



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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- Welcome. This is one of over 200 talks on the history of Western Art. I have arranged the talks chronologically starting with cave art through to art produced in the last few years.

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Kazimir Malevich, *Black Suprematist Square*, 1915, Tretyakov Gallery Moscow

47-01 CONSTRUCTIVISM AND SUPREMATISM

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- This is Section 47 on the revolutionary art that flourished for a brief period following the Russian Revolution.

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Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), Black Suprematic Square, 1915, 79.6 × 79.5 cm., Tretyakov Gallery Moscow

A section of Suprematist works by Kazimir Malevich exhibited for the first time at *The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10*, 1915

- Kazimir Malevich launched Suprematism at this exhibition. The famous ***The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10*** in Petrograd in December 1915. His aim was revolutionary, not social revolution but what he believed was more fundamental, an inner revolution. He wanted to free art from the burden of depicting the physical world (trees, kings, bowls of fruit). He believed that by using pure geometry, he was creating a new spiritual reality. He called it "the supremacy of pure feeling."
- Note the back square in the corner, the location Russian families placed religious icons.
- (CLICK) This black square on white canvas represents **ground zero** for Suprematism. Malevich **couldn't eat, sleep, or drink** for a week after completing it. You can also see in this photograph of the exhibition that the square was just the starting point for a series of increasingly complex abstract shapes.
- He created the concept in 1913 during costume design work for the opera *Victory Over The Sun*. Suprematism aimed to liberate art from representational content. It focused on pure feeling through basic geometric forms. Malevich wrote that he sought refuge in the square whilst desperately trying to free art

from representation. Incidentally, the pattern of white lines you see are an artefact of age, the original was pure black.

- **Constructivism emerged separately** around 1915 when **Vladimir Tatlin exhibited his Counter-Reliefs**. The term was coined by sculptors Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo in 1920. Whilst **Suprematists pursued spiritual abstraction, Constructivists demanded utilitarian art serving the Revolution**. Tatlin declared art must serve a social purposes. The movements shared geometric vocabulary but diverged philosophically. Suprematism represented **idealism**; Constructivism represented **materialism**.

NOTES

- Constructivism was a post-World War I development of Russian Futurism founded in 1915 by Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko.
- The term itself was invented by the sculptors Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo, who developed an industrial, angular style of work, while its geometric abstraction owed something to the Suprematism of Kazimir Malevich.
- The artists were excited by what seemed to be the unlimited opportunities presented by the Russian Revolution. They rejected the art of the past and wanted to the unlimited movement rejected decorative stylization in favour of the industrial assemblage of materials.[1] Constructivists were in favour of art for propaganda and social purposes, and were associated with Soviet socialism, the Bolsheviks and the Russian avant-garde.[2]
- Constructivist architecture and art had a great effect on modern art movements of the 20th century, influencing major trends such as the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements.
- In 2015, researchers discovered hidden text beneath the paint. I am now going to read the text which was, of course, written in Russian and usually translated as the racist joke '**Battle of negroes in a dark cave**'. It includes a racist term that is offensive today, and I quote it to show how racism was embedded in the casual thinking of the period. The Russian text is a translation of a 1897 French comic. The point is to show how what was once treated as a throwaway joke about Black bodies and darkness now forces us to confront the racist assumptions behind early modernist abstraction.
- Another much argued aspect of this painting is when it was painted. It is now thought he **backdated the work to 1913** on the canvas's reverse in

order to claim precedence over other artist who claimed to ave painted the first truly abstract work..

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Suprematism: soo-PREM-uh-tiz-um

Malevich: mal-AY-vitch

Petrograd: PET-ro-grad

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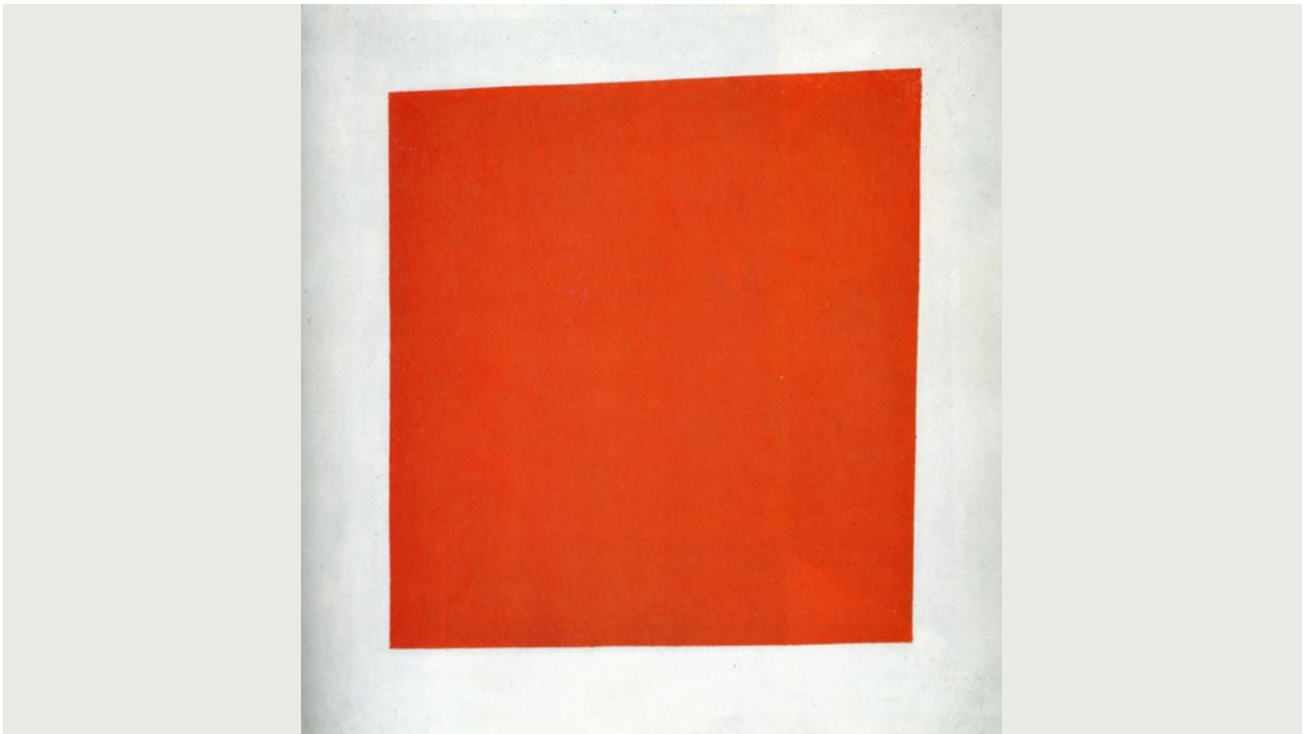
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Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), *Painterly Realism Of A Peasant Woman In Two Dimensions (Red Square)*, 1915, 53 × 53 cm., State Russian Museum Saint Petersburg, On the back canvas of Red Square, there is an inscription that reads "Peasant Woman (Suprematism)," making this one of the first times Malevich used term "Suprematism".

