

REVOLUTION IN ART

Revolution in Art

100 years after the October Revolution

01/10-03/12/2017

INTRODUCTION: 1917. REVOLUTION IN ART

Russian art in the 1910s and 1920s gave humanity of the most radical *avant-garde* movements. However, the works and groups of this Russian *avant-garde* would not have been recognised as such, without the socio-historic context in which the artists lived and produced their works – from feudalism to the industrial crisis and the demands made by workers and peasants and the 1905-1907 Revolution, from WWI to the October Revolution and the vision of international revolution and, finally, from the Civil War to the ultimate prevalence of the Bolshevik Party.

Running parallel to historical events, radical developments in the exact sciences, technological achievements and social changes at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century led artists in search of theories of art that would change the fragmentary approach to visible reality. The world was to be perceived as an integral whole of organic changes that could be comprehended through the complementary combination of scientific, ideological and aesthetic experimentation.

Russian *avant-garde* artists produced their best works amidst social hostility, with a revolutionary mentality, a vision, a spirit of community and boldness. Until 1917 the relationship of Russian *avant-garde* artists with the authorities used to be heretic and reactive. The anti-authoritarian messages contained in manifests, the painted faces of artists and their eccentric attire went hand-in-hand with the ambient atmosphere of continuous strikes and revolutionary mobilisation, demonstrations and fliers of innumerable university students, peasants and political group members. However, faith in collective action and a revolutionary attitude during the first years after October 1917 led to a climate of unprecedented cooperation between those in power and the artists. Artistic organisations were established and schools implementing radical educational methods, along with the first contemporary art museums in the world.

In fact, in the first two decades of the 20th century, art in Russia closely follows socio-political developments and often intervened in a substantial and novel manner. From 1900 up to and including the 1920s, artists never stopped declaring their social role. Cubofuturists called for solidarity among artists and for combining art forms; Suprematists talked about the invisible aspect of life and the power of artists to perceive it and disseminate it; Constructivists changed the relationship people had with objects for every-day use.

Liubov Popova used collages and sawdust to paint the bleakest moments of WWI. Kazimir Malevich delivered lectures on Suprematism and offered the proceeds from admission tickets to the battle against hunger during the Civil War; Olga Rozanova painted monochromatic green paintings, since there were no other paints to be found in the market, and Alexander Rodchenko renounced painting and called himself a constructivist at a time when the war cost millions of lives and the word ‘artist’ sounded outdated. Vladimir Tatlin and Gustav Klucis dedicated their work to the vision of the revolution and to creating a novel aesthetics for everyday life.

The digital exhibition ‘1917: Art in the Revolution/Revolution in Art’ records the development of visual arts in Russia through the radical work of artists, groups and movements in the period from 1900 to 1923 in relation to historical developments at the time.

Along the historical events that marked global 20th century history, the nodal point being the year 1917, one can trace, through archival photographs and images of art works, the evolution of Art

from 1900 up to 1923, the new aesthetics and the efforts artists made to change people's daily lives through graphic arts and industrial design.

INFORMATION MATERIAL ON THE EXHIBITION VIDEOS

The videos present works by the following artists: Elena Guro, Boris Ender, Ksenija Ender, Karl loganson, Ivan Kliun, Gustav Klucis, Mikhail Larionov, El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, Mikhail Matyushin, Grigorii Miller, Alexei Morgunov, Solomon Nikritin, Nadezhda Udaltsova, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, Alexander Rodchenko, Ilya Chashnik.

Projection #1: God Save the Tsar

Early in the 20th century, popular demand for social changes started spreading through all strata of Russian society, due to the lack of labour laws and the continuing feudalism in rural economy.

These were the elements that composed the state of the country:

Industrial development; emergence of a new low socio-economic class, that of industrial workers; along with peasants (80% of provincial population), they made up the overwhelming majority of the Russian population.

Industrial crisis, 1890; need for technological modernisation; numerous factories closed down. In 1891 starvation ruled major urban centres.

Monopolistic economic policy by Nikolai II; the economy of the country was controlled by economic trusts.

Construction of the railroad network, which connected the remote territories of the Russian vastness.

Russo-Japanese war, 1904-1905: Following the end of the Sino-Japanese war, aspiring to acquire a sphere of influence in the Far East, Russia signed an agreement with China to rent Port Arthur, provided it would be transformed into a naval base. Japan, supported by the USA, attacked the Russian fleet, which retreated under Admiral Kuropatkin. Serious consequences for the Russian economy; discontent among all social strata.

