

An abstract painting featuring bold, geometric shapes and a limited color palette. A large, dark green triangle is on the left, with a bright yellow diagonal line crossing it. A thick blue diagonal line also intersects the composition. A large, dark, textured rectangle occupies the upper right. Below the green triangle is a red rectangle with visible cracking. The bottom of the painting features a dark blue horizontal band. The overall style is reminiscent of Constructivism or De Stijl.

RA

Royal Academy of Arts
Exhibition in Focus

Revolution

Russian Art 1917–1932

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

Written by Tom Jeffreys

For the Learning Department

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Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932

Main Galleries

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COVER Cat. 81, Kazimir Malevich, **Suprematism**, 1915–16 (detail)

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Introduction

The first few decades of the twentieth century was a time of unprecedented change for Russia. Under Tsar Nicholas II (1868–1918), whose rule began in 1894, Russia went from one of the world's most powerful nations to an ignominious military failure. In 1917, poverty was widespread, the nation was on the brink of economic ruin under the Tsar's repressive regime and the army was struggling against Germany in the First World War. In February, revolution broke out. Nicholas's subsequent abdication brought to a close his family's 300-year rule over Russia. An autocratic political system that dated back to the rule of the first Tsar – Ivan IV ('the Terrible') who had reigned from 1547–1584 – came to an end.

What happened next, happened fast. A second revolution in October 1917 saw the Bolshevik Party replace the hastily-convened Provisional Government. Having only just returned to Russia following his exile in Europe, the popular leader of the Bolshevik party, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1870–1924) found himself leading a country of 185 million people. An ongoing, unwinnable war and the legacy of centuries of feudalism meant that, from the outset, the world's first Communist state faced an uphill struggle. Civil war soon followed.

Thus began a period of profound change, not only for Russia, but for its art. The Royal Academy exhibition, *Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932*, brings to life the art produced during these years of radical upheaval. Though the avant-garde artists Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), Marc Chagall (1887–1985), and Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956) may already be familiar to many of us, this is the first major exhibition in the United Kingdom to show the work of such pioneers alongside more traditional approaches to painting and sculpture. In addition, it shows how art transmitted political ideas and society's aspirations across diverse mediums and styles, including posters, textiles and ceramics. This is important because during this period the relationship between art and politics was close and complex.

In November 1932, Nikolai Punin, an art scholar and writer, curated an exhibition at the prestigious State Russian Museum in Leningrad. Entitled *Fifteen Years of Artists of the Russian Soviet Republic*, the exhibition attempted to take account of the artistic developments of the period, marking an important moment

in the history of Russian art. It is this major exhibition – also shown in Moscow in 1933 – that forms the basis of the Royal Academy exhibition.

The original exhibition was vast. It showed over 2,640 works, including paintings, graphic works and sculptures. Works by 423 artists were displayed across 35 galleries. By 1932, the Communists were consolidating power after their 1922 victory in the Russian Civil War (1917–1922). Lenin was dead and Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) had begun to exert what would become a fierce iron grip on the leadership of Russia. From its original conception to the complicated politics involved in its realisation, the 1932 exhibition revealed a great deal about the period – not only the art that had been produced, but also the story that Soviet officials wanted to tell about that art. Some great artists were marginalised, others nearly left out altogether, then included at the last minute. The exhibition shaped the course of artistic development in Russia for decades.

The Royal Academy's *Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932* exhibition, which also includes film, textiles, photography, posters and pieces of Soviet porcelain, casts new light upon this complex period and the dazzling range of artistic output that it produced.

Russia's Avant-Garde

Cat. 81 In the tumultuous years leading up to and shortly following the Revolutions of 1917, Russia was a febrile cauldron of new ideas, not only in politics, economics and social theory but also in music, design, architecture and the visual arts. Among a bewildering range of nascent concepts and styles, one artist stands out for his work and its total commitment to a whole new way of thinking about art and life: Kazimir Malevich.

In 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had published *The Communist Manifesto*. In it they laid out their critique of contemporary capitalist society and expounded the need for working men and women to overthrow the ruling classes and seize power for themselves. Only after the destruction of the old order could a new society based on equality become a reality. Marx's radical theories had a profound effect – not just in politics and economics but also in the visual arts. Following the 1917 Revolutions, there were fierce disagreements between Russia's traditional painters and avant-garde 'leftists', such as Malevich, about how to make work that would best respond to the dramatic changes that were taking place.

Malevich is most well known for his theory of Suprematism: that art should no longer aim to depict reality but create a whole new world of its own. This radical new theory is crystallised in the painting *Suprematism*, 1915–16. The work which announced Malevich's theory is *Black Square*, 1915, a later version of which featured in the 1932 exhibition, *Fifteen Years of Artists of the Russian Soviet Republic*. Malevich produced at least four versions of *Black Square*, which has since become one of the most talked- and written-about works in art history.