- Malevich exhibited this at the same exhibition. Critics initially dismissed all the works as absurd. One reviewer called them "**meaningless daubs.**" The red square sits at a slight diagonal, suggesting movement and instability. The peasant woman of the title exists only as pure colour and form. No figure appears. Malevich considered Suprematism as an exploration of various forms and colours as well as a step in the evolution of **religious understanding**. The rejection of naturalism was a fundamental premise of Suprematism.
- In 1915 Russia was engulfed in World War One. Over a million Russian soldiers had already died. Food shortages plagued cities. Revolutionary sentiment grew. Malevich believed geometric abstraction could transcend these material horrors. He wrote that Suprematism represented "**the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art.**"
- Born in Kiev to Polish parents, Malevich initially **trained as a realist**. His family survived on his mother's income after his father's plaster factory failed. He moved to Moscow in 1907 aged twenty-eight. There he absorbed Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism from exhibitions organised by wealthy collectors like **Sergei Shchukin** (pronounced "Sair-GAY SHCHOO-kin"). By 1913

he had progressed through these styles to pure abstraction.

- The red square carries symbolic weight. **Red represented revolution, blood, and the peasantry.** By reducing the peasant woman to a red square, Malevich elevated her to universal significance. He stripped away individual identity to reveal pure essence. This aligned with revolutionary ideals of collective identity over individualism.

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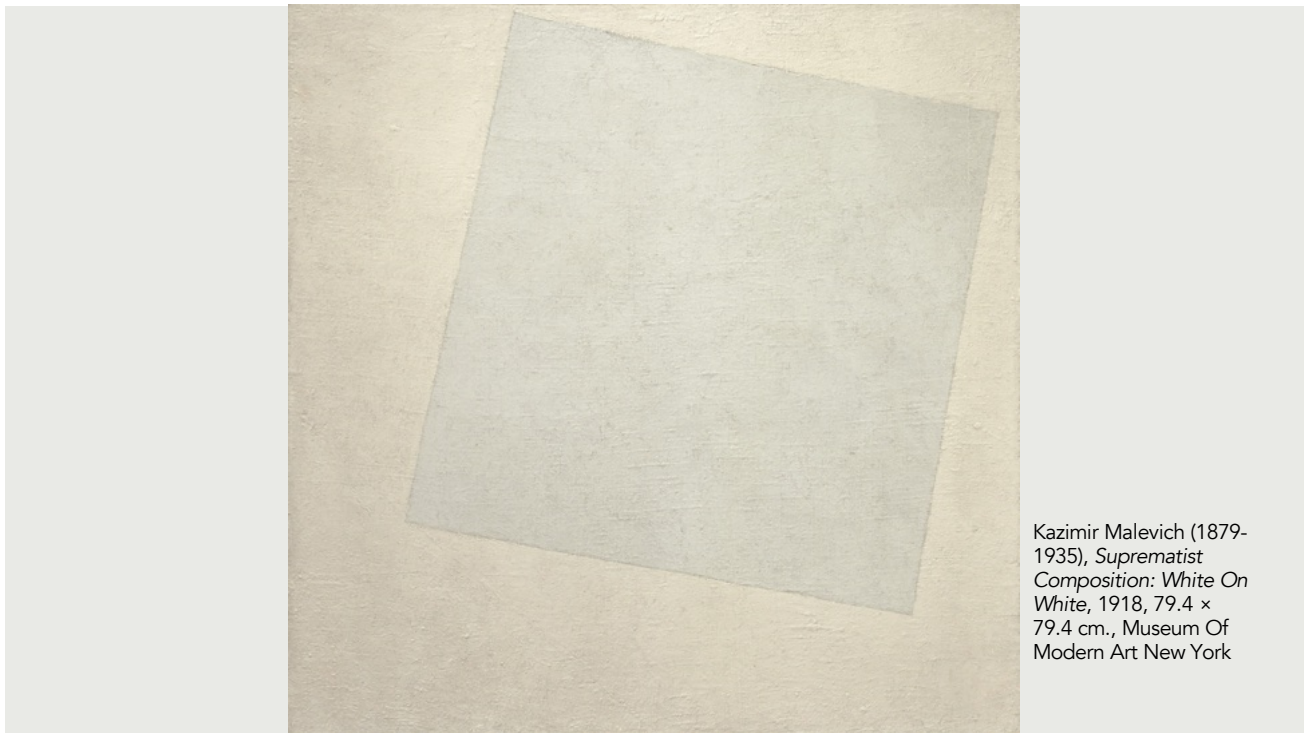
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Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), *Suprematist Composition: White On White*, 1918, 79.4 × 79.4 cm., Museum Of Modern Art New York

Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), *Suprematist Composition: White On White*, 1918, 79.4 × 79.4 cm., Museum Of Modern Art New York

- **White square tilted on white background.** Malevich reduced painting to its absolute minimum. Subtle tonal variations distinguish figure from ground. **Visible brushstrokes** preserve human touch. He intended the floating square to **represent infinity and pure sensation**. This work pushed Suprematism to its logical conclusion. One Constructivist critic **joked** it was merely "**a very good prime coating**" awaiting real art.
- Created **one year after the October Revolution**, the painting embodied **utopian optimism**. Malevich believed **revolution had liberated Russian society**. The tilted square suggested movement into new dimensions. He studied aerial photography to achieve the floating effect.
- The painting debuted in Moscow at the **Tenth State Exhibition** in April 1919. Malevich exhibited **four white-on-white canvases** with a manifesto on **non-objectivity**. Fellow artists divided sharply. Suprematists saw transcendent achievement. **Constructivists saw self-indulgent mysticism**. The debate represented deeper tensions about art's social function.
- Malevich took the painting to **Berlin in 1927** for the Grosse Berliner Ausstellung. Fearing Stalin's tightening grip, he left seventy works with architect Hugo Häring. He never reclaimed them. The works eventually reached MoMA in 1935. Malevich died that year in Leningrad. He requested a Suprematist funeral. A black square marked his coffin. Mourners wore Suprematist armbands.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Grosse Berliner Ausstellung: GROH-suh ber-LEE-ner OWS-shtel-oong

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Lyubov Popova (1889–1924),
Portrait of a Philosopher, 1915,
89 × 63 cm, Russian Museum

Lyubov Popova (1889–1924), *Portrait of a Philosopher*, 1915, 89 × 63 cm, Russian Museum

- Popova was one of the first female pioneers of Cubo-Futurism. She was born into a wealthy family and grew up with a strong interest in Italian Renaissance art. She started to study art formally when she was 11 and became an icon painter in her early twenties. Her privileged upbringing enabled her to **study in Paris from 1912 to 1913**. There she **absorbed Cubism** from teachers Jean Metzinger and Henri Le Fauconnier. We can see here in *Portrait of a Philosopher* how by 1915 she was influenced by Picasso's Cubism.
- She returned to Russia just before war erupted.
- That following year she joined Malevich's Supremus group and was inspired by the idea of creating a new form of art to help remake the world.