The Court enacted suffrage legislation.

Strikes and conflicts continued up to 1914 (WWI).

Sound: archival recordings - the voice of Nikolai II; military marches and the hymn of Imperial Russia.

Projection #2: The 1905-07 Revolution

Increasing discontent among the populace and dissemination of socialistic ideals led to workers' strikes and labour actions, as well as demonstration by the people in Saint Petersburg, which had a tragic end when the army intervened on 9 (22) January 1905, a day remembered as 'Bloody Sunday'. After continuous uprisings and rebellions between 1905 and 1907, Tsar Nikolai II appointed Pyotr Stolypin as Prime Minister of Russia; during his term in office (1907-1911) the latter attempted to follow a policy that was initially liberal, so as to serve the demands by the rising bourgeois class, yet also authoritarian to ensure social domination of the monarchy.

Events:

Demonstration of the striking workers of Putilov Ironworks in Petersburg, outside the Winter Palace that was drowned in blood on 9 January 1905 (Bloody Sunday).

Waves of strikes in the provinces urged by the Bolsheviks; demonstrations throughout the country by peasants asking that land be given to them.

Battleship Potemkin: Crew rebellion against their officers and general strike in Odessa.

Trade Unions established. Political Parties and Movements created.

October 1905: Universal strike throughout Russia (15 October). Nikolai II appoints a committee to enact liberal constitutional changes. He conceded legislative power to the Duma, which from then one would ratify or reject imperial government laws.

Conflicts and continuing strikes throughout the country; Assassinations of Bolshevik leaders Bauman and Afanassiev; Jewish pogrom; Second armed revolution in December 1905; Barricades in Moscow.

Strikes and conflicts continued up to 1914 (WWI).

Sound: archival recordings of Russian revolutionary songs of the time.

Projection #3: From Symbolism to Cubofuturism

In the beginning of the 20th century, Moscow was in direct contact with Paris, the centre of artistic developments. Symbolism and post-impressionistic trends prevailed in Europe and influenced young Russian artists. Intense fauvist colours, Gauguin's primitivism, the influence of Cézanne and Matisse prepared Russian artists for the transition towards *avant garde* aesthetics. Russian artists Popova, Morgunov, Lentulov, Kliun, Udaltsova, Exter Rozanova, etc. travelled to Paris in the 1912-1916 period and drew on French cubism (shattering forms, concurrent view of an objects from different viewpoints, geometrisation and static forms). They also depicted movement at successive instances simultaneously in their compositions, a characteristic feature of Italian futurism, thus creating the native 'Cubo-Futurism' movement. 'Russian Futurism' or 'Cubo-Futurism' does not refer only to painting but includes other art forms.

Artists: Kazimir Malevich, Elena Guro, Ivan Kliun, Zinaida Serebriakova, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Nadezhda Udaltsova, Alexei Morgunov

Projection #4: Universal War

WWI struck a mighty economic and social blow against Russia, as 80% of light and heavy industry turned into war industry. Inflation and food shortages were on the rise. When Tsar Nikolai II took over as supreme commander, usurpers and rogues, like Rasputin, took over the Palace. The October 1917 Revolution found Russia in the front lines of war. In essence, the Russian army retreated from WWI when the Bolsheviks established their power in 1918, a year that later marked the onset of the Civil War in Russia, also known as the conflict of the Reds and the Whites.

The hand-made book 'Universal War' comprises two printed pages containing twelve poems and an introductory text by futurist poet Aleksei Kruchenykh as well as eleven non-objective colour collages made of fabric and paper by Kruchenykh himself in cooperation with painter Olga Rozanova. 100 copies of the book were constructed in 1916, each one unique. Kruchenykh notes in his introduction that "these collages were born from the same inspiration that gave birth to surrealist language; in other words, from liberating creation of redundant luxuries. Surreal painting started prevailing. Surrealist poetry extended towards surreal painting."

The theme of the poems and collages is the War, obviously influenced by the atmosphere of WWI. These are some of collage titles: "Battle of the Futurist and the Ocean", "Battle between Mars and Scorpio", "Explosion of a Trunk", "Treason", "Destruction of the Gardens", "The Battle of India and Europe", "Heavy Artillery", "Germany in the Dust", "Military Regime". In his poetry, Kruchenykh uses metaphysical numerology theories developed by futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov, who had foreseen that a world war would break out in the year 1985.