**'Remake everything.
Organise it so as to
make everything new,
so that our false, dirty,
boring, ugly life becomes
just, clean, happy
and beautiful!'**

Alexander Blok, *The Twelve*,
1918



Cat. 81
Kazimir Malevich
Suprematism, 1915-16
Oil on canvas,
81 × 81 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Photo © 2017, State Russian Museum

Black Square is a logical progression from paintings such as *Suprematism*. Malevich himself said he aimed to evoke 'the experience of pure non-objectivity in the white emptiness of a liberated nothing'. Like many of his works from this period, *Suprematism* consists of a series of overlapping oblongs in primary colours, black and grey. The focal point is the rhombus of empty space in the centre, but the different angles of the composition keep the eye moving around the surface of the canvas. In his use of bold colours and geometric forms, Malevich abandons the real world, instead seeking to emphasise the 'primacy of pure feeling'. He argued that, 'To the Suprematist, the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth.'

In the *Fifteen Years...* exhibition, Malevich was given an entire gallery to show his works, which included paintings, ceramics, graphic art, and architectons (sculptures that Malevich called 'prototypes for a new architecture'), many of which he had produced in collaboration with other artists. This gallery is recreated almost in its entirety for the Royal Academy exhibition. Some have argued that giving Malevich his own gallery in 1932 was a way to showcase the breadth of his creativity; while others argue that it was to marginalise him from the main thread of Soviet art history. As Malevich himself said at the time, 'At the exhibition they isolated our brothers [...] like enemies.' Either way, Malevich's relationship with the Russian authorities was often precarious. He was arrested (and subsequently released) by the Party in 1927 following a trip to Poland and Germany where he had been exhibiting work. As the Communist Party tightened its grip on power, first under Lenin, then Stalin, Malevich's radical ideas became increasingly marginalised. The avant-garde, which flowered so brightly in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, would come to be seen as at best irrelevant and at worst a threat to the authority of the new regime.

How does *Suprematism* capture the revolutionary atmosphere of the period when it was made?

What kind of 'pure feeling' does *Suprematism* evoke in you, and how do you think it does this?

Classical Traditions

In the years leading up to and immediately following the Revolutions of 1917 many different artistic styles and movements emerged, all competing to provide the authentic voice of the age. Art was no longer considered a luxury for wealthy individuals: after 1917, commercial galleries disappeared, private commissions stopped, and important personal collections were nationalised in the name of the people. Some artists supported the regime because they passionately believed in its ideals; others because it was their sole source of income. Many formed groups

'Our civic duty before mankind is to set down, artistically or documentarily, the revolutionary impulse of this great moment in history.'

Declaration, Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), 1922

and penned manifestos to outline their vision for the art of the future; others simply ploughed their own furrow.

Traditionally, the artists of this period have been divided into two groups. On one side was the avant-garde, which included not only the Suprematists and Constructivists but other cutting-edge artists such as the abstract pioneer Kandinsky and the mystical Chagall. On the other side were the realists, including the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, formed in 1922, whose members were committed to producing accurate depictions of the world around them. Of these artists, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin (1878–1939) was among the most idiosyncratic.

Cat. 193 Petrov-Vodkin had taken lessons from an icon painter before studying art in St Petersburg and later in Moscow. The influence of these early studies is evident in his *1918 in Petrograd*, 1920, often also referred to as the 'Petrograd Madonna' or 'Madonna and Child'. Her face forms an idealised oval and her hands are long and slender, while the perspective of the blue building in the background seems exaggerated. The baby's clothing is painted in a hard-edged style and the mother's face seems to convey an expression of concern. While Malevich was reinventing painting for the modern age, Petrov-Vodkin was looking back to the great masters of the Italian Renaissance – the likes of Giotto (1266/7–1337) and Raphael (1483–1520).

The title, *1918 in Petrograd*, firmly roots the subject matter in contemporary events. In 1918, Russia was fighting a bloody civil war. On one side was the Communist Red Army led by the charismatic Leon Trotsky (1879–1940). Against them were the White armies, a loose alliance of anti-Communist forces which included Fascists and pro-Tsarists, aided by forces from Japan, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and the USA. During the winter of 1919, Petrograd was under siege and food was extremely scarce. By 1920, 775 of the city's factories had closed due to the lack of oil. Only 722,000 people remained in the city out of a 1918 population of two million. In the background of the painting, much of the city is empty. Many of the figures are hunched over with cold or hunger.

