



# RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE: Pioneers and Direct Descendants

EXHIBITION AT FIRE STATION, ARTIST  
IN RESIDENCE, GARAGE GALLERY

04.12.18  
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## TEACHER'S GUIDE

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# INTRODUCTION

As part of the Qatar-Russia 2018 cultural exchange programme, Qatar Museums presents *Russian Avant-garde: Pioneers and Direct Descendants*. This exhibition features a variety of artworks from the collection of the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. On view are objects that were created during great social upheaval, as a revolution was taking place in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century.

The production of the second-wave of the avant-garde, in contrast with the art of their great predecessors, demonstrated both historical continuity and the development of radical concepts in the postwar years of the 1950s – 70s.

This teacher resource is created to act as a guide and a learning tool that will supply the educator with the required information in a coherent manner. It provides a framework to better understand Russian art history, along with suggested exercises that the educator may use as reference to prepare lesson plans, and make the most of the school field trip to the Fire Station Garage Gallery.

# BACKGROUND

In Russia's modern history, the 20th century witnessed an explosive growth in the arts, literature, theory and culture that was heavily influenced by vast political transformations. Hence, Russia had "endured violent military conflicts, both domestic and international in scope."<sup>1</sup>

In February 1917, an uprising caused the masses to rebel against the long-ruling dynastic family "and paved the way for the Bolsheviks to take over power;"<sup>2</sup> making Russia the world's first Communist State. Eight months later on October of the same year civil war broke throughout the country between the Communists and the Tsarists. The government launched a rigorous campaign to use art, architecture, sculpture and other visual resources to convince and educate the people about Communism.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, arts were used as propaganda to consolidate power.

Fast forward to 1924, Joseph Stalin became the supreme leader, and under his dictatorship, the Soviet Union became increasingly repressive. Individual freedom was crushed in favor of a collective ideology.<sup>4</sup>

# RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

**What is Avant-garde?** It is the French term for 'vanguard' used to describe the frontline of an army moving into battle.<sup>5</sup> In the art world, artists who challenge convention and traditional concepts about art operate in the same frontline. This methodology produces art that is often taken to the absolute thereby, attempting to purify it of all that is superfluous or decorative.

The Avant-garde movement started in Russia in 1910. Prior to that, Art Nouveau paved the way for the Russian Avant-garde. As art historian Galina Yelshevskaya explained, the avant-garde art transformed the artist from a person with a paintbrush into an eccentric alpha-male.<sup>6</sup>

They were considered as the trend-setters of their time. Avant-garde art is characterized by anything that is provocative, brutal, bright, condensed or abstracted. The artists seemed to enjoy the brightness of colours and the simplicity of forms. As a result, in certain instances the personality or politics of the creator overshadowed the creation.

The period between 1912 and 1934 is considered to be the flourishing highpoint of the Russian Avant-garde. Society and political changes became inextricably intertwined. The artists' role was to think on how they could support the ongoing revolution. All ambitious avant-garde artists published a manifesto, a crucial literary extension of the artwork. "The artists' manifesto is a document of ideology crafted to convince and convert."<sup>7</sup> In other words, the statement is intended to shock, inspire or even offend. Avant-garde artists thought that if art was to be put on an intellectual pedestal, colours and canvasses were no longer enough. Cultural theory is required more so than pictures.<sup>8</sup> Therefore many styles and schools of art were developed and adopted by the avant-garde movement.



**Lyubov Popova**  
Picturesque Architectonics  
1918

# IMPACT OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The Soviet Union was known to have the world's largest community of engineers and scientists, and this could be traced back to the time of Imperial Russia in the early 20th century, when prominent scientists contributed towards the development of physics, astronomy, mathematics, biology, and chemistry. For example, "Nikolai Lobachevskii, the first person to develop non-Euclidean geometry; Dmitri Mendeleev, creator of periodic table of the chemical elements; and Ivan Pavlov, noted physiologist and first Russian to receive a Nobel Prize."<sup>9</sup>

After the revolution, the sciences prospered in every field with the support of the Soviet government. But their adopted positive attitude towards science retained the view that science and politics are interwoven. This paranoia is a reoccurrence of the fear the Tsarist's government had of "Russian scientists who studied in Western Europe would bring home not only scientific knowledge but also Western political theories"<sup>10</sup> in conflict with the ruling government's autocracy.