Projections #5-9: The 1917 Revolution

23 February (8 March) 1917: Major demonstrations on International Women's Day. Thousands participated in protest marches lasting three days. Officers, after soldiers refused to do so, started shooting at protesters on the third day. The army joined the protesters.

Elections. Monarchy collapsed. Provisional Government.

July 1917: Rioting and revolt of soldiers, supported by the Bolsheviks. The reason was the bad conditions of the Russian army at the war front. A state of emergency was declared.

Lenin returns to Petrograd from his self-exile in Zurich. Revolutionary Councils were established.

25 October (7 November) 1917: Winter Palace conquest. The Tsar's family was arrested. Kerensky escaped. Power to the Bolshevik Party, which had come second at the elections (the first being the coalition of Revolutionaries-Communists and Mensheviks). Declaration of the 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat'.

The Soviet State was organised after the first two Decrees by Lenin:

- a) on Peace: this addresses countries abroad and declares that 'a labour and peasant government is established in Russia, as a result of the 24-25 October 1917 Revolution; its basic instrument is the soviets (councils) of workers', peasants' and soldiers' delegates". The decree invited all countries to start, on a free and democratic basis, bipartite cooperation and diplomatic cooperation. Actually, the USSR was recognised by the West only after 1924.
- b) on Land: personal ownership of land was abolished and all landed estates were placed at the disposal of local soviets.

Projection #5: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (photomontage by Gustav Klucis)

Projection #6: The Protagonists of the Revolution (all politicians involved and their description)

Projection #7: Avant-Garde in Art (Revolution in Art where form determines the content and not the opposite as it was common in previous times)

Projection #8: Sergei Eisenstein (scenes from his films "Potemkin" and "October")

Projection # 9: Events

1. Until 1917, the Russian Empire was a vast country occupying 1/6 of the globe, with a population of 170 million, of which 85% were peasants and 75% illiterate. Besides the Russians, people living in the Empire represented more than 100 peoples.

2. The Russian Empire had one of the largest armies in the world; the army was the basis of the Tsar's imperial power.

03. On 1 August 1914, the Russian Empire entered WWI on the side of Entente.

04. The Russian army suffered major losses in WWI with more than 2 million fatalities, 5 million injured and 2.5 million prisoners of war.

05. In the beginning of 1917 a food crisis broke out, since peasants were mobilised to join the armed forces and villages were deserted. Long lines of people stood waiting to get bread in the cities.

06. At the end of February 1917 a general strike broke out in Petrograd (Petersburg). Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to protest.

07. The police and the troops were ordered to shoot at the protesters, but the soldiers refused to follow orders and joined the revolutionary masses. This is how the February 1917 Revolution started.

08. Representatives of the Duma (Parliament) called an extraordinary session to work on an action plan for forming a new government.

09. Elections were also organised for workers' and soldiers' deputies for the Soviet (Council) of Petrograd (Petersburg), which consequently became the *de facto* instrument of the revolutionary authority in the country.

10. The rebellious populace occupied police stations, destroyed the symbols of Tsarist power and demanded that the monarchy be overturned.

11. On 2 March 1917, Emperor Nikolai II abdicated in favour of his brother, Michael. On 3 March Michael refused to accept the throne. The February Revolution was successful.

12. The rebels freed prisoners.

13. Funeral for the victims of the Revolution.

14. May Day celebration in Petrograd (Petersburg).

15. The Provisional Government announced that the war against Germany and its Allies would continue until final victory, but the attack at the front failed. The soldiers refused to obey the orders of their superiors.

16. Demonstrations in Petrograd against the war and the provisional government. On 3 July the protest was dissolved with firearms.

17. The Bolsheviks distribute arms to the workers and organised the Red Guard to defend the revolution.

18. The generals prepared a coup and established a military dictatorship.

19. The Bolsheviks gained the support of the people promoting slogans like "Peace to the peoples", "Land to the peasants", "Factories to the workers" and activating the army in villages and provincial territories.