Petrov-Vodkin was one of the most influential artists under the Communist rule. He taught a generation of younger artists who went on to form what is now known as the School of Petrov-Vodkin. But his style was not without controversy. Ilya Repin (1844–1930), the father of Russian Realism, was dismissive of his early works. In the 1930s his work was criticised as obscure, as 'alien to the masses', in the words of art historian John Ellis Bowlt. Nonetheless he had a grand retrospective exhibition in Leningrad and Moscow in 1937 and was then given the prestigious task of painting gigantic murals for the newly commissioned Palace of the Soviets. As we shall see, this, like many other dreams, would never be realised.

To what extent does *1918 in Petrograd* seem like a contemporary political work?

In what ways does it seem like a classical religious painting?

Cat. 193
**Kuzma Petrov-
Vodkin,**
1918 in Petrograd
(Petrograd Madonna),
1920
Oil on canvas,
73 × 92 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Photo © State Tretyakov Gallery





Applied Arts and Propaganda

Cat. 1 In *Demonstration on Uritsky Square*, 1921, Boris Kustodiev shows a mixed crowd of sailors, soldiers and workers proudly carrying revolutionary banners through the main square of St Petersburg. Huge red banners dominate the left of the painting while red star-shaped signs bear the hammer and sickle, a Soviet symbol of the unity between industrial worker and peasant. In the foreground on the right, a worker reads the latest edition of *Pravda*, the Party newspaper first published in 1912. The large dark monument is the Alexander Column, named after Emperor Alexander I of Russia (1777–1825). Large-scale public demonstrations were always an important part of Communist political expression. They were events full of speeches and song.

As we can see by looking closely at Kustodiev's work, the art of the early Soviet years was by no means limited to painting and sculpture. Artists turned their attention to the new tasks demanded by the Revolution, as the famous Soviet artist

Cat. 1
Boris Mikhailovich Kustodiev
Demonstration on Uritsky street on the day of the opening of the 2nd Comintern Congress in July 1920, 1921
Oil on canvas,
133 × 268 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Photo © 2017, State Russian Museum



'In place of genre, portrait or still-life artists, let us see artists who are metalworkers, textile specialists, electricians, the friends and workers of the great class. Then art will coincide with productive work, and life for the first time will sparkle in a dynamic torrent of forms that now have significance.'

Boris Arvatov, *Pechat' i Revolutsiya*, 1, 1922

Alexander Samokhvalov wrote in 1917: 'revolution demanded slogans, symbols and posters'. In *Demonstration on Uritsky Square* we see such banners in action. Many artists and even icon painters embraced with gusto the painting of such banners.

In the early years of Soviet Russia, art began to appear everywhere, even on the dishes families used at mealtimes. Communism had always been a fundamentally urban movement, but in 1917, 80 per cent of Russia's population were peasants living in small villages scattered across Russia's vast landmass. The government needed to educate them about Communism, what it meant and why it mattered. So it built memorials and works of public art across the country; organised mass demonstrations as depicted by Kustodiev; and sent trains, brightly painted with images and slogans, to the countryside to distribute Communist propaganda, designed and made by artists who shared its political beliefs.

In 1918, the Imperial Porcelain Factory in St Petersburg was nationalised and renamed the State Porcelain Factory. The facility that had produced luxury goods for the Tsars was now in the service of the state and the people. Just as



Petrov-Vodkin and Kustodiev used techniques learned under the old regime in the service of the new, the factory began to produce high quality porcelain products to champion not the greatness of the Tsar, but the greatness of Communism. In addition to specialist ceramic artists, avant-garde figures such as Malevich and his followers were enlisted to adorn the surfaces of these pieces with pro-Soviet designs. However, Soviet Realist figurines were quite different to their Suprematist designs, and some are included in the Royal Academy exhibition, including: *Woman Embroidering a Banner*, 1919.

Why do you think Kustodiev chose to include a worker reading Pravda in his painting *Demonstration on Uritsky Square*?

What kind of atmosphere does Kustodiev create with this painting and how does he do it?

Brave New World

With Russia still in the grip of civil war, the initial enthusiasm for the future after the overthrow of the Tsar was marred by the grim realities of post-revolutionary life. First, the Soviets adopted a policy called War Communism in order to keep the Red Army stocked with food and weapons. This led to severe food shortages and brutal repression. Then, in 1921, Lenin launched his New Economic Policy (NEP), a form of 'state capitalism' designed to boost the economy by allowing a certain amount of private trade and enterprise. Peasants were then permitted to sell their grain surpluses. The policy worked to the extent that, by October 1922, the economy was recovering and the Whites had finally been defeated. But many people felt disaffected – some by the war-time hardships, others by the return of capitalism. Artists communicated their disillusionment in works that went beyond the straightforward propaganda demanded by the nascent state.

