

Futurists and Others in Famished Moscow

Radical Artists Find New Manners of Expression Amid Social Chaos

By OLIVER M. SAYLER

SIDE by side with the persistent theatres in famished Moscow, the Russian artists still ply their brush and chisel in spite of the social chaos which has engulfed all the economic institutions of an elder time and revealed their essential artificiality. Art alone survives the earthquake shocks of revolution, and Russian art has been doubly secure because of its deep-rooted imagination and its passionate sincerity.

It should not be surprising, except to those who have fed blindly on reactionary propaganda, to learn that the great public art collections, like the Tretyakovsky Gallery in Moscow, have been guarded as carefully and have been of wider civic service under the Bolsheviks than in the days of the autocracy, while the collections in danger from an invading enemy, such as the Hermitage and the Alexander III Museum in Petrograd, have been stored for safety in the Kremlin vaults in Moscow. For all Russians, no matter what their class or rank or party, have profound respect and reverence for the products of Russian artistic genius and for the masterpieces of other countries which had become Russian possessions.

It is not so easy, though, to understand how the artists of to-day can continue to create while worlds are in the melting pot, and I for one, with all my faith in the virility and vitality of the Russian imagination, was unprepared to find the annual exhibitions crowded with contemporary canvases and marbles during my stay in Moscow and Petrograd through the first six months of the Bolshevik regime. But crowded they were, not only with fine examples of



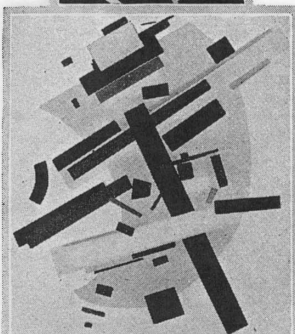
"The War Barrel of the Danaids," by David Burliuk, showing a procession of mothers winding across the mountain to deposit their children in the great maw

David Burliuk, the "father of Russian futurism." His motto is: "Protest against the formula 'Art for Art's Sake,' for art is for all—for the mob, for the streets. Art for the Circus and the Circus for Art!"



of War. At the close of the exhibition this painting was hung out of doors in one of the busiest downtown spots in Moscow, where thousands of passers-by saw it each day

(Below) An example of Suprematism by Casimir Malevitch, founder of the school. Suprematism is "the pictorial art of colors," and renounces all attempt to represent any scene, object or definite idea



sur, their acceptance of conditions as they find them is readier and their creative vision is more fertile than that of their more conservative brethren. Social change, while it disheartens those who worked for the masters of a passing era, gives free rein to bad boy antics as well as to honest experiment. And time alone can tell us which is which!

Among the honest experimenters, I am sure, in spite of his brusque pugnacity, is David Burliuk, called by his friends the father of Russian futurism. Burliuk's impulse, like that of his fellow radicals, preceded the stress of war and the storm of revolution, but



"The Angel of Peace Who Came Too Late," David Burliuk's masterpiece and to-day, done in smouldering reds and dull blues a terrifying symbolic representation of Russia

"A View of New Jerusalem," Aristid Lyentuloff, exhibited "The World of Art"

An example of Casimir Malevitch's early cubist work, which is entitled "Peasants"



OldMagazineArticles.com

-the last of two pages-

that impulse undoubtedly has been intensified by the times. The father of Russian futurism was born of Cossack blood in Ukraina in 1882. Perhaps that explains his assurance and intensity, just as a strangely misformed face, one side of which is a full inch shorter than the other, may help explain his bitter and penetrating sense of the grotesque. He received his early education in art at the Bavarian Academy in Munich in 1902 and in Paris in 1904. At this time he was a devotee of impressionism, later flirting with cubism and finally in 1911 becoming the advocate of futurism which he understands as the psychology of motion, the psychology of a large city.

TO Burliuk, futurism means a protest against refined culture, a defense of the crude but always youthful forms of the archaic. He believes that our time is a time of synthesis. His best and most expressive pictures, therefore, are symbolic in execution, although he produces landscapes, portraits, imaginative studies and decorations in all styles, in addition to writing and publishing his own verse and that of the other Russian futurists. As he summed it up for me one day, the intellectual basis for his art is this: "All styles—all epochs—the good things of the whole world. Not the narrowing but the broadening of the program. Protest against the formula, 'Art for Art's Sake,' for all art is for all—for the mob, for the streets. Art for the Circus and the Circus for Art!"