20. The war front was split. Soldiers of the Russian army fraternised with soldier of the German army.

21. In the autumn the Bolsheviks were ready for armed conquest of power. The Bolsheviks' General Staff.

22. Defenders of the Winter Palace, the seat of the Provisional Government.

23. 25-26 October. The Bolsheviks occupied all strategic sites in Petrograd and announced that the Provisional Government was no more. Power passed to the hands of the Soviets. At the 2nd Congress of the Soviets, a new government was formed, namely the Council of the Soviets, headed by Lenin.

24. The Soviet Government published the "Decree on Peace" and launched peace negotiations with Germany, urging all countries involved in the war to follow suit.

25. The countries of the Entente refused to participate in the peace negotiations and on the pretext of continued military operations sent troops to Russia.
26. Supported by the countries of the Entente, 'White' (counter-revolutionary) troops were formed, aiming at overturning the power of the Soviets. Civil War broke out (1917-1922).
27. In March 1918, the Soviet Government transferred the capital from Petersburg (Petrograd) to Moscow.
28. In July 1918, Nikolai II and his family were executed in Yekaterinburg, where they had been under house arrest.
29. Under Trotsky's leadership, the Bolsheviks created the Red Army for the armed defence of Soviet power.
30. Following the attempt to assassinate Lenin and other leaders, the Bolsheviks announced the onset of the Red Terror against counter-revolutionaries and the Cheka (Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution) and the Secret Police were established. The Civil War became merciless and bloody.
31. 'White' Terror. Red Army soldiers were executed.
32. Serious shortage of food and starvation in urban centres.
33. Attack by the Red Cavalry.
34. Villages burned in Siberia.
35. White Army Cavalry.
36. The battles of 1919.
37. Evacuation of the remaining White Army from Crimea, 1920.
38. The Bolsheviks were the victors of the Civil War and invited fighters to return to peaceful labour.
39. In March 1919 the first Comintern Congress (Communist International) was held in Moscow.

Sound: archival recording of revolutionary songs; voices of Vladimir Lenin, Leo Trotsky, Vladimir Mayakovski, David Burliuk and Aleksei Kruchenykh.

Projections 6 & 9: Inspired by the film "Tsar to Lenin" by Herman Axelbank, 1937.

Projection #10: Art in the Years of the Civil War

Solomon Nikritin recorded his memories of Civil War violence and L. Lissitzky created a propaganda poster, in which, among geometric forms and colours, he wrote the slogan: "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge". Liubov Popova turned the photographs of the Tsar and other members of the previous Russian Aristocracy upside down to show that now it is the people that rule the country.

Projection #11: The Protagonists of the Avant-Garde

Liubov Popova, Nadezhda Udaltsova, Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, Vladimir Tatlin, Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Olga Rozanova, Vladimir Mayakovski, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, etc.

Projection #12: Monument to the 3rd International

After 1917, artist Vladimir Tatlin turned to architectural design; this culminated in the year 1919 when he designed a 400 m glass and steel building to house the Communist International (Cominter). Three levels of metal and glass with electric lifts, heating systems, projection equipment and telephone and radio transmitters would rotate at different speeds each: the first one would be in the shape of a cube (rotation in 365 days), the second one in the form of a pyramide (rotation in 30 days) and the third one in the form of a cylinder (rotation in 24 hours). These premises would house various services of the Communist International, from meeting offices and Press Rooms to a radio station. The building, which, for technical purposes, was never built, was titled by Tatlin himself as "Monument to the Third International". According to critic Nikolai Punin (1921), "the basic idea for this monument was moulded on the principles of organic composition, which ruled architecture, sculpture and painting, thus leading to a new type of monumental constructions combining a purely creative with a useful form".

Projection #13: The Freedom of Art

In the first years of the Revolution, absolute freedom of speech and art were encouraged. The first Commissar for Culture and Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky initially approached art and education as issues of free, creative thought. He said that artists and faculty members should seek out and apply practices that follow experimental methods. "Diversity is what will show us the path to improvement," Lunacharskii had remarked in 1918.

Projection #14: Art in Service of the Revolution

In 1917 Anatoli Lunacharsky was appointed as People's Commissary of Education. At the initiative of Osip Brik, an Artists' Committee for voluntary contribution to Revolutionary propaganda was established, with the participation of numerous Russian avant garde artists. The Bolshevik policy counted on the role of the visual arts in serving the goals of the Revolution so that radical change to the social status quo could be achieved. The School of Visual Arts (IZO) of the People's Commissariat of Education was established, under the directorship of artist David Sterenberg and various artists were appointed as directors of IZO sub-directorates and branches. Suprematism and Constructivism theories were disseminated through fine art studies and the decoration of public spaces. Fine art schools were founded in numerous Russian provincial towns. A multitude of aesthetic theories and artistic movements emerged. The aim was for art to permeate everyday life.

The Constructivism Movement: an attempt to implement a plan for creating new life conditions with the help of a novel aesthetic based on simple, rational and functional forms and structures. Materialism versus idealism; the union of art with life; Art had to meet social needs; to be functional and to express a new perception of art works, which would be aligned with the new ideological perceptions of the communist system; Development of graphic arts.

Projection #15: Freedom of Form

According to artist Kazimir Malevich, in order to depict the movement of a form, the form had to transform itself and become organic. So, the black square develops into an isosceles cross, which, in turn, transforms its sides into rotating axes forming a circle. According to Malevich, the square, the cross and the circle are the basic geometric forms that define the organic properties of the evolution of the universe.

Projection #16: Red Light

In the beginning of the 1920s, Ivan Kliun painted a series of works which he called 'cosmic images'. One of these 'images' is the composition "Red Light, Spherical Composition". This work also reflected the enchantment and attraction many Russian *avant garde* artists felt for the cosmic, astronomic phenomena theories and their interest for the future conquest of space and the study of the nature of the universe. This is even more intense in the work by Konstantin Yuon "New Worlds". Right after Lenin's death in 1924, Kliment Redko painted a picture titled 'Uprising',

which places the leader of the Bolsheviks in the centre as if he were about to resurrect, among elements of church iconography; the artist places the leader's close associates by him and lights Stalin in an eerie cold colour. In geometric array, soldiers, army bands, working class men and women march towards the new world.

Projection #17: Pattern

Sound: 11th Symphony in G minor by Dmitri Shostakovich (1957, Opus 103, sub-title: The Year 1905); Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra; Director: Yevgeny Mravinsky. Recording: 1959.

Projection #18: Kazimir Malevich

Kazimir Malevich is a multi-aspect, radical artist, one of the most dynamic *avant garde* representatives; during his creative development he passed from impressionism and symbolism, in the beginning of the 20th century, to becoming associated with cubo-futurism and being influenced by the 'surrealistic language' of Russian futurists, a language that had acquired its own primary meaning based not on cognition, but on sensory experience, before ultimately developing his own theory about non-objective painting, which he called 'Suprematism'.

'Suprematism' first appeared in 1915 in Petersburg, at the 'Last futuristic exhibition 0.10'. Malevich's suprematist works were free of any kind of object and presented compositions of geometric shapes and colours, aiming at declaring the primary role of form as opposed to content and to state that form is what attributes content, rather than the other way around, which had been the prevailing view till then. The word 'suprematism' comes from the Latin 'suprem-' (prevalence, dominance) and, according to Malevich, relates to the supremacy of colour and form over all other technical aspects of a painting. Malevich perceived himself as a *sui generis* realist, but he saw realism as an imaginary reality, 'which one had to reach so as to distant themselves from the visual aspect of life'. The painting 'Black Square' became an emblematic image of Suprematism (1915).

When Malevich painted the 'Black Square' and presented it in a corner between two walls, where the Russians used to place religious icons at home, he said that it was neither the end nor the beginning of art, yet, both of these simultaneously and attributed to himself the qualities of the final and first philosopher at one and the same time. According to Malevich, Suprematism is the art referring to the invisible yet real aspect of life.

Projection #19: Screenings of Films by Sergei Eisenstein

Battleship Potemkin, 1925 (duration 66')

Strike, 1925 (duration 82')

October, 1928 (duration 95')

Courtesy: New Star

REVOLUTION IN ART

**Exhibition on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of October Revolution
52nd Dimitria Festival Kick-off**

01/10-3/12/2017

Thessaloniki International Fair, Pavilion 2, 1st floor

Opening: 01/10, 20:00

Opening hours:

Monday-Friday: 17:00-21:00
Saturday: 11:00-14:00 & 17:00-21:00
Sunday: 11:00-14:00

Co-organised by:

Municipality of Thessaloniki – 52nd Dimitria Festival
TIF-HELEXPO / ‘ARTECITYA’ Programme
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