Cat. 52 In this context, one of the most intriguing works is *New Planet*, 1921, by Konstantin Yuon (1875–1958). Like Petrov-Vodkin, Yuon – the son of a bank clerk – also trained at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. After graduating in 1898, Yuon travelled to Paris. His early works, owing a debt to French Impressionism, were serenely beautiful rural and urban scenes that elegantly capture the glow of sunlight on snow in the middle of a long Russian winter.

New Planet, however, is completely different. Shafts of light contrast dramatically against a dark night sky. A bright red planet seems to rise upwards on the left of the painting. Clusters of figures face towards it, their arms raised in supplication or terror. On the one hand, Yuon presents us with a vision of a bright new future. The artist chose to paint the planet red, the colour of Communism. An entirely red planet suggests Communism's triumph over the entire world. This had always been a fundamental tenet of Marxism, that the workers'

Cat. 52
Konstantin Yuon
***New Planet*, 1921**
Tempera on cardboard,
71 × 101 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Photo © State Tretyakov Gallery
© DACS 2017



'The Revolution shook me with a full force that overpowered the individual, his essence, pouring across the borders of imagination and bursting into the most intimate world of images that turn themselves into part of the Revolution.'

Marc Chagall, *Angel nad kryshami* (Angel Above the Rooftops), Moscow, 1989

Revolution must be an international movement. On the other hand, the painting's perspective renders the planet distant and out of reach. Its light brings fire and pain. The land occupied by the people in the present, in the foreground, is scorched and barren. Many have fallen to the ground. Is Yuon presenting us with a bright new future? Or is he portraying the end of the world as we know it?

After *New Planet*, Yuon largely reverted to historical scenes and bucolic depictions of rural life. As the Soviets grew increasingly intolerant of any hint of dissent within the arts (as in every other field of daily life), Yuon made a sensible decision. Although his work did not always correspond to the dictates of Socialist Realism, he nonetheless went on to enjoy a long and successful career. He was awarded a Stalin Prize in 1943, was made a member of the Communist Party in 1951, appointed the First Secretary of the Union of Soviet Artists in 1956, and received the Order of Lenin, the highest civilian award possible, before his death in Moscow in 1958.

What kind of future do you think Konstantin Yuon was predicting in his painting *New Planet*?

How does Yuon achieve that sense of the future in this painting?



Salute the Leader

The death of Lenin on 21 January 1924 created yet another struggle for power. He had been ill for some time prior to his death, and as Stalin, Trotsky and others jockeyed for position within the Communist Party leadership, the cult of Lenin began to emerge.

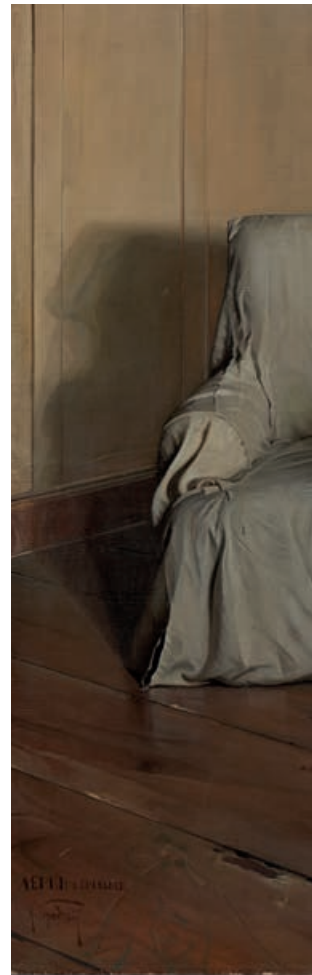
Initially, Stalin and his 'centre' faction allied with Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938), editor of *Pravda*, the Party newspaper. They argued in favour of continuing Lenin's NEP in order to defeat Trotsky and the left who believed in a purely Communist approach to economics and more democratic decision-making within the Party. Both sides sought to position themselves as true inheritors of Lenin's legacy. Stalin won and Trotsky was removed from the Politburo in 1926. Once Trotsky had been deported, in February 1929, Stalin turned on his former allies.

The political in-fighting of the period was mirrored by disagreements among artists. In May 1920, the Communist Party executive committee ordered that Narkompros (the Soviet Ministry of Culture) be cleared of avant-garde artists such as, among others, the Suprematists and Constructivists. The radical avant-garde was denounced as 'bourgeois' and associated with the evils of capitalism and excesses of the West. Gradually, the Party and Stalin promoted one artistic movement above all the others: Socialist Realism.

After Lenin's death, images of the leader began to proliferate widely: on posters and medals, in photographs and newspapers. Art historian Christina Lodder has argued that this process 'helped to enshrine figurative art as the official art of the Soviet Union, paving the way for Socialist Realism'.

