

SYNOPSIS:

Constructivism was the last and most influential modern art movement to flourish in Russia in the 20th century. It evolved just as the Bolsheviks came to power in the October Revolution of 1917, and initially it acted as a lightning rod for the hopes and ideas of many of the most advanced Russian artists who supported the revolution's goals. It borrowed ideas from **Cubism**, **Suprematism** and **Futurism**, but at its heart was an entirely new approach to making objects, one which sought to abolish the traditional artistic concern with composition, and replace it with 'construction.' Constructivism called for a careful technical analysis of modern materials, and it was hoped that this investigation would eventually yield ideas that could be put to use in mass production, serving the ends of a modern, Communist society. Ultimately, however, the movement foundered in trying to make the transition from the artist's studio to the factory. Some continued to insist on the value of abstract, analytical work, and the value of art *per se*; these artists had a major impact on spreading Constructivism throughout Europe. Others, meanwhile, pushed on to a new but short-lived and disappointing phase known as **Productivism**, in which artists worked in industry. Russian Constructivism was in decline by the mid 1920s, partly a victim of the Bolshevik regime's increasing hostility to avant-garde art. But it would continue to be an inspiration for artists in the West, sustaining a movement called International Constructivism which flourished in Germany in the 1920s, and whose legacy endured into the 1950s.

Key Points

- Constructivists proposed to replace art's traditional concern with composition with a focus on construction. Objects were to be created not in order to express beauty, or the artist's outlook, or to represent the world, but to carry out a fundamental analysis of the materials and forms of art, one which might lead to the design of

- functional objects. For many Constructivists, this entailed an ethic of "truth to materials," the belief that materials should be employed only in accordance with their capacities, and in such a way that demonstrated the uses to which they could be put.
- Constructivist art often aimed to demonstrate how materials behaved - to ask, for instance, what different properties had materials such as wood, glass, and metal. The form an artwork would take would be dictated by its materials (not the other way around, as is the case in traditional art forms, in which the artist 'transforms' base materials into something very different and beautiful). For some, these inquiries were a means to an end, the goal being the translation of ideas and designs into mass production; for others it was an end in itself, a new and archetypal modern style expressing the dynamism of modern life.
 - The seed of Constructivism was a desire to express the experience of modern life - its dynamism, its new and disorientating qualities of space and time. But also crucial was the desire to develop a new form of art more appropriate to the democratic and modernizing goals of the Russian Revolution. Constructivists were to be constructors of a new society - cultural workers on a par with scientists in their search for solutions to modern problems.

BEGINNINGS

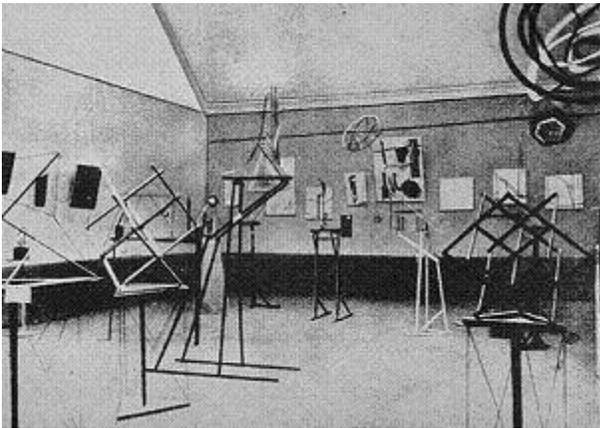
Vladimir Tatlin is often hailed as the father of Constructivism. A contemporary of the Suprematist, Kazimir Malevich, he had collaborated on the preceding Cubo-Futurist movement. But his interests fundamentally shifted during a visit to Paris in 1913, where he saw a series of wooden reliefs by Picasso. Tatlin appreciated that the reliefs were not carved or modeled in a traditional manner but composed in an entirely different way - indeed they could be said to be 'constructed' - put together from pre-formed elements. On his return to Russia, Tatlin began to experiment with the possibilities of three-dimensional relief, and to use new types of material with a view to exploring their potential.