In parallel, artists were captivated and heavily influenced by the scientific and technological breakthroughs that were occurring at a dizzying constant rate from the launch of the Soviet space program or the domestication of electricity. Projectionism and Constructivism relied heavily on scientific principles, and the elements of chemistry and the laws of physics became embedded in the arts.

# KEY CONCEPTS & THEMES OF THE 20TH CENTURY: PIONEERS AND DIRECT DESCENDANTS

Pioneer artists of the 20th century such as, Kazimir Malevich, Vasily Kandinsky and others were in pursuit of creating a new art vocabulary by experimenting with forms and colors. They believed that art conveyed political ideas and society's aspirations.

## Suprematism

Art movement founded by Kazimir Malevich in 1915, is a form of abstract art relying on geometric forms associated with ideas of spiritual purity, rather than a visual depiction of objects.<sup>11</sup>

## Constructivism

Concept centered around Valdimir Tatlin's masterpiece, *Tower Monument* presented in the *Third Communism International* in 1919. Tatlin had opposed Malevich's style and believed in constructing objects with one's own hands. Constructivists later became designers as they produced tableware, textiles, furniture, photographs, posters, and even buildings. Constructivism is mostly associated with architecture.<sup>12</sup>

## Projectionism

Solomon Nikritin (1889-1965) is a Ukrainian avant-garde artist and one of the founders of the 'Projectionists' group, also known as the 'Method' group, in the early 1920s. He describes Projectionism as "the science of the systematic organization of materials."<sup>13</sup>

The term *Projectionism* was not only applied to new approaches in painting and methods of art criticism, but also to the methodology of constructing a new class-less and authority-less society, to which it was considered necessary to aspire. Nikritin asserted in his manifesto that the "method invented by the artist, becomes the purpose of the creative process. The intention was for new ideas to transfer creative energy into further development."<sup>14</sup>

## Organic School

Another Russian avant-garde movement that was led by Mikhail Matyushin (1861-1934) Russian avant-garde painter and composer, and his wife, Yelena Guro who was also a painter and a poet. They were stimulated by the creative principles of nature, and viewed the world in a holistic manner. In addition, the emphasis on the interconnection of biological organisms with their surroundings did impact the aesthetical developments of the Organic school of painting. The artists had different organic perspectives and approaches.<sup>15</sup>

## Kineticism

Emerged during the early 20th century of the Russian avant-garde. "Kineticism is art based on the idea of moving form. This does not only refer to the movement of an object, but also includes any change, transformation – any kind of 'life' that develops in the work as it is observed by the viewer."<sup>16</sup> As its aesthetic potential progresses it creates a mutual synthesis between the arts and "becomes a mirror of technological progress and its human perception."<sup>17</sup>

## **Socialist Realism**

By the early 1930s Socialist Realism became the dominant movement as they portrayed the machine (technology) and the modern city as visions of progress. The regime only legitimized one creative method, 'Socialist Realism' since it expressed Soviet ideology.<sup>18</sup> This movement shed light on the Soviet imagined utopia and its supposed glorious future. Artists were ordered to produce figurative art that could be easily understood by the masses.<sup>19</sup>

Socialist Realism could also be pronounced as a relentlessly propagandistic art genre. "Art movements can be fitted into the structure of oppositions,"<sup>20</sup> as one movement can be seen as a reaction to another. For example, the 'Underground' experimental avant-garde can be seen as a reaction against 'Socialist Realism.'

## **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.)**

The former communist country that was established in 1922 and came to an end 1991. The Soviet Union stretched out from Eastern Europe to North Asia, consisting of 15 Soviet Socialist Republics, and was a superpower post World War II.