Cat. 10 Along with Alexander Deineka (1899–1969), Isaak Brodsky was the movement's leading practitioner. Brodsky's monumental *Lenin in Smolny*, 1930, is among his crowning works. Painted in a characteristically realistic style, the work measures almost 2 × 3 metres. Depicted near life-size, Lenin has a commanding presence. In contrast to the scale of the painting, which suggests both power and grandeur, the subject itself is stark. The room is bare but for a sofa, wooden chair, two chairs covered with dust sheets and a small table strewn with papers. Lenin is simply dressed in a brown work suit.

Lenin in Smolny was not the only portrait that Brodsky painted of Lenin, but it is the most intriguing. Although Socialist Realism is often characterised by the clarity of its political message, this painting is charged with ambiguity. It shows Lenin signing documents inside a small office, most likely in the first weeks of the Revolution. But Brodsky painted it in 1930, six years after Lenin had died. While Lenin is ostensibly the subject of the painting, he is shown from the side, his eyes cast down, focused on the business at hand. Although Brodsky always recommended drawing from life, he actually took this pose from a photograph and drawings of Lenin at a congress meeting in 1920. Facing the viewer is an empty chair, which begs the question: whose seat is that?



'Comrade Stalin, having become Secretary-General, has unlimited authority concentrated in his hands, and I am not sure whether he will always be capable of using that authority with sufficient caution!'

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *Letter to the Congress*, 1922



Cat. 10
Isaak Brodsky
Lenin in Smolny, 1930
Oil on canvas,
190 × 285 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow
Photo © State Tretyakov Gallery

Why do you think Isaak Brodsky chose to leave the central, dust-sheeted, chair empty?

What effect would the large scale of the painting be likely to have on its viewers?



Man and Machine

'You can't paint our udarnik (shock-worker) in the pose of a merchant or factory owner. He has a different stance [...] the artist must see that stance and be able to show it!'

Alexander Deineka, *Zhizn. Iskusstvo. Vremia* (Life. Art. Time) / *Literaturno-khudozhestvennoe nasledie*, Moscow, 1989

Cat. 35
Arkady Shaiket
Komsomol at the Wheel,
1929

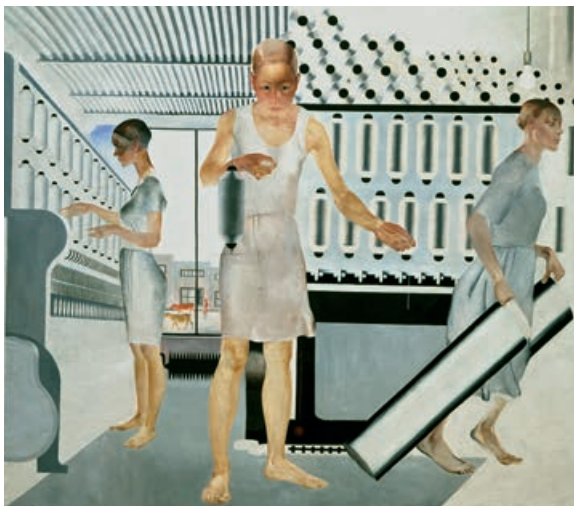
Print from the 1950s,
78 × 58 cm

Alex Lachmann Collection, London
© Private collection

Fig. 1
Alexander Deineka
Textile Workers, 1927

Oil on canvas,
162 × 185 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Photo © 2017, State Russian Museum
© DACS 2017



While painters and sculptors argued over different styles that could best represent the promises of Communism, a new medium was emerging that would arguably produce the defining images of Russia in the 1920s and 1930s: film, both photography and the moving image.

Cat. 35 Photojournalist Arkady Shaikhet (1898–1959) was responsible for some of the most memorable photographic images of the time. In this photograph from 1931 he shows a young worker from the Komsomol, the youth organisation of the Communist Party. Handsome, lit from above, and standing above the eye line of the viewer, the young worker is presented as a hero. At the wheel of a vast machine, he is in control: a symbol of the power of workers in the Communist state. This is how the nascent workers' state wanted to portray itself to the world and, perhaps even more importantly, to itself. Such images continued to be reproduced: the print shown in this Royal Academy exhibition is from the 1950s. Photography was ideally suited to propaganda: while a painting existed as a unique object, multiple copies of a photographic image could be made and disseminated in newspapers, magazines and pamphlets. Photography involved the use of new technologies, accurately symbolising the Soviet love affair with modern machinery. Photographic images were easy to understand, and were also easy to manipulate to give the illusion of direct, unmediated reality.

The newly emerging medium of film would prove itself particularly amenable to the government censors. Gustav Klutsis (1895–1938) pioneered the use of photomontage in propaganda; Esfir Shub (1894–1959) was employed to re-edit imported entertainment films to 'correct' or even reverse their ideology; and Dziga Vertov (1896–1954) made the celebrated *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929, that documented carefully selected realities of contemporary urban life with no story and no actors. Most famous perhaps was a film by Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) and Grigori Aleksandrov (1903–1983), the evocative, and factually inaccurate, glorification of the 1917 Revolution, *October: Ten Days that Shook the World*, 1928. It is said that Stalin personally intervened in the film's editing to ensure that Trotsky's presence was removed altogether.