Liubov Popova (1889-1924), *Painterly Architectonic*, 1916, 59.4 × 39.4 cm., private collection

- **Here we see how her *Painterly Architectonics* series synthesised Suprematist geometry with Constructivist materiality** indicated by the overlapping coloured planes creating spatial depth. She used the term "architectonic" to **emphasise construction** over expression. Popova embraced both of these ideas but eventually identified herself entirely with the aims of the **Revolution** working in poster, book design, fabric and theatre design, as well as teaching.
- **Her bold colour combinations** distinguished her work. Reds, blues, and greens created luminous surfaces. She emphasised **faktura—the tactile quality of painted surfaces**. Some areas show thick impasto; others reveal bare canvas. This material focus anticipated her later textile designs which explored texture as meaning.
- **Female artists faced significant barriers** in the Russian avant-garde. The **0.10 exhibition included only two women** among fifteen artists. **Popova overcame prejudice** through talent and determination. Critic Nikolai Punin praised her "**exceptional painterly gift**." She exhibited alongside Malevich and Tatlin. Her brother Pavel later preserved her artistic legacy.
- **Popova died** at the peak of her artistic powers two days after the death of her son, from whom she had contracted scarlet fever in 1924 in Moscow.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Liubov: lyoo-BOFF

Popova: po-PO-va

faktura: fak-TOO-ra

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El Lissitzky (1890-1941), *Beat The Whites With The Red Wedge*, 1919, 53 × 71 cm., Museum Of Fine Arts Boston

El Lissitzky (1890-1941), *Beat The Whites With The Red Wedge*, 1919, 53 × 71 cm., Museum Of Fine Arts Boston

Nikolai Kolli, *The Red Wedge*, 1918, the words are "**Красным клином бей белых**" which mean literally "Red Wedge Beat Whites" or "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge"

- This is a famous Soviet political poster, *Beat The Whites With The Red Wedge*. A dynamic red triangle pierces white circle. Bold typography reinforces revolutionary message. Lissitzky created this lithograph during the **Russian Civil War**. **Reds** (Bolsheviks) battled **Whites** (anti-communists). Simple geometry makes the message universally readable.
- Born Lazar Markovich Lissitzky to a Jewish family, he trained as an architect and engineer. In 1919 Marc Chagall invited him to teach at the Vitebsk art school. There Malevich recruited him to Suprematism. **Lissitzky became Malevich's most important disciple**. He synthesised Suprematist abstraction with Constructivist utility.
- The poster's title allegedly **countered antisemitic slogans**. Right-wing monarchists chanted "**Beat the Jews, save Russia!**" Lissitzky's Jewish identity informed his revolutionary commitment. He saw **Bolshevism as liberating oppressed minorities**. The poster transformed hate speech into revolutionary exhortation. Red wedge became red future.
- Art historian Maria Elena Versari connected the poster to **Italian Futurist manifestos** glorifying war. Marinetti's 1914 Futurist Synthesis of War distributed

twenty thousand copies. Lissitzky never acknowledged the influence. However, **Malevich knew Marinetti** and called him **one of "two pillars"** of twentieth-century art. Futurism's aesthetics of violence infiltrated Suprematism.

- (CLICK) In 1918 architect Nikolai Kolli erected a physical Red Wedge monument in Moscow. A red triangle vertically penetrated a white block. Visible cracks suggested revolutionary force shattering old structures. Lissitzky adapted this three-dimensional monument into two-dimensional propaganda. The poster achieved international fame as Constructivism's defining image.

NOTES

- The term Soviet originates from the Russian word sovet (**COBET**), which translates to "council," "assembly," "advice," or "harmony". In the context of the Russian Revolution, it specifically refers to worker councils, which were elected bodies of workers, soldiers, and peasants established to manage local affairs and later the state.
 - Soviet: Refers to a political system or type of governing council. The term Soviet was first used during the 1905 Russian Revolution to describe worker councils, but it became globally recognised following the 1917 February Revolution, when councils (soviets) of workers' and soldiers' deputies were formed to share power with the Provisional Government. The Soviet Union (USSR) was a multinational state comprising 15 republics (e.g., Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia), of which the Russian SFSR was only one. Soviet refers to the communist era from 1917 to 1991.
 - Russian: Refers to an ethnicity, language, or nationality. And refers to the whole history of Russia, the Imperial era, the Soviet era and the post-1991 Russian Federation.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Lissitzky: li-SITS-kee

Vitebsk: vi-TEBSK

Marinetti: mah-ree-NET-tee

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El Lissitzky (1890-1941), *Self-Portrait (The Constructor)*, 1924, 11.2 × 11 cm., Museum Folkwang Essen

El Lissitzky (1890-1941), *Self-Portrait (The Constructor)*, 1924, 11.2 × 11 cm., Museum Folkwang Essen

- Lissitzky's face combines with geometric tools. **Compass and graph paper** overlay his features. The photomontage is a way of saying that **"artist" should be replaced by "constructor"**. This self-fashioning embodied Constructivist ideals. Artists become engineers.
- Lissitzky suffered from **tuberculosis** throughout his life. Illness repeatedly interrupted work forcing him to leave Moscow in 1923 to seek treatment in a Swiss sanatorium. There he met **Sophie Küppers**, director of Hanover's Kestner-Gesellschaft, who became his **second wife in 1927**. She later wrote his biography. Despite ill health, Lissitzky produced prolifically. He designed exhibitions, books, posters, and typography.
- He exhibited this at the **Presa exhibition in Cologne** in 1928. This international exhibition showcased modern communications and **Lissitzky designed the Soviet pavilion**. His work **influenced Bauhaus designers**.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Folkwang: FOLK-vang

Kestner-Gesellschaft: KEST-ner geh-ZEL-shaft

Tschichold: CHI-hold

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El Lissitzky (1890-1941), *Proun 19D*, 1920-1921, 97.5 × 97.2 cm., Museum Of Modern Art New York

El Lissitzky (1890-1941), *Proun 19D*, 1920-1921, 97.5 × 97.2 cm., Museum Of Modern Art New York

- Lissitzky produced a series of works called **Prouns** (pronounced "proons like "moons") meaning "**Project for the Affirmation of the New.**" As he said, "**where one changes from painting to architecture.**"
- Lissitzky developed Prouns to **bridge Suprematism and Constructivism**. He retained **Malevich's geometric vocabulary** but added **architectural solidity**. Collaged materials emphasised texture over pure colour. Spatial recession suggested buildable structures.
- **In 1921 Stalin's government increasingly demanded utilitarian art.** Abstract experimentation faced **hostility**. Lissitzky left for **Germany** as cultural ambassador. He **worked with Bauhaus** artists and De Stijl designers. His *Proun Room* (1923) transformed gallery space into total environment. Visitors entered abstract reality.
- **His influence on Western modernism proved enormous.** He collaborated with **Kurt Schwitters, Theo van Doesburg, and László Moholy-Nagy**. His diagonal compositions influenced graphic design for decades. Constructivism's geometric clarity shaped the International Style. Lissitzky returned to Moscow in 1925. The Soviet Union under Stalin viewed pure abstraction as bourgeois and so Lissitzky became the Soviet Union's leading exhibition designer. He became a master of typography and graphic design and satisfied his need for abstraction using photomontage to arrange photographs of factories or people

into geometric compositions.