## **Propaganda**

Efforts to deliberately mobilize and manipulate beliefs and attitudes by presenting facts selectively to encourage a particular perception and to serve a certain agenda.<sup>21</sup>

## **Descendants 1950s – 60s: Underground**

Nikita Khrushchev was appointed as the new Soviet Union ruler (1953 – 1964), after the death of Joseph Stalin, the former leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup> During Khrushchev's reign the Russian culture experienced what is known as the Thaw (1956 – 1962), this period also had its ambiguities for personal freedoms were not guaranteed. In other words, "the art of the former Stalin era gave the impression of a giant frozen monolith, suddenly this monolith was subjected to a new warmth and began to melt and disintegrate."<sup>23</sup>

That suggested a mass rehabilitation that came in different forms. "Khrushchev was considered to be a patriot who genuinely wanted to improve the lot of all Soviet citizens,"<sup>24</sup> while under his leadership artists were freed from labor camps, books and journals became more available, avant-garde art was shown in private homes, and Modern Western art went on display in Moscow.

Thus, local artists had access to view the works of Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock and Rothko. The artists had worked as if Socialist Realism never existed. There was no general opposition style; everyone had their own language.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately this artistic license ended abruptly in December of 1962, when Khrushchev clamped down on all forms of progressive art,<sup>26</sup> destroying all hopes for artistic freedom. This event resulted in the birth of the 'Underground'.

## **Nonconformism**

After Khrushchev's backlash the art scene was fractured, and the notion of 'Underground' art emerged. It is also known as 'Nonconformism' or the 'Second Avant-garde' that took place in (1962 – 1974). The 'Underground' scene developed its own structure and was stylistically diverse. "Many artists who had been excluded from working in public or state institutions chose to create their own art outside of the government-sanctioned process,"<sup>27</sup> and risked their personal safety.

## **Conceptualism**

During the 1970s while Western Pop art was a response to overconsumption and overproduction of advertising; socialist art was a response to the overproduction of ideology. Conceptual art is a manual on how to assemble art and deconstruct Soviet ideology. "Conceptualism is concerned with exposing the arbitrariness of the world demonstrating how our preconceived notions of it are imposed without our noticing."<sup>28</sup>



# SUGGESTED PRE & POST VISIT EXERCISES:

## ELEMENTARY & MIDDLE-SCHOOL

### Pre-visit

- Explain the basics of art language, such as, color wheel: primary and secondary colors, tones, lines and shapes.
- Familiarize students with a brief overview of Russian history, and the consequence of revolutions.
- Select one artist displayed in the exhibition (Check the artist list below) and familiarize the students with regards to their life, paintings or sculptures. The students should then be excited to see the artwork in person when they visit the gallery.

### Post-visit

- Inspired by the theme of 'Suprematism' have the students create a 2D artwork that represents their feelings using abstract forms and structures instead of vivid visual depictions; paying close attention to the selection of colors and shapes used. This activity can be created using the collage method of cutting and pasting, or drawing on an A3 paper using colored pencils, crayons or school paint.
- For this activity students may work in pairs or small groups. Ask the students to recreate one of their favorite 2D or 3D artworks from the gallery using either household or recycled materials such as, cereal or tissue boxes, straws, popsicle sticks, tissue paper, cotton balls, etc.
- After the students complete their artwork, the teacher can hold a class discussion to give the students a chance to present their creation, reflect on the gallery visit and talk about their favourite artwork in the exhibition.





## HIGH-SCHOOL

### Pre-visit

- Enlighten the students about the political and societal changes that occurred in Russia during the 20th century, and understand the key themes and concepts of this era.
- Understand how the Soviet Union tried to build a utopia based around science and technology.

### Post-visit

- Mind mapping is a visual form of note taking that allows students to comprehend and puzzle out new ideas and build connections. Ask the students to draw a mind map based on an artworks that exhibits kinetic movement. This mind map must be a breakdown of the visual language that the artwork communicates. Encourage students to engage in active thinking of the themes that the artwork conveys. How do the students now see science and technology expressed?
- For this creative exercise a camera is required and students can work in pairs. Ask the students to take a portrait photograph of their partners, an outdoor scene or an indoor still life. They can resize the image to fit an A3 paper, print and trace it onto a piece of cardboard. Using watercolors or acrylic paint, ask them to paint over their traced image to distort it and transform it into an avant-garde artwork.
- Inspired by the theme of propaganda, request the students to create a political cartoon using sketch pens that will depict propaganda from their own point of view. It can be related to any present event, not necessarily related to Russian history. For example, some news media, journals or online social media deliberately spread fake news to influence their audiences.

# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand the historical context of the exhibition and how art of the time transmitted political ideas and aspirations of society.
- Pupils will be able to distinguish art that is avant-garde, they will gain knowledge about various art movements and be able to discuss and analyze it with confidence.
- Pupils will be exposed to different mediums, techniques and styles used in the artworks.
- Discover how art can be used as propaganda.

# SUGGESTED READINGS

- The Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets the West 1910–1930 by Gail Harrison Roman and Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt.
- Russian Impact on Art by Mikhail Alpatov, Martin L. Wolf and Ivy Litvinov.
- A History of Russian Art by Cyril G. E. Bunt.
- Art in Context: Exploring Nonconformist Art in the Soviet Union – Resource for educators, grades 7-12 by The Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University.
- Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932 by John Milner, Natalia Murray, Nick Murray and 8 more authors.
- Russian Art of the Avant-garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934 by John E. Bowlt.
- Forbidden Art: The Postwar Russian Avant-garde by Vitaly Patsukov.

## Living Artists

1. Francisco Infante-Arana (b. 1943)
2. Igor Shelkovsky (b. 1937)
3. Lev Nusberg (b. 1937)
4. Mikhail Dorokhov (b. 1942)
5. Rimma Zanevskaya-Saggir (b. 1930)
6. Vladimir Akulinin (b. 1943)
7. Vladimir Galkin (b. 1946)

## Deceased Artists

1. Alexander Rodchenko (1891 - 1956)
2. Boris Turetsky (1928 - 1997)
3. Eduard Shteinberg (1937 - 2012)
4. Ivan Klyun (1873 - 1943)
5. Ivan Kudryashov (1896 - 1972)
6. Karl Ioganson (1890 - 1929)
7. Kliment Redko (1897 - 1956)
8. Mikhail Roginsky (1931 - 2004)
9. Nadezhda Udaltsova (1886 - 1961)
10. Petr Williams (1902 - 1947)
11. Sergey Luchishkin (1902 - 1989)
12. Tatyana Makarova
13. Vladimir Slepian (1930 - 1998)
14. Vladimir Stenberg (1899 - 1982)
15. Vladimir Tatlin (1885 - 1953)
16. Vyacheslav Koleichuk (1941 - 2018)
17. Yuri Zlotnikov (1930 - 2013)

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3. "Public Art During the 20th Century: Political Art," *visual-arts-cork.com*
4. Peter B. Maggs, "Soviet Law," *Britannica.com*
5. *Nationalgalleries.org*
6. "The Quickest History of 20th Century Art in Russia," *Arzamas Academy*.
7. "Art Manifestos and Their Applications in Contemporary Design," *smashingmagazine.com* 21.02.2010.
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9. Loren R. Graham, "Russian & Soviet Science and Technology," (History of Science Society, 1989), *hssonline.org*
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13. "Projectionism," *rhythmusundprojektion.com* 03.04.2017.
14. "Projectionism," *studylib.net*
15. Isabel Wünsche, *The Organic School of the Russian Avant-Garde: Nature's Creative Principles*.
16. "Overview of Publications on Soviet and Russian Kinetic Art," *garagemca.org*
17. "A Perpetual Motion Machine. Russian Kinetic Art," *artinvestment.ru*
18. "The Quickest History of 20th Century Art in Russia," *Arzamas Academy*.
19. "Public Art During the 20th Century: Political Art," *visual-arts-cork.com*
20. Pooke & Newall, *Art History: The Basics*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), 108.
21. Bruce Lannes Smith, "Propaganda and Related Concepts," *britannica.com*
22. Marc Raeff & Edward Louis Keenan, "Russia: The Khrushchev era (1953-64)," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 28.
23. "The Thaw and the 1960s. The Birth of the Underground," *Arzamas Academy: Audio Lectures*.
24. Marc Raeff & Edward Louis Keenan, "Russia: The Khrushchev era (1953-64)," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 28.
25. "The Quickest History of 20th Century Art in Russia," *Arzamas Academy*.
26. Ibid.
27. "Art in Context: Exploring Nonconformist Art in the Soviet Union," *Davis Center*, 6.
28. "The Quickest History of 20th Century Art in Russia," *Arzamas Academy*.