Once Stalin had consolidated his grip on power, he embarked upon a period of rapid industrialisation, signified by the announcement in 1928 of the first of his five-year plans. Industrialisation had been painful in nineteenth-century Europe; it would be doubly so for Russia. Marx had viewed Communism as an inevitable historical consequence of capitalism. The ability of capitalism to generate surplus wealth through industrialisation would pave the way for a society

based on equality. In addition to two successive wars, Russia's economic, social and political structures had hardly changed in centuries. In order to industrialise rapidly, Stalin resorted to extreme methods: political repression of both the Party and of the general population. Production of pig iron, coal and iron ore all rose dramatically, and Stalin could boast that his first five-year plan had achieved its goals in only four years. By the outbreak of the Second World War, Russia was able to mobilise a modern army against Germany, whose industrialisation had begun decades before.

The art of this era glorified Stalin's new machine age. Alexander Deineka's *Textile Workers*, 1927 (fig.1), exalts its subject through its bold composition and simplified colour palette. While Shaikhet presented an image of masculine power, Deineka celebrated the role of women. Under Communism, women gained the same rights as men. These two images, by Shaikhet and Deineka, are rich in symbolic complexity. For example, the female textile workers and the Komsomol youth all remain anonymous. Arguably, this allows any viewer to identify with the young workers. But such images also hint at a loss of individual identity. As Lenin came to be depicted everywhere, other Soviet heroes were portrayed as anonymous symbols of a class rather than as individuals in their own right.

Compare Shaikhet's *Komsomol at the Wheel* with Deineka's *Textile Workers*. In your opinion, which image presents the more believable depiction of working life in a Russian factory?

Which image more successfully shows the workers as the new heroes of Russian Communism, and how does the artist achieve this?

Life as an Artist

Cat. 53 A comparison between two paintings by Pavel Filonov (1883–1941) can tell us a great deal about the life of a Russian artist in the 1920s and early 1930s. Western art history has usually focused on the struggle between Suprematism and Socialist Realism, while largely ignoring idiosyncratic artists such as Filonov. But he is an important figure, both for his unique artistic style and for what his works can tell us about the period in question. In the 1910s, Filonov had pioneered a style that came to be known as 'analytical'. He aimed to 'grow' the subject he was depicting, increment by increment, like a plant or a crystal. In *Formula of the Petrograd Proletariat*, 1920–21, Filonov demonstrated this process with extraordinary imaginative power. Using very sharp pencils and fine brushes, he created compositions that seemed to have splintered into a thousand tiny pieces across the canvas. The result is extremely difficult to read with any precision; the initial impression is one of dizzying energy and dynamism. Gradually, details do emerge – people, animals, buildings – but these are important not so much as individual elements but for their contribution to the collective composition.

'In the course of two years Soviet power in one of the most backward countries of Europe did more to emancipate women and to make their status equal to that of the 'strong' sex than all the advanced, enlightened, 'democratic' republics of the world did in the course of 130 years.'

Lenin, 'Soviet Power and the Status of Women', published in *Pravda*, 1919

Cat. 53

Pavel Filonov

Formula of Petrograd Proletariat, 1920–21

Oil on canvas,
154 × 117 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Photo © 2017, State Russian Museum

'I cannot take commissions. I am a researcher. A commission leads to other commissions, and I must do my own works. I cannot follow the path of official art. I do not need fame. My ideology will find its own path!'

Pavel Filonov, *Dnevnik* (Diaries), St Petersburg, 2000





Fig. 2
Pavel Filonov
Tractor Workshop at the
Putilov Factory, 1931–32
Oil on canvas mounted
on cardboard,
73 × 99 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Photo © 2017, State Russian Museum

Comparing *Formula of the Petrograd Proletariat*, 1920–21, to *Tractor Workshop at the Putilov Factory*, 1931–32 (fig.2), it is scarcely believable that the same artist created the two paintings. Unlike the splintered perspectives of Filonov's 'Formula' paintings, the latter is a conventionally composed interior view. The slightly distorted forms of the tractors in the foreground hint at Filonov's artistic interests but the flat background and the recognisably human figures are clearly an attempt at Socialist Realism.

Filonov rarely sold any of his works in Russia. He was offered good money to sell abroad but he always refused, preferring instead to live an ascetic existence on little but bread and tea. Gradually, however, as the Soviet regime tightened its grip on power, Stalin increasingly restricted freedom of expression and artists were forced to adapt or face the consequences. Article 58 of the Russian SFSR Penal Code adopted in 1927 gave authorities a free hand to make arrests.

