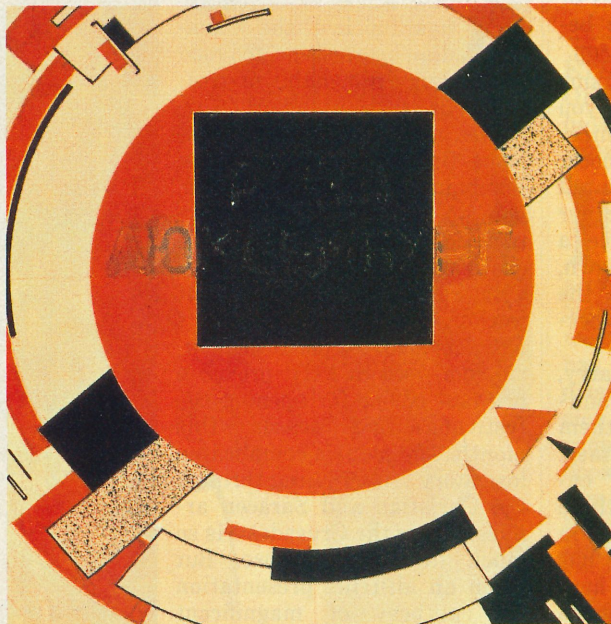


# The lost art of Russia's avant garde

The art of revolutionary Russia has been doubly forgotten: overlooked in the West in favor of Parisian and German modernism and suppressed at home by the Stalinists who found it decadent. Now, for the first time in the West, the full flowering of that movement can be seen in an exhibition, organized by the Guggenheim Museum in New York City and on display in Ottawa at the National Gallery until September: *Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia: Selections from the George Costakis Collection*. For 30 years it was the passionate quest of George Costakis, a Russian-born Greek who worked as a minor official at the Canadian Embassy in Moscow, to rescue this art from oblivion. In doing so, he has rewritten art history, revealing a scope hitherto unrecognized in what was probably the most radical period in modern art.

The 300 paintings and drawings by 45 artists on display in Ottawa represent only the tip of the legendary Costakis collection, which now comprises about 1,200 works. That, in turn, is only a fraction of what he once possessed. When he emigrated to Greece in 1977, Costakis was forced to leave 80 per cent of his collection in the Soviet Union. By that time, he had amassed the world's largest private holding of Russian art, rivalled only by a few Soviet museums.

Born in 1912, Costakis collected Dutch old masters, Russian silver and carpets as a young man. Not until 1946, after he fell in love with the severe beauty of Olga Rozanova's *Green Stripe* (1917), did he plunge into his pursuit of the modernists, unloading his earlier collections in the process. Not surprisingly, he had been ignorant of the movement before then. Throughout the '20s the avant-garde had fallen gradually out of favor; the official decree of Socialist Realism in 1934 effectively dug its grave. Ironically, the avant-garde artists, many of whom had supported the revolution, were denounced for being out of touch with the masses. One brilliant



El Lissitzky, 'Untitled,' 1919-'20: a break with tradition

propagandist, Gustav Klucis, died in a labor camp in 1944. In such a political climate, even collecting the art was not without its danger. Still, Costakis sought out all living modernists, their relatives and friends. Advised by art historians to concentrate on 10 well-known figures, he instead discovered 60

forgotten ones. Ridiculed by other collectors, he snapped up most of the art cheaply. He obtained one painting by Liubov Popova by replacing it with a piece of plywood: the work had served to cover a window.

Until the First World War, Russia had always been on the receiving end of European culture. But cut off from the West during the war, Russian artists took the lessons of modernism to a new extreme. By purging art of the figurative associations that still clung to European abstraction, they prefigured, to a remarkable degree, the New York school of abstract painting that emerged after the Second World War. Within the always fractious avant-garde, some artists aligned themselves behind Kazimir Malevich, founder of the Suprematist movement. Thought at the time to signal

the end of art, Malevich's paintings of pure black squares, one of which is in the exhibit, are exhilarating icons of a new mysticism. Similarly, the crisp geometric forms and flat planes of black, white and primary colors used by his younger associate, El Lissitzky, the century's greatest innovator in graphic design, represent a radical break with tradition.

The other titan of the period was the Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin, whose iron, glass and wood constructions have survived only through his drawings, which can be seen in the exhibit. Also on display is a rare work from this school, *Oval Hanging Construction* (1920), by Alexandr Rodchenko.

In the beginning, the Bolsheviks encouraged the entry of the avant-garde into politics and everyday life: it was the first and only time that political and artistic revolutionaries have marched arm in arm. During that brief period of harmony, Tatlin, Lissitzky, Rodchenko and others put abstract design to work for the revolution. They created clothing for the masses and posters, and even painted directly on trains and ships to educate an illiterate peasantry. In Klucis' *Radio Orators* (1922), elegant, collapsible platforms built for a Communist congress

Liubov Popova, 'Composition,' 1921: an original style



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in Moscow, the word became both an element of design and a tool for propaganda.

For a time the theatre became the answer to the artists' hopes of reaching people. The exhibit contains a full-scale reconstruction of Liubov Popova's stage set from the Vsevolod Meierkhold's 1922 production of the *Magnanimous Cuckold*. Its open construction, use of raw materials and moving parts helped change the whole direction of stage design.

A remarkably versatile artist who died in 1924 at the age of 35, Popova is the most interesting of all whose stock has recently risen because of the Costakis collection. Costakis defends some of the lesser known artists as if they were his offspring, demanding that they be



Л. ПОПОВА 1922

Popova's costume design for 'Cuckold'

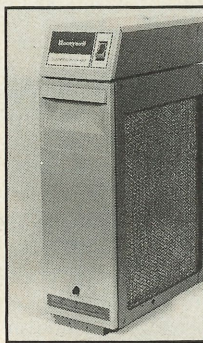
recognized on a par with Lissitzky, Malevich and Tatlin. Yet of those he champions, only Popova created a style to rival the giants in originality, as seen in the dynamic intersecting color planes of her *Composition* (1921). Ivan Kliun's eccentric shapes and full range of cosmetic color lack the rigor found in Malevich's work. Similarly, Klucis' paintings and drawings, which resemble those of Lissitzky, never achieve his vision of boundless space.

In reviving these works, however, Costakis has changed history's view of Soviet art between 1910 and 1923 forever. What once appeared as a few solitary artistic peaks has been broadened to a high plain of communal creativity. His efforts have restored the tragically wasted talents of a lost generation to their rightful heritage. —PHILIP MONK

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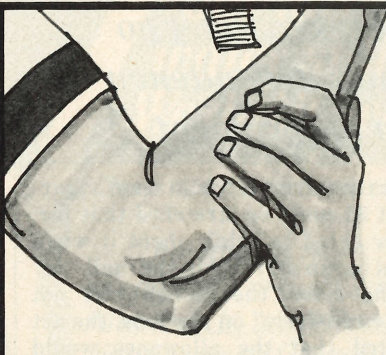
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