- He continued **working until his death from tuberculosis in 1941.**

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Proun: proo-OON

UNOVIS: oo-NO-vis

Moholy-Nagy: MO-hoy nahj

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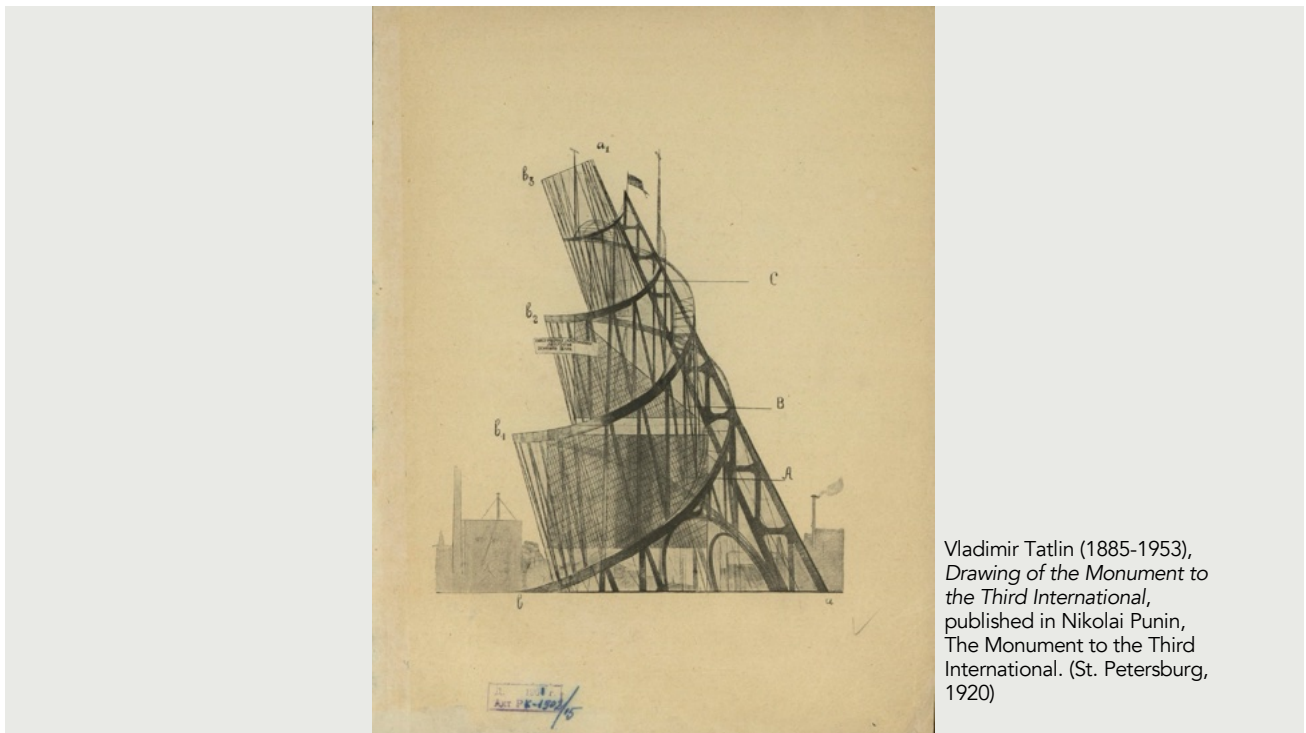
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Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) and an assistant with the *Monument to the Third International* in Moscow, 1920

Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953), *Drawing of the Monument to the Third International*, published in Nikolai Punin, *The Monument to the Third International*. (St. Petersburg, 1920)

- While Vladimir Tatlin, the **father of Constructivism**, was making relief constructions around 1914, "Constructivism" as a defined movement really solidified **after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution**. It reached its peak in the early 1920s. **Artists like Tatlin and Rodchenko** believed Malevich was too mystical. They quarrelled fiercely and their rivalry lasted decades.
- They felt the "true" revolution required artists to become engineers. They wanted to stop making "art" for museums and start designing stoves, posters, uniforms, and buildings for the new Soviet state.
- This is a model of the tower Tatlin designed. It was an ambitious design best understood in this drawing.
- (CLICK) He designed a spiralling iron and glass tower to dwarf the Eiffel Tower. Planned at four hundred metres, it would have been history's tallest structure at the time. More than twice the height of the great pyramid at Giza and taller than the Eiffel Tower and the Shard in London.
- The twin helixes contained rotating geometric volumes. The cube at the bottom rotated once a year and housed the legislature. The pyramid rotated once a month and housed executives. The cylinder at the top rotated daily and housed

the press bureau. Right at the top was a hemisphere that rotated hourly and contained a radio station.

- Commissioned by the Bolshevik government in 1919, the monument embodied revolutionary dynamism. Diagonal thrust symbolised forward momentum. Rotating chambers represented cosmic alignment. Glass transparency signified government openness. Modern materials—iron, steel, glass—rejected traditional stone monumentality. Soviet critic Viktor Shklovsky proclaimed it "made of iron, glass, and revolution."
- **Tatlin exhibited a five-metre wooden model** in November 1920 at his workshop. He relocated it for the Eighth Soviet Congress in December. **The model toured** demonstrations through the 1920s. Photographs document its dramatic presence. Geometric purity and mechanical movement inspired international avant-garde. The Germany Expressionist **George Grosz** held placards declaring "**Art is dead—Long live Tatlin's Machine Art.**"
- **The tower was never built.** Post-war Russia **lacked resources** for such ambition. Tatlin's utopian vision exceeded technological capabilities. Some historians argue the structure was **inherently unbuildable**. The **rotating chambers** presented **impossible engineering challenges**. Nevertheless, the design achieved mythic status. It represented Constructivism's fusion of art, architecture, and social engineering.
- Born in Moscow, Tatlin briefly studied icon painting before discovering Cubism in Paris. He claimed to have visited Picasso's studio in 1913. There he **saw Picasso's assemblages** and decided to surpass them. His Counter-Reliefs of 1915 introduced three-dimensional abstraction. These corner-mounted constructions preceded Gabo's sculptures. Tatlin declared himself founder of Constructivism.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Tatlin: TAT-lin

