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Introduction: The “Historic” Avant-Garde of 1910–30

In the second and third decades of the twentieth century the avant-garde generated a prodigious cultural ferment among artists from Ukraine. One of the first avant-garde art exhibitions in the Russian Empire, the Link Exhibition of 1908, took place in Kyiv, and Ukrainians participated heavily in all the early displays in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In the pre-war years they worked among avant-gardists in Paris, Munich, St. Petersburg, and Moscow. Early in their careers some of the great innovators of Ukrainian art, such as Volodymyr (Vladimir) Tatlin, Alexander Archipenko, Alexandra Exter, David Burliuk, Ivan Kavalieridze, Vadym Meller, and Mykhailo Boichuk, spent time in Paris, Munich, or Berlin. Burliuk and Meller exhibited with Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) group in Munich in 1912. Influences traveled from East to West, as well as West to East. Exter, for example, participated in the Link Exhibition, then in Paris, where she met Picasso, Braque, Léger, and Apollinaire, along with other artists from Ukraine, such as Archipenko, Nathan Altman, David Shterenberg, and Wladimir (Volodymyr) Baranoff-Rossiné (Baranov) living in the city. Up to the time she finally emigrated to the French capital in 1924, she divided her time between Paris, Moscow and Kyiv.

Ukrainian artists made major contributions to the international avant-garde. Kazimir Malevich's suprematism, Tatlin's constructivism, Burliuk's futurism, Archipenko's cubist sculptures, Exter's theater art, and Boichuk's monumentalism or neo-Byzantinism represent only a few examples of their experimentation. Yet, as part of a specifically Ukrainian avant-garde they have been understudied. Even the connections between them have frequently gone unrecognized. This has obscured their contribution as a group to the international movement.

The present volume brings together exploratory essays with the aim of introducing readers to this avant-garde and tracing what in fact was a generational experience that stretched from the pre-war years in Paris and Western European capitals, through the turmoil of 1917–22, to the end of the Soviet 1920s.

Throughout the twentieth century the goal of international recognition remained something of an *idée fixe* for Ukrainians, who often made conscious efforts to bring the country’s unique traditions, sensibility, and worldview to the European cultural high table. Ironically, this goal was perhaps most successfully accomplished by the century’s first and, one might argue, least self-conscious generation, the avant-garde. It was in many respects the most closely integrated into Western European culture. Today the achievements of individual artists have been recognized in many cases, but the Ukrainian dimension to their legacy has not. Somewhat paradoxically, celebrated artists from Ukraine seldom have their roots and sense of identity acknowledged. This aspect of the interpretative matrix is not applied to them—neither, for example, to Burliuk and Malevich, who identified themselves as Ukrainians, nor to Sonia Delauney, Exter, Archipenko, and Tatlin, who linked their work to a Ukrainian inspiration. The essays that follow explore the meaning of such self-identification in specific cases and the distinct accent these artists brought to international art. Five of the essays have been modified and updated from earlier publications.

The first half of the book records the emergence of artistic schools and styles, and the attempt by artists to deal with urgent political and cultural issues. Several essays deal with the cultural and political background in the 1920s. They indicate that the experience of the avant-garde in Ukraine was not the same as in Russia, a fact deliberately ignored in Soviet times and one that has so far attracted insufficient attention among Western researchers. The “Cultural Renaissance” of the 1920s in Soviet Ukraine, the Jewish artistic revival in the country during this decade, the final hurrah of the avant-garde in Kharkiv in the years 1928 to 1930, when experimentation had already been closed down in Moscow and Leningrad—all of this created a situation different from the one that existed in Russia. After contact with the West was broken off at the end of the twenties, Ukrainians were only allowed to participate in “all-Soviet” exhibitions and any attribution of particularism to their work was most commonly defined as “bourgeois nationalism.” Research into the avant-garde and a fuller understanding of this period only became possible when in the 1990s exhibitions were mounted and new materials became available following the opening of Ukrainian archives.

The second half of the book focuses on five individuals: David Burliuk, Kazimir Malevich, Vadym Meller, Ivan Kavaleridze, and Dziga Vertov. These essays challenge some long-established views, arguing, for example, that the Ukrainian context throws light on crucial aspects in the lives and work of these figures. Each individual artist presents particular problems of interpretation, but by situating their work within an analysis of personal biography and cultural context, the essays aim to provide a better understanding of artistic achievement. The focus is mainly on the development of visual arts: painting (Burliuk, Malevich), propaganda posters (Boichuk), theater art (Meller), sculpture (Kavaleridze), and film (Vertov) are examined. Most of these artists experimented with different media. Some, such as Burliuk and Kavaleridze, were also writers, a fact only tangentially discussed in this volume.