By 1919, both Malevich and Tatlin had achieved some prominence as representatives of different paths for the Russian avant-garde. They came together at "0.10, the Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting" (1919), in which Malevich exhibited Suprematist paintings and Tatlin unveiled his *Corner Counter-reliefs*. The latter were suspended in air across a corner of the room, instead of being attached to the flat surface of a wall, and their abstract forms defied the traditional idea that relief should depict a figure or an event. Instead, the *Reliefs* allowed the viewer to focus on the types of materials used, and how forms were arranged in relation to each other. Although Picasso and the Cubists had already been working with constructions and collage, Tatlin's work was important in emphasizing both the character of the materials used to fabricate the art object, and the fact that the completed artwork was itself a conventional physical object - not something that seemed to offer a window on to a different reality.

However it was not until Tatlin exhibited his model for the *Monument for the Third International* (1919-20) that Constructivism was truly born. More commonly known as Tatlin's Tower, the unusual spiral-shaped building was designed as a government office

building. Planned to rise higher than the Eiffel Tower, this triumphant commemoration of the Russian Revolution was to be at once modern, functional and dynamic. The project proved an inspiration to the artist's contemporaries, who quickly came together to debate its consequences, and hence Constructivism came to life. The First Working Group of Constructivists was established in 1921, and included Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova and others.

Although Constructivism fostered work in the traditional modes of high visual art, such as painting and sculpture, the movement's ambitions to enter mass production also encouraged artists to explore the decorative and applied arts. Hence the Higher Technical Artistic Studios (Vkhutemas) began to train its students in the applied arts, which reawakened interest in textiles and ceramics. In particular, Ilya Chashnik produced special ceramics that featured abstract planar forms, and Stepanova explored textile design, using repeating bold abstract patterns that evoked the virtues of mass production. El Lissitzky and Rodchenko were both well-known for their graphic design and typography, which made use of bold lettering, stark planes of color, and diagonal elements.



CONCEPTS AND STYLES

Constructivism developed side by side with Suprematism, the two major modern art forms to come out of Russia in the 20th century. But unlike Suprematism, whose concerns with form and abstraction often seem tinged with mysticism, Constructivism firmly embraced the new social and cultural developments that grew out of World War I and the October Revolution of 1917. Concerned with the use of 'real materials in real space', the movement sought to use art as a tool for the common good, much in line with the Communist principles of the new Russian regime. Many of the Russian Constructivist works from this period involve projects in architecture, interior and fashion design, ceramics, typography and graphics.

Many of the pioneers in Constructivism had also studied Suprematist ideas, but they increasingly experimented with three-dimensional designs. They also began to attack traditional forms of art, which it was thought Constructivism could supplant: Painting was officially declared "dead" at the 5 x 5 = 25 exhibition, where Alexandra Ekster, Lyubov Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and Alexander Vesnin each

presented five works. Paintings were included, but Popova declared that they should only be considered as designs for eventual constructions. Rodchenko's *Black on Black* series of paintings, however, made a statement. Directly confronting Malevich's *White on White*, which was meant to be the ultimate representation of a new reality, Rodchenko's black paintings announced the end of an era - "Representation is finished; it is time to construct."

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

El Lissitzky was important in spreading Constructivism beyond Russia. In 1922, he co-organized the Dusseldorf Congress of International Productive Artists, with **Hans Richter** and **Theo van Doesburg** of the Dutch group **De Stijl**, and here the International Constructivist movement was officially launched. The artists at the Dusseldorf Congress released a manifesto that claimed art as a "tool of progress," turning Constructivism into a symbol of the modern era. Although the International movement did not highlight functionality, it expanded on the idea of art as object, and used new materials to highlight advances in technology and industry.

Germany became the center of the new movement due to the presence of **El Lissitzky**, who spent time in Berlin working on exhibitions at the Van Diemen Galerie and the Grosse Berliner Ausstellung in the early 1920s. He also collaborated on several publications. **Hans Arp** and **Kurt Schwitters**, were both attracted to the modern, technological qualities of Constructivism despite their involvement in the more anarchic movement **Dada**. Lissitzky's Proun forms also influenced the work of **Laszlo Moholy-Nagy** at the **Bauhaus**, who developed an interest in technology and the machine. With the added presence of **Van Doesburg**, who also came to teach at the **Bauhaus**, the popularity of Constructivism quickly overshadowed **Expressionism** in Germany, and spread throughout Europe.

The movement gained ground in England when **Moholy-Nagy**, **Naum Gabo** and others took refuge in London following the German invasion. Echoes of Constructivism came to be seen in modern sculpture, even in the work of **Henry Moore**, who was also inspired by natural forms. The movement also had an impact in the United States, where the sculptor **George Rickey** became the first to write a comprehensive guide to Constructivism, in 1967. Today, the legacy of Russian Constructivism flourishes in the graphic arts and advertising. Street artists, such as **Shepard Fairey**, have also gained recognition by employing the propagandistic style of the Russian Constructivists in their work.

