Komardenkov: *Dni minuvshie*, Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1973, p. 55.
[23] El Lissitzky: "New Russian Art. A Lecture" in S. Lissitzky-Küppers: *El Lissitzky. Life. Letters. Text*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1968, p. 336.
[24] Quoted from A. Strigalev: "O proekte pamiatnika III internatsionala khudozhnika V. Tatlina" in *Voprosy sovetskogo izobrazitelnogo iskusstva i arkhitektury*, Moscow, 1973, p. 410.
[25] N. Tarabukin: *Ot molberta k mashine*, Moscow: Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1923, p. 42.
[26] For a photograph of the exhibition see, for example, the cover of the exhibition catalog *Von der Fläche zum Raum in Russland/From Surface to Space in Russia 1916-1924*, Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne, 1974.
[27] This was the title of one of Lissitzky's important essays. See Lissitzky- Küppers, op. cit., pp. 327-30.
[28] M. Ginzburg: "Itogi i perspektivy" (1927). Quoted in K. Afanasiev et al. (eds.): *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury 1926-1932 gg.*, Moscow: Nauka, 1970, p. 82.
[29] L. Popova: Untitled contribution to *X Gosudarstvertnaia vystvka*, op. cit. Text reprinted in Matsa, op. cit., p . 112.
[30] From a lecture by Popova on *The Magnanimous Cuckold* at the Institute of Artistic Culture, Moscow, in April, 1922. Quoted in Rakitina, op. cit., p . 154.
[31] Yu. Elagin: *Temnyi genii*, New York: Chekhov, 1955, pp. 248-49.
[32] A. Rodchenko: "Line" (1921). Published in German and English translation in *Von der Fläche zum Raum*, op. cit., p. 67.
[33] A. Rodchenko: "Protiv summirovannogo portreta za manumentalnyi snimok" in *Novyi lef*, Moscow, 1928, No. 4, p. 16.
[34] From unsigned preface to the album *Soviet Painting. 32 Reproductions of Paintings by Soviet Masters*, Moscow and Leningrad: State Art Publishers, 1939, unpaginated.