In 1929, the official censors kept an exhibition of Filonov's work on hold for almost a year. His works were rejected from other exhibitions. His close friends arranged some commissions for him, including *Tractor Workshop*, but he hated to work in that way. Filonov died of starvation during the Siege of Leningrad in the winter of 1941 and many of his works were donated to the Russian Museum.

Describe how Pavel Filonov captures a spirit of revolution in his *Formula of the Petrograd Proletariat*.

Compare *Formula of the Petrograd Proletariat* with *Tractor Workshop*. What, if any, similarities do you see in them?

Why, in your opinion, might an artist find it difficult to alter their style when they have been ordered to?

New City, New Society

'The avant-garde of revolutionary destruction is marching over the whole wide world [...] and on the square of the revolution there should be erected corresponding buildings.'

Kazimir Malevich,
'Arkhitektura kak
poshchечina betono-
zhelezu', *Anarkhiya*, 37,
April 1918

From the beginning, the Revolution had inspired a flowering of creativity that extended far beyond the visual arts. Communism sought nothing less than to reinvent the world. In 1913, visionary architect and designer Vladimir Tatlin conceived a new artistic movement: Constructivism. He saw art as a fundamentally useful activity, as work, capable of remaking and remodelling the world for a new era. The Constructivists advocated the abandonment of traditional media, such as painting and sculpture, in favour of actual interventions into the world itself: architecture, graphic design, objects.

Tatlin was not the only one who believed in the importance of architecture. Artist and theorist Aleksei Gan (1887–1942) argued that old buildings, such as mansions, luxury apartments and churches, were rooted in the ideologies of the past and must now be replaced. Unfortunately, seven years of near-continual war, from the First World War (1914–18) to the Russian Civil War, prevented much of substance being built until 1924.

Cat. 182
Alexander Rodchenko
Narkomfin [People's
Commissariat of Finance]
Building, 1932
Gelatin silver print,
24 x 30 cm

Alex Lachmann Collection, London
Photo © Patrick Schwarz
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Cat. 182 But, with the wars over and Stalin firmly in charge, it was time once more for Russia to look forward. This period saw the start of several major architectural undertakings. One classic example is the Narkomfin building in Moscow designed by Constructivist architect Moisei Ginzburg (1892–1946) in 1928. Ginzburg aimed to do away with the old bourgeois architectural legacy in order to, quite literally, build a new society. This particular apartment block was designed to house employees of the People's Commissariat of Finance and to



build a new sense of community by having communal catering, crèche facilities, and a long, wide, internal 'street'. A life-size reconstruction of El Lissitzky's design for a standard interior for this block is presented in the Royal Academy exhibition.

Another Constructivist artist, Alexander Rodchenko, took the photograph of the Narkomfin building shown here. Rodchenko, best known as a pioneer of collage and photomontage, was also a hugely influential artist, designer and photographer. In this carefully composed image, Rodchenko shows us the long, sleek, straight lines of the Narkomfin building. It is even reminiscent of some of Malevich's early geometric compositions.

The building of Lenin's mausoleum tells us much about the importance of architecture. As in the other fields of artistic endeavour, architecture had also seen struggles between the avant-garde and those in favour of a more classical approach. Lenin's mausoleum showed that the avant-garde was beginning to lose the battle. The first structure was black and red and made of wood; the second was also made of wood but much larger – like a flat-topped pyramid; and the third translated this structure into an intimidating monument of polished black marble and red porphyry stone. It was completed in 1929–30 and still stands on Moscow's Red Square.

Moisei Ginzburg's Narkomfin building was specifically designed to help build a new sense of community. Can you think of any other existing buildings that may also have been designed with the intention of building a united community? In what ways do you think they have or have not succeeded?

There are no figures in this photograph. What effect does this have?

'We are for the withering away of the state, and at the same time we stand for the strengthening of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which represents the most powerful and mighty of all forms of the state which have existed up to the present day!'

Joseph Stalin, Address to the 16th Congress of the Russian Communist Party, 1930

1930 and Beyond: Stalin's Utopia

Cat. 214 This photomontage from 1932 is by Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958). She designed it to serve a specific commemorative function: to celebrate the success of Stalin's first five-year plan to modernise Russian industry and agriculture.

Along with her husband, Alexander Rodchenko, and leading thinker Kazimir Malevich, Stepanova was one of the pioneers of Constructivism. But while Malevich continued to express his ideas in the traditional media of painting and sculpture, Stepanova turned to the new techniques of photography and photomontage. In this image we see several collaged symbols of Russia's new-found modernity: machines, factory towers, and a row of tractors. Overlaying these images is the head of Stalin, his hand raised in salute, his eyes staring straight at the viewer. Whereas Lenin's mausoleum was conceived as a monument to the importance of a great man, Stepanova's work immortalises a more forward-looking moment of national significance. New developments in industry and agriculture showed exactly the kind of progress that ought to be celebrated to ensure people remained thankful to the Communist government, and to Stalin.