Shklovsky: shklov-SKEE

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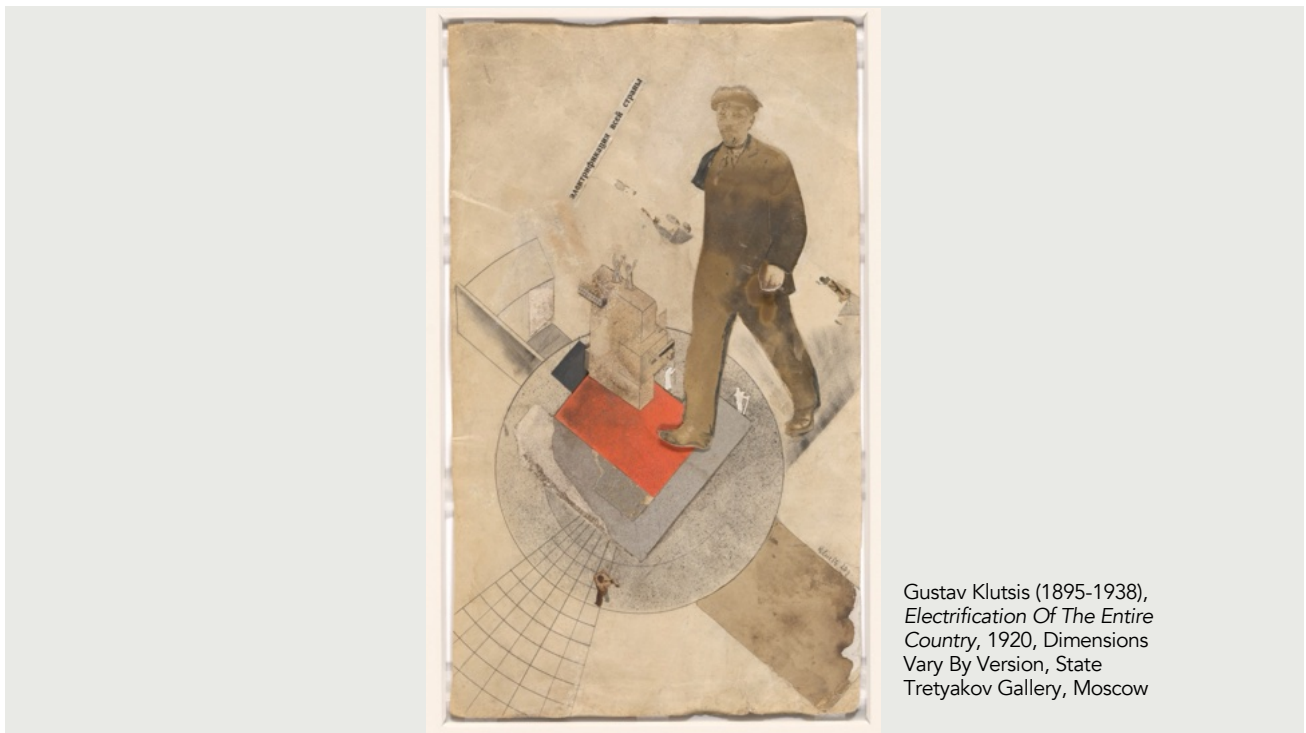
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Gustav Klutsis (1895-1938), *Electrification Of The Entire Country*, 1920, Dimensions Vary By Version, State Tretyakov Gallery Moscow

- **Klutsis pioneered photomontage** combining photographs with geometric shapes. Lenin's figure dominates the composition. Electric towers symbolise **Soviet modernisation**. The work combines **political propaganda** with formal innovation. Klutsis declared photomontage suited revolutionary art's needs.
- **Born in Latvia when it belonged to the Russian Empire**, Klutsis fought in the Latvian Rifles regiment during World War One. He witnessed the October Revolution first-hand. His regiment guarded Lenin. This access influenced his political art. He believed in Communism's transformative potential.
- **Klutsis studied at VKhUTEMAS** (pronounced "vee-khoot-mahss" a Russian acronym that translates to "Higher Art and Technical Studios") **under Malevich and Rodchenko**. He synthesised Suprematist geometry with photographic realism. His Dynamic City designs of 1919-1920 preceded Rodchenko's photomontages. **Klutsis claimed he invented the technique**. Disputes over priority caused friction. Both artists developed photomontage independently from Dadaist precedents.
- The title references **Lenin's electrification campaign**. Lenin declared "**Communism equals Soviet power plus electrification of the entire country.**" Power stations symbolised industrial progress. Electricity would transform peasant Russia into modern nation. Klutsis visualised this transformation through photomontage.

- **Stalin's Great Terror destroyed Klutsis.** In 1938 the NKVD **arrested him during purges.** They accused him of counter-revolutionary activity. He disappeared **into the Gulag.** Execution came soon after. His wife Valentina Kulagina, also a Constructivist artist, survived him. Soviet authorities suppressed Klutsis's work for decades.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Klutsis: KLOOT-sis

VKhUTEMAS: v-khoo-TEH-mas

NKVD: en-ka-veh-DEH

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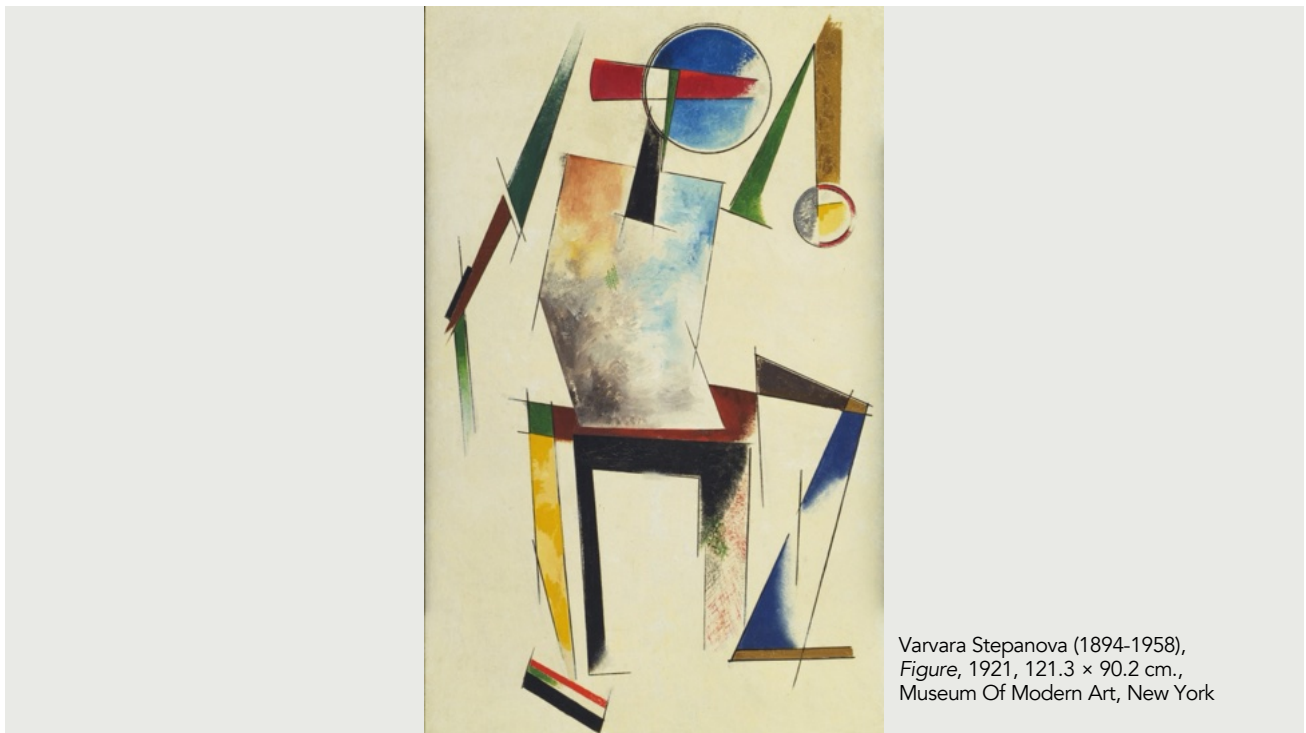
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Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958),
Figure, 1921, 121.3 × 90.2 cm.,
 Museum Of Modern Art, New York

Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), *Figure*, 1921, 121.3 × 90.2 cm., Museum Of Modern Art, New York