QUOTATIONS

"The investigation of material volume and construction made it possible for us in 1918, in an artistic form, to begin to combine materials like iron and glass, the materials of modern Classicism, comparable in their severity with the marble of antiquity. In this way, an opportunity emerges of uniting purely artistic forms with utilitarian intentions.... The results of this are models which stimulate us to inventions in our work of creating a new world, and which call upon the producers to exercise controls over the forms encountered in our everyday life."

-Vladimir Tatlin

"We hold that the fundamental features of the present age is the triumph of the constructive method.... Every organized work - whether it be a house, a poem, or a picture - is an object directed toward a particular end, which is calculated not to turn people away from life, but to summon them to make their contribution toward life's organization."

-El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenberg



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Key Artists:



Naum Gabo

Naum Gabo was a Russian sculptor associated with the Constructivist movement, and was a pioneer in Kinetic sculpture. Gabo was a key avant-gardist in post-revolutionary Russia, and later played an influential role in the De Stijl and Bauhaus schools of art.



El Lissitzky

El Lissitzky was a Russian avant-garde painter, photographer, architect and designer. Along with his mentor Kazimir Malevich, Lissitzky founded Suprematism. His art often employed the use of clean lines and simple geometric forms, and expressed a fascination with Jewish culture. Lissitzky was also a major influence on the Bauhaus school of artists and Constructivism.



Laszlo Moholy-Nagy

Laszlo Moholy-Nagy was a Hungarian painter, photographer and teacher at the Bauhaus School. Moholy-Nagy was influential in promoting the Bauhaus's multi- and mixed-media approaches to art, advocating for the integration of technological and industrial design elements.



Lyubov Popova

Lyubov Popova was an eminent Russian avant-garde artist, painter, and designer. Her work was

important for several modern styles, including Cubism, Suprematism, and Constructivism.



Alexander Rodchenko

Aleksander Rodchenko was a Russian artist, sculptor, photographer, and graphic designer. Concerned with the need for analytical-documentary photo series, he often shot his subjects from odd angles-usually high above or below-to shock the viewer and to postpone recognition. He was one of the founders of constructivism and Russian design; he was married to the artist Varvara Stepanova.



Varvara Stepanova

Varvara Stepanova was the wife of Alexander Rodchenko. An artist herself, she devoted her life to the collaboration with her famous husband. Rodchenko's experimentation with geometry and abstraction was formative for her own pursuits in painting and design.



Vladimir Tatlin

Yaacov Agam is an Israeli sculptor and experimental artist best known for his contributions to optical and kinetic art. Agam's work is usually abstract, kinetic art, with movement, viewer participation and frequent use of light and sound. His works are placed in many public places. He is also known for a type of print known as an Agamograph, which uses lenticular printing.

Major Works:



Title: Corner Counter-Relief

Artist: Vladimir Tatlin

Description: Tatlin's *Counter-Reliefs* were a vital part of his developing ideas, and they

form a bridge between the influence of Cubism on his work, and the birth of Constructivism. It is typical of this development that *Corner Counter-Relief* conforms neither to the conventional format of painting or sculpture, because Constructivism would aspire to display those old fashioned forms. However, its placement in the corner of a room also echoed the traditional site of religious icons in a pious Russian household - hence Tatlin suggests that modernity and experiment should be Russia's new gods. The idea for the series may have come from the Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture (1912), a volume by the Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni, in which he calls on sculptors, "Let's split open our figures and place the environment inside them." The way in which the object spans the corner changes the space of the room, and establishes a unique relationship to the surrounding environment. The diagonal wires are evocative of a musical instrument, and they were perhaps inspired by Tatlin's experience as a musical instrument maker.