In addition to rapid urban industrialisation, huge changes were forced upon the countryside from 1928 onwards: the old feudal system was swept aside and new collective farms were established. This process led to widespread famine and millions of deaths. At the same time, the artists of the avant-garde had begun to experience numerous threats and attacks, not least from the Association of Russian Revolutionary Artists, who denounced abstract works as 'formalism' and demanded that they cease altogether. Malevich began to create work in a more politically acceptable figurative style. In *Peasants*, 1930 (fig.3), faceless figures, amid a vast, empty Russian countryside, stare blankly towards the viewer.

By the early 1930s, Stepanova and others were still producing work in the Constructivist style, but such influences were becoming increasingly rare. The government's April decree of 1932 called for the reconstruction of artistic and literary organisations along state-approved lines. Then, in 1934, the Soviet Writers'

Cat. 214

Varvara Stepanova
Result of the Five-Year
Plan, 1932

Photomontage,
41 × 56 cm

Alex Lachmann Collection, London
Photo © Patrick Schwarz © DACS 2017
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Congress declared that Socialist Realism was from then on to be the only approved style of artistic practice.

Stalin's influence was increasingly tangible in every aspect of Soviet society. His priorities were consolidation of power, industrialisation, and the building of an army to fight against the capitalist powers of the West. Concern for the individual was largely trampled under the interests of the state. In 1930, the Gulag – a series of labour camps that had been in use for several years – became an official instrument of state policy. By 1931–32, there were approximately 200,000 Gulag prisoners.

Following widespread famines in 1932 and 1933 as a direct consequence of the policy of agricultural collectivisation, Stalin feared civil unrest from within Russia and military invasion from without. The purges became increasingly severe: from Party expulsion to arrest, imprisonment, and often execution as Stalin wielded the secret police (NKVD) with ever more terror. Among those killed were early heroes of the Revolution, writers and intellectuals, peasants, members of the army, and eventually anyone considered an 'anti-Soviet element'. The Royal Academy exhibition includes a Room of Memory in which photographs are projected of just some of the millions who were killed under Stalin's brutal regime.

Compare Malevich's *Peasants* with Stepanova's *Result of the Five-Year Plan*. Which of them do you think is the more powerful piece of propaganda. In what ways is it more powerful?

Compare Malevich's *Peasants* to his earlier *Suprematism*. How has the artist's style changed? Which elements remain constant? Why do you think this is?



Conclusion

By 1933, when the *Fifteen Years...* exhibition was transferred to the State Historical Museum on Moscow's Red Square, Stalin's influence could be felt across every aspect of day-to-day life in Russia. He was even said to have personally intervened in the organisation of the exhibition's Moscow display.

Although exhibited under the same title, the two exhibitions were different. The 1933 version had expanded to include no less than 3,500 works by nearly 500 artists. The second gallery which had originally focused on Abstract and Constructivist works was cut by the exhibition committee, who cited lack of space. In his catalogue essay, the curator Nikolai Punin tried to put a positive spin on such interference: 'Of course the present exhibition cannot lay claim to a strict historical continuity; much of what "came and went" is not represented at all; in the same way historical proportions are not preserved. But "continuity" and "historicism" are not what is most important now; we are building a new life, a new artistic culture and therefore prefer to look ahead, rather than to pedantically count every step of our historical past.'

Puin's words are particularly insightful. By admitting that 'continuity' and 'historicism' were no longer important he was effectively admitting that, under Stalin, the truth was no longer a priority. Artists must work together for the common, national good, or face the consequences. Punin had already been arrested twice for speaking out in support of the persecuted artists of the avant-garde, and in 1949 he himself was sent to the Gulag, where he died in 1953.

As the Soviet regime became ever darker under Stalin, the bright future promised by Socialist Realism became the only acceptable means of expression. From that great flowering of creativity in the early years of the Revolution, Russian art was reduced to variations upon a single vision, strictly controlled by the state. Nothing that defied the official doctrine was allowed to be exhibited in public from the early 1930s until the late 1960s. Many avant-garde works were hidden in storerooms by museum curators, private collectors and the families of the artists themselves. It is only in recent years that many have once more emerged into the light.

Fig. 3
Kazimir Malevich
Peasants, c.1930
Oil on canvas,
53 × 70 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
Photo © 2017, State Russian Museum

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Cat. 10 detail
Isaak Brodsky
Lenin in Smolny, 1930



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