- Geometric figure **suggests a human form**. Angular shapes evoke **movement and energy**. Stepanova pioneered Constructivist figurative abstraction.
- **Stepanova met Rodchenko at Kazan Art School in 1910**. Their partnership proved creatively and personally vital. Both joined the Productivist movement in 1921. They collaborated on theatre, textile, and poster designs. Stepanova designed revolutionary sportswear emphasising movement and function.
- Born in Kovno (now Kaunas, Lithuania), Stepanova studied in Kazan before moving to Moscow. She participated in all major avant-garde exhibitions. Her poetry experiments paralleled her visual work. She created **zaum** (transrational) poems rejecting conventional meaning. Sound and rhythm superseded semantic content.
- At the **5×5=25 exhibition**, Stepanova showed five Constructivist compositions. She declared: "**Technology and industry have confronted art with the problem of construction as an active process.**" She distinguished composition (intuitive) from construction (rational). Constructivists built; they didn't compose.
- Stepanova designed costumes for Vsevolod Meyerhold's biomechanical theatre. Geometric patterns emphasised actors' movements. Clothing became functional apparatus. She later worked at the First State Textile Factory designing bold geometric fabrics for mass production. Her patterns translated Constructivist principles to everyday textiles. She outlived Rodchenko by two

years, dying in 1958.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Stepanova: styeh-PAH-no-va

zaum: zah-OOM

Meyerhold: MAY-er-hold

Kovno: KOV-no

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Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), *Non-Objective Painting No. 80 (Black On Black)*, 1918, 81.9 × 79.4 cm., Museum Of Modern Art New York

Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), *Non-Objective Painting No. 80 (Black On Black)*, 1918, 81.9 × 79.4 cm., Museum Of Modern Art New York

- Aleksandr Rodchenko was the co-founder of Constructivism Rodchenko was the one who codified **the movement's rules** and pushed it into the **public eye through photography and graphic design**.
- Rodchenko painted this series as response to **Malevich's White on White**. Where Malevich pursued spiritual infinity, Rodchenko asserted materiality. The painting declared Constructivism's arrival. Black represented concrete reality, not mystical void.
- The debate between idealists and materialists intensified in 1918. **Russia's Civil War raged**. The Bolshevik government struggled to survive. Food shortages worsened. **Artists questioned pure abstraction's relevance**. Could geometric forms feed people? Productivists demanded practical art. **Easel painting seemed bourgeois indulgence**.
- Rodchenko allied with Left Front of the Arts and the group published **LEF magazine** promoting socially engaged art. Filmmaker Dziga Vertov influenced Rodchenko's theories. **Vertov's "kino-eye" documented workers' lives**. Rodchenko adapted this to "photo-eye." He **photographed construction sites, factories, and athletes**.
- At the 1921 exhibition 5×5=25, Rodchenko exhibited three monochrome canvases: pure red, pure yellow, pure blue. He declared painting dead, reduced to its essential components. Five Constructivists—Rodchenko, Stepanova,

Popova, Aleksandr Vesnin, and Aleksandra Ekster—announced their turn to industrial design. The manifesto proclaimed: "We declare the easel picture obsolete."

- Rodchenko's versatility distinguished him. He designed furniture, textiles, theatre sets, book covers, and posters. His Workers' Club for the 1925 Paris Exposition showcased Constructivist design. Collapsible furniture maximised space. Bold colours energised workers. Function dictated form. Stalin's rise ended such experimentation. By 1932 Socialist Realism became official doctrine.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Rodchenko: rod-CHEN-ko

LEF: lef

Vertov: VER-tov

Vesnin: vyez-NEEN

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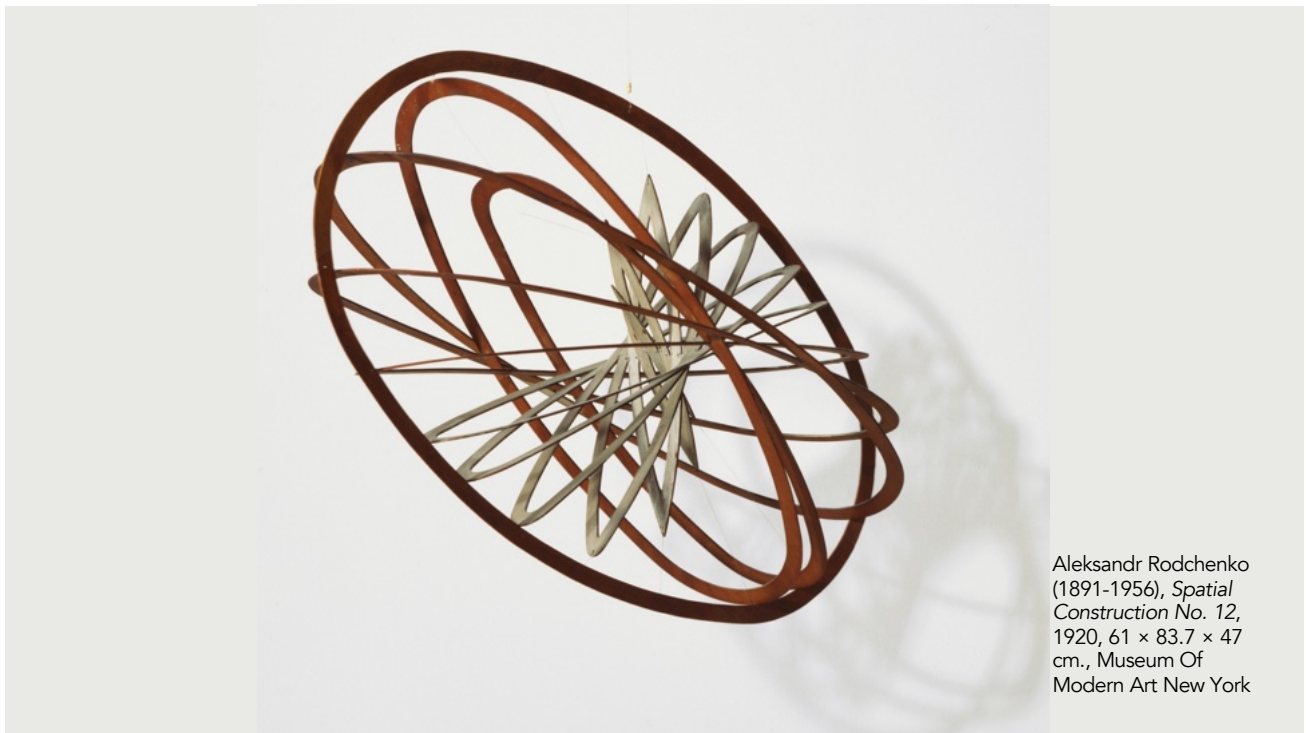
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Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), *Spatial Construction No. 12*, 1920, 61 × 83.7 × 47 cm., Museum Of Modern Art New York