Year: 1914

Materials: Iron, copper, wood and strings

Collection: State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



Title: Design for the Monument to the Third International

Artist: Vladimir Tatlin

Description: *Monument to the Third International*, also sometimes known simply as Tatlin's Tower, is the artist's most famous work, as well as the most important spur to the formation of the Constructivist movement. The Tower, which was never fully realized, was intended to act as a fully functional conference space and propaganda center for the Communist Third International, or Comintern. Its steel spiral frame was to stand at 1,300 feet, making it the tallest structure in the world at the time - taller, and more functional—and therefore more beautiful by Constructivist standards—than the Eiffel Tower. There were to be three glass units, a cube, cylinder and cone, which would have different spaces for meetings, and these would rotate once per year, month, and day, respectively. For Tatlin, steel and glass were the essential materials of modern construction. They symbolized industry, technology and the machine age, and the constant motion of the geometrically shaped units embodied the dynamism of modernity. Although the tower was commissioned as a monument to revolution, and although it was given considerable prominence by the Bolshevik regime, it was never built, and it has continued to be an emblem of failed utopian aspirations for many generations of artists since.

Year: 1919-1920

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Title: Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color

Artist: Aleksandr Rodchenko

Description: Traditionally, color is used in art to describe the appearance of a particular object, or else to lend associations (the blue traditionally used to depict the Virgin Mary's robes in Renaissance paintings carried symbolic meanings). But Rodchenko's triptych focuses only on the material character of color, and it is considered the first artwork to do so. Here, red, blue, and yellow are used neither to describe an object nor to elicit certain associations; instead they are presented almost as a palette from which the artist can work. This is typical of the Constructivist attitude to materials, which was focused not on transforming them into art but on utilizing their properties in the most honest and effective ways possible. The triptych might be read as a rejection of the mysticism that seemed to tinge some work by Rodchenko's Suprematist contemporary, Kazimir Malevich. Rodchenko wrote of it, in 1921, "I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, yellow. I affirmed: this is the end of painting. These are the primary colors. Every plane is a discrete plane and there will be no more representation."

Year: 1921

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: The Rodchenko and Stepanova Archive, Moscow



Title: Textile Design

Artist: Lyubov Popova

Description: Popova first emerged as an Impressionist painter, but she was later drawn into Constructivist and Suprematist circles. By 1921 she had abandoned painting to pursue the Constructivist ambition to leave behind traditional art forms and to make work for mass production. She concentrated on textile design, such as in this work, Popova uses repeating geometric patterns which were thought more appropriate to modern life and mass production than the floral designs that had previously been popular for such textiles. The intersecting circles and spacing of the stripes add tension and movement within the pattern, while also visually creating the effect of different textures. Popova's prominence within Constructivism is indicative of the significant role played by women in driving the movement's concerns; other avant-garde movements of the period were

dominated by men.

Year: c. 1924

Materials: Pencil and ink on paper

Collection: Private collection



Title: Constructed Head No. 2

Artist: Naum Gabo

Description: Gabo was never fully accepted into the Russian Constructivist circle due to his continuing devotion to the category of art, and his disinterest in making utilitarian objects. His devotion to modernity, however, is reflected in his choice of materials, which often lent his forms the quality of a machine. Although this *Head* is made from iron, its composition is remarkably similar to Picasso's sculptured heads of his mistress, Fernande. It also betrays a more traditional approach to composition and form than that pursued by most Constructivists, since it uses materials to depict a figure, rather than using them to reveal the qualities of the materials themselves. In Gabo's work, the materials are merely a vehicle; their presence recedes as we begin to imagine the object they depict. Gabo was ultimately more influential outside Russia, bringing Constructivist ideas to Germany, Britain and, later, the United States.

Year: originally conceived c. 1916

Materials: Galvanized iron

Collection: Private collection



Title: Proun Room

Artist: El Lissitzky

Description: Lissitzky was in many respects closer to the Suprematist movement than to Constructivism, yet he reflects the ambitions of the latter by introducing more political ambitions into the abstract and formal concerns of Suprematism. He was also important in exporting Constructivist ideas to Germany. This room was constructed at the Grosse Berliner Ausstellung, where he assisted with the design of the exhibition areas. It marks the first time he had expanded ideas from painting into three dimensions. This is among a series of works from the early 1920s that Lissitzky entitled Prouns, an acronym for the Russian words "Project for the Affirmation of the New". Although the elements of this

Proun work are hung flatly against the wall, the contrast of light and dark, as well as the combination of different materials, give the illusion of objects floating in space. The geometric forms and their dynamic arrangement evoked the modern transformations that Russian society was then undergoing, and which the artists wished to celebrate. Installed on all sides of a room, Lissitzky's environment conveys the idea of Constructivism as a way of life, and the hope that these geometric figures might soon inform the everyday objects that surrounds us.

Year: 1923

Materials:

Collection: