



QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Alexander Rodchenko is perhaps the most important avant-garde artist to have put his art in the service of political revolution. In this regard his career is a model of the clash between modern art and radical politics. He emerged as a fairly conventional painter, but his encounters with **Russian Futurists** propelled him to become an influential founder of the **Constructivist** movement. And his commitment to the cause of the Russian Revolution subsequently encouraged him to abandon first painting, and then fine art in its entirety, and to instead put his skills in the service of industry and the state, designing everything from advertising to book covers. His life's work was a ceaseless experiment with an extraordinary array of media, from painting and sculpture to graphic design and photography. Later in his career, however, the increasingly repressive policies targeted against modern artists in Russia led him to return to painting.

Key Ideas

- Rodchenko's art and thought moved extremely rapidly in the 1910s. He began as an aesthete, inspired by **Art Nouveau** artists such as **Aubrey Beardsley**. He later became a **Futurist**. He digested the work of **Vladimir Tatlin**, and the **Suprematism** of **Kazimir Malevich**. By the decade's end he was pioneering **Constructivism**. This experimental inquiry into the elements of pictorial and sculptural art produced purely abstract artworks which separate out the components of each image - line, form, space, color, surface, texture, and the work's physical support. Constructivism encouraged a new focus on the tangible and material aspect of art, and its experimental spirit was encouraged by a belief that art had to match the revolutionary transformations then taking place in Russian politics and society.
- Rodchenko's commitment to the values of the Revolution encouraged him to abandon painting in 1921. He embraced a more functional view of art and of the artist, and

he began a collaboration with the poet **Mayakovsky** on a series of advertising campaigns. Their work not only introduced modern design into Russian advertising, but it attempted to sell the values of the Revolution along with the products being promoted. This particular union of modern design, politics, and commerce has occasionally inspired advertisers in the West since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

- Photography was important to Rodchenko in the 1920s in his attempt to find new media more appropriate to his goal of serving the revolution. He first viewed it as a source of pre-existing imagery, using it in montages of pictures and text, but later he began to take pictures himself, and evolved an aesthetic of unconventional angles, abruptly cropped compositions, and stark contrasts of light and shadow. His work in both photo-montage and photography ultimately made an important contribution to European photography in the 1920s.

DETAILED VIEW:

Childhood

Alexander Rodchenko was born in Saint Petersburg, Russia to a working class family. His father, Mikhail Rodchenko, was a theater props manager, and his mother, Olga, a washerwoman. The family's social status did not provide much opportunity for the artistic education of talented Alexander. It is still unclear what training (if any) Rodchenko might have acquired as a child. The family moved to the city of Kazan in 1905. Two years later, Mikhail passed away, but they were able to allocate some of the family's scarce funds for Alexander's education.

Early Training

Rodchenko enrolled in the Kazan School of Art, where he studied from 1910 to 1914 under Nikolai Feshin and Georgii Medvedev. The young artist quickly absorbed the basic principles of the academic training, earning high praise from his instructors. In 1914, he met **Varvara Stepanova**, a fellow student. They became life-long partners and artistic collaborators.

Kazan proved to be too small and stifling for Rodchenko's emerging vision. He and Stepanova journeyed to Moscow in 1915 to acquire more meaningful exposure to the nascent Russian modernism, permanently settling there in 1916. Rodchenko attended the Stroganov Institute, where he studied drawing, painting and art history.

In Moscow, Rodchenko was influenced by the key figures of the Russian avant-garde movement, namely **Vladimir Tatlin** and **Kasimir Malevich**. He executed his first abstract drawing, reminiscent of Malevich's **Suprematist** compositions, in 1915. But it was not only the avant-garde artistic milieu that influenced him. Through his acquaintances with liberal thinkers, such as the **Futurists David Burliuk** and **Wassily Kamensky**, Rodchenko found himself in the heart of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

Rodchenko's involvement with the Bolshevik cause was both ideological and aesthetic. As a working class young man, he witnessed firsthand the social injustice of Tsarist Russia. Rodchenko deeply believed in the power of art as a driving force of social

transformation, as is detailed in many of his letters and diaries, which were only recently translated into English. Rodchenko embraced the emerging aesthetics of Russian Constructivism, becoming a leading member of the group.

Rodchenko's early years demonstrated his artistic talent and quest for innovation. From 1917 to 1918, he was mainly experimenting with flat geometric compositions. Then, in 1919, he created an entirely abstract series of *Black on Black* paintings, which might be read as a response to the Spiritualism of Malevich's *Black Square* (1915). While Malevich's work seemed to herald the end of painting, it also touted a spiritualism which Rodchenko rejected. The *Black on Black* paintings, similarly reductive, though not as extreme as the *Black Square*, emphasized instead the material qualities of picture-making.

In the early years of the Soviet Republic, Rodchenko, alongside his friend and colleague Wassily Kandinsky, was actively engaged in the government reform of art collections and education. In 1917, he became secretary of the Professional Union of Artist-Painters, joining the Izo (Otdel Izobrazitel'nykh Iskusstv or the Section of Visual Arts), as one of the presiding officials the following year.



In 1920, he was appointed the Director of Museum Bureau and Purchasing Fund, a newly created agency in charge of the immense art collections transferred by the Bolsheviks from the palaces of the rich into the public domain. During his tenure, Rodchenko acquired 1,926 works of modern and contemporary art by 415 artists and established thirty public museums in the Russian provinces.

Mature Period

While organizing the provincial museums, Rodchenko trained artists to serve the Communist state at the Higher Technical Artistic Studios. He taught the same principles that shaped his own artistic discourse: the rejection of the illusory representation as an outdated form hindered by the capitalist visual agenda; the denunciation of painting as a domineering visual genre, preferring design, which challenged the notion of a work of art as a unique commodity; and, even more radically, the promotion of the idea of an artist as an engineer, a key creative force at the service of the masses.

In 1921, Rodchenko joined the **Productivist** movement, a group of artists devoted to the idea of incorporating artistic forms into the daily lives of common people. As a member of the group, Rodchenko designed notable utilitarian objects, including furniture, various household items and textile patterns. More importantly, he became involved in bringing Constructivist forms into the mass visual propaganda of the Bolsheviks. His posters, such as *Books* (1923), became an icon of the early Soviet state and its artistic fervor. These works are still considered a pinnacle of modern graphic design today.

The ideas of Wassily Kandinsky may have been an important influence on Rodchenko in the early Soviet years, since the two were closely associated. But while Kandinsky was interested in the expressive possibilities of art, Rodchenko was increasingly interested in its potential as a laboratory for design and construction. This difference is reflected in his interest in line as an elemental component of painting. However, his final statements in painting returned to the issue of color: in 1921 he exhibited a groundbreaking triptych *Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color* comprised of purely monochrome panels of those colors.

In 1921 Rodchenko took a decisive, although temporary, break from painting. Instead, he concentrated on creating 3-D models of design objects, architectural sketches and photography. He also created sets for film and theatre, as well as designing furniture and clothes. From 1923 to 1925, he collaborated with the great avant-garde poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, illustrating some of his books and magazines for the progressive Soviet Writers, such as *LEF* and *NOVYI LEF*.

It was through photography that Rodchenko enjoyed the most success in the 1920s. Employed as a correspondent for a number of Soviet newspapers and magazines, his photographs were exhibited all over the world. He was universally praised for his avant-garde compositions and experimental approach to focus and contrast in his photographs.

Late Years and Death

By the middle of the 1930s, Rodchenko fell out favor with the Communist Party. The regime's visual ideology was completely transformed when Joseph Stalin came to power. The free-spirited avant-garde aesthetic was now actively suppressed by the state. Rodchenko and his wife were lucky not to perish in Stalin's Great Purges that swept through the Soviet Union and exterminated many individuals who came to prominence at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution. With Social Realism becoming the official art of the U.S.S.R., Rodchenko's paintings and designs were openly condemned by the authorities for so-called "formalism".

As such, Rodchenko turned to photojournalism. His photographic images epitomized the era of High Stalinism by depicting lavish parades, immense industrial undertakings and the decisive transformation of agriculture. Naturally, Rodchenko was explicitly forbidden to capture the horrendous human toll of this sweeping modernization. In the 1940s he returned to painting, executing a number of powerful abstract expressionist compositions. These works, however, were never to be seen by his contemporaries, for they openly contradicted the officially sanctioned aesthetics. He continued his work as a photographer throughout the Stalin years, until his death in 1956.

Legacy

As a key figure of the Russian modernist movement, the art of Alexander Rodchenko helped redefine three key visual genres of modernism: painting, photography and graphic design. In his paintings the artist further explored and expanded the essential vocabulary of an abstract composition. His series of purely abstract proto-monochrome paintings were influential to such artists as Ad Reinhardt and the Minimalists of the 1960s. In the field of photography, he established unprecedented compositional paradigms, which in many ways still define the entire notion of the modern photographic art. Rodchenko's involvement with Bolshevik cause further propelled his appreciation in the leftist circles of the American avant-garde.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES:

Below are Alexander Rodchenko's major influences, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 Wassily Kandinsky	 Vladimir Mayakovsky	 Cubism
 Aubrey Beardsley	 David Burliuk	 Futurism
 Vladimir Tatlin	 Lyubov Popova	 Suprematism
 Kazimir Malevich	 Vasily Kamensky	 Productivism

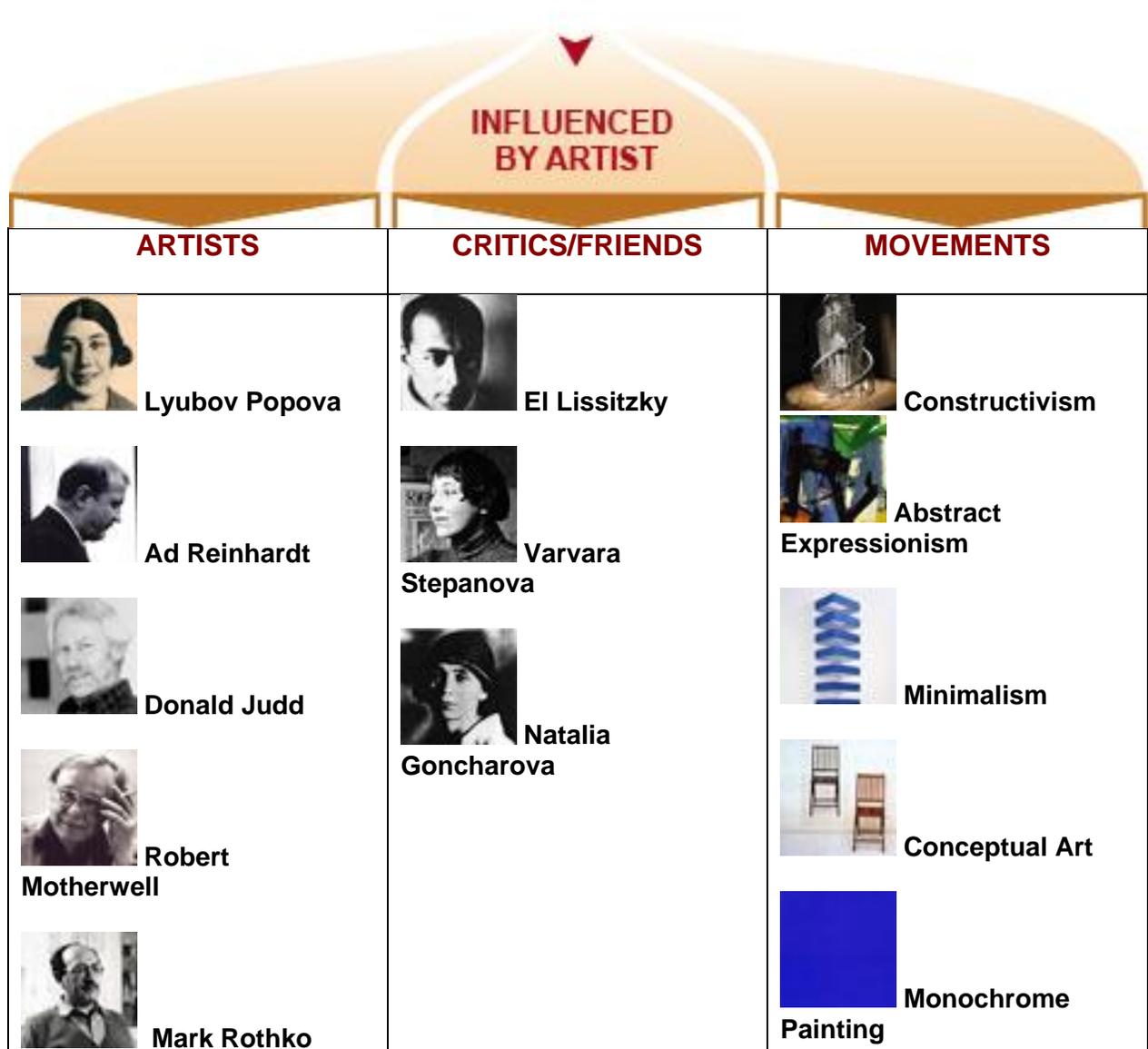
INFLUENCES
ON ARTIST





Alexander Mikhailovich Rodchenko

Years Worked: 1915 – 1956



Quotes

"In order to educate man to a new longing, everyday familiar objects must be shown to him with totally unexpected perspectives and in unexpected situations. New objects

should be depicted from different sides in order to provide a complete impression of the object"

"Future is our only objective."

"We had visions of a new world, industry, technology and science. We simultaneously invented and changed the world around us. We authored new notions of beauty and redefined art itself."

"I am convinced that representation would never be back the way it was and that non-representation will die out in its own turn, paving the way for something entirely new, the beginning of which I am feeling right now."

"One has to take several different shots of a subject, from different points of view and in different situations, as if one examined it in the round rather than looked through the same key-hole again and again."

"I want to take some quite incredible photographs that have never been taken before... pictures which are simple and complex at the same time, which will amaze and overwhelm people ... I must achieve this so that photography can begin to be considered a form of art."



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