- Rodchenko cut a **single sheet of plywood** into concentric rings. Hung from above, the **sculpture rotates in space**. **No glue or fasteners** join the pieces. **Gravity and tension create structural integrity**. The work demonstrates pure construction. Space becomes as important as material. Rodchenko wrote that he aimed to "**draw in space**."
- Born in **Saint Petersburg** to a working-class family, Rodchenko **studied in Kazan** where he **met artist Varvara Stepanova**. They **married** and collaborated throughout their lives. In 1916 he participated in **Vladimir Tatlin's exhibition "The Store"**. Tatlin's Counter-Reliefs revolutionised his thinking. He abandoned painterly expression for geometric precision.
- Where Malevich sought spiritual transcendence, Rodchenko asserted material reality. **Their rivalry epitomised Suprematism versus Constructivism**. Rodchenko declared easel painting obsolete. He advocated art serving industrial production.
- **By 1920 Rodchenko directed the Museum Bureau** reorganising art education. He taught at VKhUTEMAS, Russia's equivalent of the **Bauhaus**. His hanging constructions **pioneered kinetic sculpture**. Influenced by **engineering and mathematics**, he eliminated arbitrary composition. Each decision followed logical necessity. Form emerged from material properties.
- In **1921 Rodchenko joined the Productivist group** with his wife **Stepanova**

and **Aleksei Gan**. They published manifestos demanding useful art. Rodchenko **abandoned sculpture for photography, graphic design, and typography**.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Rodchenko: rod-CHEN-ko

VKhUTEMAS: v-khoo-TEH-mas

Gan: gahn

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Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), *Lengiz Books Poster*, 1924, 72.4 × 51.4 cm., Museum Of Modern Art, New York

- In 1921, Rodchenko, along with his wife Varvara Stepanova and several others, formed the **First Working Group of Constructivists**. This was the **official birth of the movement** as a collective. While **Tatlin's work inspired** them, **Rodchenko was the driving force** behind their manifesto, which **rejected the "spiritual" art of Malevich**.
- Here **Lilya Brik** shouts in bold Cyrillic letters:
 - **КНИГИ** (Pronounced: **Kneegi**) meaning **"BOOKS"**.
 - The text on the right **ПО ВСЕМ ОТРАСЛЯМ ЗНАНИЯ** (Pronounced: **Po vsem otraslyam znaniya**). Meaning: IN ALL BRANCHES OF KNOWLEDGE (or "In Every Field of Knowledge").
 - Above and below it says **ЛЕНГИЗ** (Pronounced: **Len-geez**). An acronym for the Leningrad Branch of the State Publishing House (Leningradskoye Otdeleniye Gosudarstvennogo Izdatelstva).
- The poster's typography demonstrates modernist principles. Sans-serif letters suggest machine precision. Red and black colours reference revolutionary flags. The woman's direct address breaks the fourth wall. She hails the viewer as revolutionary subject. Books educate workers. Education creates class consciousness.
- Rodchenko photographed **poet Lilya Brik** for this commission. She was married to Osip Brik and the lover of Vladimir Mayakovsky. Her husband Osip

recognised the genius of Mayakovsky and all three lived together in the spirit of Revolution and with the aim of abolishing bourgeois concepts like marriage and jealousy. Rodchenko was a close friend but happily married to Varvara Stepanova.

- Rodchenko began photographing in 1924 after abandoning painting. He acquired a **Leica camera**. **Extreme angles** became his signature. He shot from below looking up, or above looking down. He wrote: "One has to take several shots from different points of view as if one examined it in the round."

- **PRONUNCIATION GUIDE**

Lengiz: len-GLZ

Brik: breek

Mayakovsky: my-uh-KOV-skee

Sovetskoe Foto: so-VYET-sko-ye FO-to

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Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), *Stairs*, 1929-1930, 29.8 × 23.8 cm., Museum Of Modern Art, New York

Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), *Stairs*, 1929-1930, 29.8 × 23.8 cm., Museum Of Modern Art, New York

- Dramatic diagonal captures stairs from above. Figures descend in geometric pattern. Harsh shadows create abstract composition. The photograph transforms architecture into rhythm. Extreme viewpoint makes familiar space strange. Rodchenko wrote: "This is the most interesting point of view of the future."
- Shot at Shukhov Radio Tower in Moscow, the staircase spirals vertiginously. Rodchenko leaned over railings to capture the view. He risked injury for compositional perfection. The photograph exemplifies his belief that multiple perspectives reveal truth. Single viewpoint limits understanding.
- In 1928 Sovetskoe Foto magazine accused Rodchenko of "formalism." Critics claimed his angles distorted reality. They demanded straightforward realism. The attacks marked Socialist Realism's ascent. Stalin's cultural bureaucracy rejected abstraction. Rodchenko was expelled from the October Group in 1931. He continued working but faced constant criticism.
- By 1929 Socialist Realism increasingly dominated Soviet art. Party bureaucrats demanded comprehensible imagery. Rodchenko's formalist experiments faced attack. Critics called his angles "bourgeois deviation." They demanded straightforward documentation. Photography should celebrate workers, not experiment with form.
- Despite pressure, Rodchenko maintained artistic principles. He continued

shooting from radical angles. His photographs for USSR in Construction magazine smuggled modernism into state propaganda. He documented White Sea Canal construction in 1933. The project used Gulag labour. Thousands died. Rodchenko's images ignored this horror, showing triumphant progress instead.

- He survived Stalin's purges unlike many colleagues. His pragmatism kept him alive. He photographed what authorities demanded whilst preserving personal work. After Stalin's death in 1953, Rodchenko returned to abstract painting. He died in Moscow in 1956. Stepanova organised retrospectives establishing his legacy.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Shukhov: SHOO-khov

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Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), *Portrait Of The Artist's Mother*, 1924, 60.2 × 45.3 cm., Museum Of Modern Art, New York

Aleksandr Rodchenko (1891-1956), *Portrait Of The Artist's Mother*, 1924, 60.2 × 45.3 cm., Museum Of Modern Art, New York

- Rodchenko's photograph of his **mother** focuses attention on her **character and presence**. His parents were **working-class**. His father worked as a theatre props master. His mother's name was Olga. He photographed her in their Moscow flat. Despite **Constructivism's rejection of individualism**, Rodchenko created deeply personal portraits.
- This photograph appeared in **LEF magazine**. The Left Front of the Arts promoted photographic realism over painterly aesthetics. They argued **photography's mechanical objectivity** suited Communist ideology. Cameras couldn't lie. Rodchenko's portraits balanced documentary truth with formal innovation.
- His photographic method emphasised texture. He printed on **glossy paper enhancing tonal range**. Dark blacks contrasted with bright whites. Middle greys revealed subtle modulations. His darkroom technique was meticulous. He experimented with exposure and development times. Each print was unique.