Burliuk easily dominates the group of radicals who exhibit at The Jack of Diamonds. He is not the most extreme experimenter, but the vigor of his imagination and his power of execution command the respect of all but the most hide-bound conservatives in Moscow. The entire end of one room was given up to his canvases, but he might as well have limited his contribution to one, for a single painting made you forget all the rest. "The Angel of Peace Who Came Too Late," Burliuk calls it. With its unspeakably tragic conception, its dull blues and its smouldering reds, and the strange tortuous detail resembling that of Van Gogh, the picture is a relentless and heart-breaking epitome of Russia to-day.

Burliuk's pugnacity, which seems to irritate the staid more than his unconventional paintings, takes weird forms at times. In his symbolic futurist composition, "The Execution of Marie Antoinette in Moscow, 1917," by which he contrasts the spirit of the French and the Russian Revolutions, he has

Painted his own distorted features as a kind of mask over the face of the executioner. Another of his paintings, born of the Russian hatred for war and its sacrifices, "The War Barrel of the Danaids," in which a solemn procession of mothers comes winding across the mountain to deposit their babes in the capacious maw of destruction, found its way after the close of the exhibition to a commanding position out of doors at the corner of Kuznetsky Most and the Neglinny Proyezd, one of the busiest spots in down town Moscow, where it stared at the passing populace.

The closest friend of Burliuk in futurist by-ways is Vassily Kamyensky, a handsome Russian of light hair and blue eyes and the most picturesque figure in Moscow's artist colony. "If Burliuk is the father of Russian futurism," say the wags, "then Kamyensky is its mother," and when the two appear on the same platform to recite their verse, they are often introduced in this way. Kamyensky is a native of the Urals, and, although he has done some painting, he has spent most of his time in writing. Among his works are two novels, "The Mud Hunt" and "Styenko Razin"; and several volumes of verse, including "Tango with the Cows" and "Barefoot Maidens."

Most prolific and successful of the cubist group among the radicals is probably Alexandra Exter, of Kieff, who began like Burliuk in Paris student days as an impressionist and who has travelled through the succeeding stages to her present use of cubism to express intensely dramatic characters and scenes. She seems to have found her happiest medium in designing settings and costumes for stage productions.

Pavel Kuznetsoff, born in Saratoff on the Volga, is another radical who has not gone quite so far afield in method. His temper is that of the mystic and the symbolist, and "The Birth of the Devil" is his most famous painting.

Far from subtle is Aristid Lyentuloff, son of a priest from Penza, born in 1883, and one of the founders, with Burliuk and Kamyensky, of The Jack of Diamonds group. He exhibits now, however, with The World of Art, and his brilliant colors and decorative design made his work the most distinctive of this organization's annual exhibit. He delights in distortion, and there is a jolly sense of the fantastic in his sketches of the Kremlin, where natural distortion and architectural inexactness give him ample incentive. His studies of New Jerusalem are equally antic.

OF the whole radical colony, though, the most revolutionary and the most intriguing is Casimir Malevitch, founder of the school of Suprematism. Malevitch began as a cubist about 1910, and he traces the development of his ideas of art and of painting in particular in a pamphlet which he calls, "On the Way from Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism." Today, he has renounced all effort to "represent" any scene, object or idea in colors. He uses colors and masses for their own sake and finds that occupation and the explanation of his work in the galleries sufficient to take up all the time he is not serving in the ranks of the Red Guard as an ardent Bolshevik.

I quote from his pamphlet these phrases:

"Futurism discovered the rapidity in modern life."

"The realists, having put live things on canvas, deprive them of the life of motion, and our academies are filled not with 'studies from life' but with 'studies from death.'"

"Suprematism is the pictorial art of colors, the independence of which can not be reduced to one. The running of the horse can be represented in one tone pencils. But to paint the motion of red, yellow and blue masses is impossible with the pencil. Painters ought to drop their subjects and ideas if they wish to be pure painters."

Just what is the sub-conscious intent behind the work of Malevitch and his followers, I do not know. He is the target of ridicule in Russia, just as he would be in any country. But I found his strange compositions unusually jolly to look at. In our grey world that is something!

I had to go back to Burliuk, though, for a summary of the origins of radical art in Russia to-day.

"Well," he said, "I think the style of modern Russian painting developed from a study of French painting—western ideas from the year 900 onward carried over to Russian soil. Then, too, it has come from a close study of the art of China and Japan, and from our love for the Russian people and its own olden art—the *ikon*, the cheap engravings, and the decorations on our wooden utensils. The study of street signs has contributed, also. The new painting still shocks the artistic bourgeoisie, but its influence on life is already immense."

OldMagazineArticles.com