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Isaak Brodsky (1883–1939),
Portrait of J.V. Stalin, 1933, 131
× 102 cm, State Museum and
Exhibition Center ROSIZO

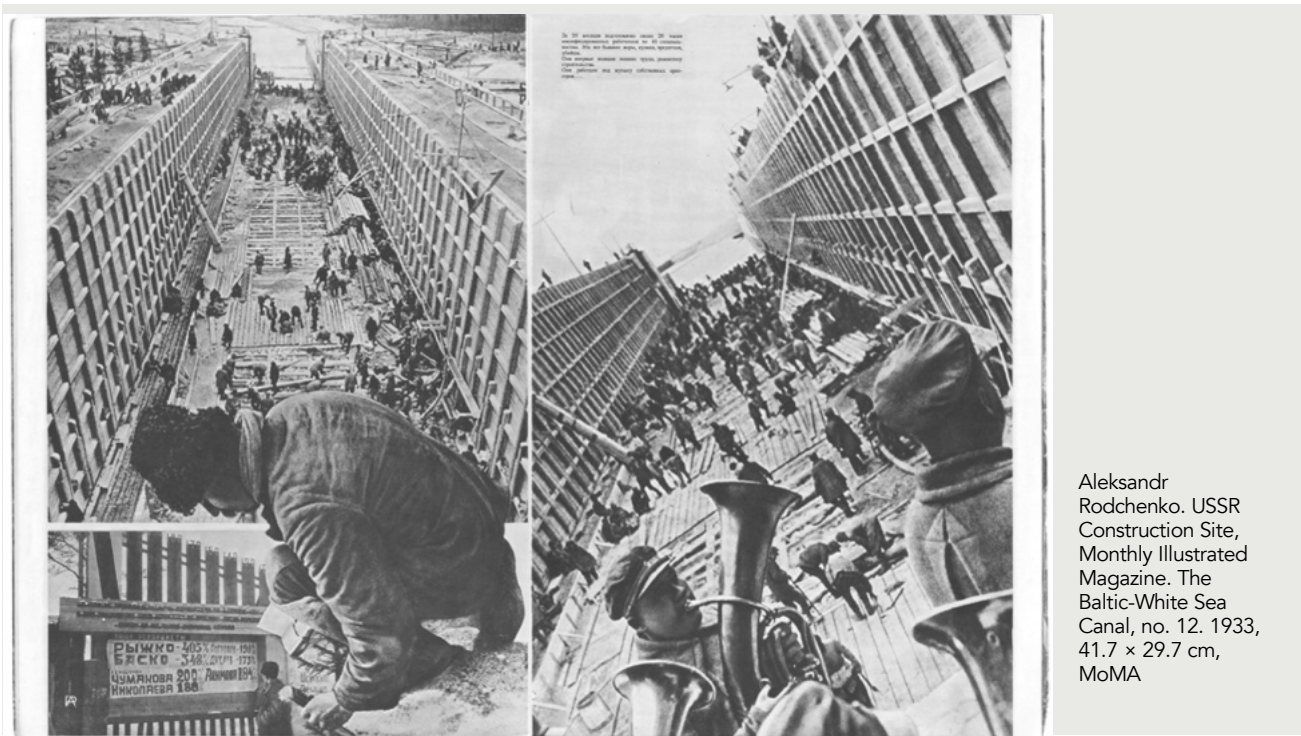
Isaak Brodsky (1883–1939), *Portrait of J.V. Stalin*, 1933, 131 × 102 cm, State Museum and Exhibition Center ROSIZO

- Constructivism and Suprematism **ended in the early 1930s** when Stalin's regime **dissolved independent avant-garde groups** via decree, **imposing Socialist Realism** as the sole official style and **condemning abstraction as "formalism"**. Suprematism, Kazimir Malevich's non-objective art, faded as Party demands prioritised **legible, optimistic propaganda** over pure geometric forms. **Constructivism, initially thrived** in design and industry but was cut back when its spirit of experimentation clashed with the rigid, formulaic heroic figures of Socialist Realism. .
- A prime **Socialist Realism** example is **Isaak Brodsky (1883–1939), *Portrait of J.V. Stalin*, 1933**. Permissible subjects included heroic workers, working peasants, engineers, soldiers, Party leaders, and model citizens shown building socialism with optimism and discipline and this was strictly enforced.
- Malevich shifted to figurative work under pressure, his abstracts hidden until post-death rehabilitation. Popova switched to textiles and theatre but died in 1924 from scarlet fever, evading full repression.
- Vladimir Tatlin abandoned monumental projects like his unrealised tower, turning to conventional still lifes and stage design. Rodchenko faced **expulsion from unions** for "formalism", **surviving via photography** and compliant commissions. Stepanova, his partner, focused on **applied arts like textiles** before retreating to obscurity. Most adapted or withdrew as Stalinism reshaped

Soviet art into a state service.

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Aleksandr Rodchenko. USSR Construction Site, Monthly Illustrated Magazine. The Baltic-White Sea Canal, no. 12. 1933, 41.7 × 29.7 cm, MoMA

Aleksandr Rodchenko. USSR Construction Site, Monthly Illustrated Magazine. The Baltic-White Sea Canal, no. 12. 1933, 41.7 × 29.7 cm, MoMA

- By 1924 Rodchenko had largely abandoned painting. Photography offered direct engagement with reality. **He documented construction projects for "USSR in Construction" magazine.** The board bottom left shows the names of Russian "shock workers" as they were called and the percentage they had exceeded their daily or monthly quota. The smaller text on the right of the board is the women workers. The idea is it would inspire other workers.
- The inclusion of musicians in a construction setting was part of the Soviet propaganda to portray the project as a positive, celebratory event where prisoners were "rehabilitated" through enthusiastic collective labor, a fictitious claim.
- The reality is it was one of the **deadliest infrastructure projects in history.** Estimates of the death toll vary, but most historians agree that between **12,000 and 25,000 people died** during its construction due to exhaustion, starvation, and the brutal winter climate. Some unofficial estimates by survivors like **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** claim over 250,000 died of starvation, exhaustion and exposure..
- It was completed in 20 months, but because it was built in such a rush with primitive tools (shovels and pickaxes rather than heavy machinery), the canal was too shallow (3.5 metres) for the sea-going cargo vessels and large naval ships for which it was intended..

- **Rodchenko and Lissitzky**—were involved in the **propaganda** surrounding these canals. Rodchenko was sent to photograph the construction of the White Sea Canal. He produced a famous issue of the magazine **USSR in Construction** that glorified the project, portraying the forced labor as a "re-forging" (perekovka) of criminals into "**New Soviet Men.**"
- **Critics often point to this as the moment the avant-garde "sold its soul" to the Stalinist regime**, using brilliant graphic design to mask a **humanitarian atrocity**.

NOTES

- The Moscow-Volga Canal was built shortly after (1932-37), specifically to provide Moscow with water and a navigable route to the Caspian, Black, and White Seas (earning Moscow the nickname "The Port of the Five Seas"). Like the White Sea Canal, this was also a Gulag project, managed by the Dmitlag camp—the largest single camp in the Gulag system at the time. While often overshadowed by the White Sea project, the Moscow-Volga Canal was equally lethal. It is estimated that at least 20,000 to 30,000 prisoners died during its construction from the same brutal conditions.

47-01 CONSTRUCTIVISM AND SUPREMATISM

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- Following the Russian revolution artists believed the whole world of art had to be fundamentally rebuilt from the ground up. Their truly revolutionary art was a fore runner of Western abstract art. However, within ten years the Russian state became increasingly proscriptive and then totally controlled from the centre.
- It was not until 1991 that contemporary art was officially recognised as high art" and modern art flourished. However, in recent years political pressure and funding have favoured patriotic, traditionalist and even neo-Soviet Realism.
- That bring me to the end of today's talk. Thank you for your interest, time and attention and I look forward to recording the next talk in my overview of Western Art.



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