The achievements of this generation were remarkable—all the more so, it could be argued, because they were accomplished in a time of rapid cultural transformation and political upheaval. Today this legacy resonates with many contemporaries, particularly in Ukraine, where the avant-garde plays a prominent role in debates around cultural memory. The tensions that have surfaced in these debates indicate the importance of understanding the experience of the great innovators who worked in the early twentieth century. This book examines both the nexus between art and politics and the lives and works of some brilliant and still controversial figures. The search of these avant-gardists for self-awareness and a new modern identity still provides many valuable lessons for contemporaries.

Forging the European Connection

Kyiv to Paris: Ukrainian Art in the European Avant-Garde, 1910–30¹

Modernism emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as an international movement in the arts that emphasized the idea of a radical break with the past and the possibility of a transformed world. Rejecting realism and naturalism, it searched for new literary and artistic forms, often under the influence of photography, cinema, new technologies, and recent discoveries in the sciences. Pre-1914 European modernism is today often associated with the movements of impressionism, symbolism, cubism, and abstractionism. The second wave of modernism, which spanned the years 1914 to 1930, is linked with futurism, constructivism, expressionism, and surrealism, and is also commonly identified with the avant-garde, largely because many of its members were strongly influenced by the rise of radical politics, and sometimes saw themselves as a culturally advanced party preparing the way for revolutionary change.

Boris Groys has argued that the Russian avant-garde was implicated in the totalitarian politics of the twenties and thirties by virtue of its desire to restructure the world “according to a unitary artistic plan” (Groys 1992, 21). However, radical ways of seeing were as often as not rejected by the Bolshevik Party and its acolytes, particularly after they achieved power. The Ukrainian avant-garde in particular cannot be unambiguously identified with the Bolshevik Revolution. It preceded this revolution, frequently challenged it, and was ultimately destroyed by it.

The propagandistic aspects of the Soviet avant-garde, which became dominant, even overwhelmingly so, in the late twenties, have attracted

1 This chapter is adapted from an article that appeared on the Zorya Fine Art website in 2005: <http://www.zoryafineart.com/publications/view/11>.

disproportionate attention among many scholars, who frequently allowed this political and ideological focus to overshadow other innovations. When the West rediscovered the “Eastern” avant-garde in the last decades of the twentieth century, the primary focus was often on its visionary politics and achievements in abstract art. But this movement in the arts was always a complex phenomenon, full of competing crosscurrents. In the 1990s, as new information long suppressed under Soviet rule surfaced, it became clear that the “Eastern” avant-garde not only differed significantly from the “Western,” but was more differentiated internally than had been assumed. Numerous exhibitions at this time explored the different national backgrounds of avant-gardists.²

Pre-war Paris was visited by numerous artists from Ukraine. Among them were Alexander Archipenko, Alexandra Exter, Mykhailo Boichuk, David Burliuk, Wladimir Baranoff-Rossiné (Baranov), Sofiia Levytska (Sonia Lewitska), Abram Manevych, Yosyp Chaikov (Joseph Tchaikov), Vladimir (Volodymyr) Tatlin, and Vadym Meller. They joined prominent older modernists already living there, such as Oleksandr Murashko, Lev Kramarenko, Mykola Burachek, and Ivan Trush.³ It was common at the time for students from Ukraine to be sent to France and Germany as part of their education. In fact, from 1908 to 1914 there were so many Ukrainian artists in the city that they had their own club called the “Cercle des Ukrainiens à Paris” situated in the Latin Quarter at rue Thouin 14, which housed a library with periodicals from Ukraine. Archipenko was an active member, sang in the choir and conducted tours of Paris salons (Popovych 1977, 14).⁴ Travel appears to have been relatively easy. Ivan Kavaleridze has recalled how simple it was to obtain a visa in Kyiv. After producing his passport and ten roubles, he picked up his visa the following day, purchased a train ticket for thirty-two roubles and sixty kopecks and caught the train (Kavaleridze 2017a, 102–3). From Western Ukraine, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, travel was even more straightforward. Although the First World War and the 1917 Revolution in the Russian Empire sealed borders and restricted movement, some artists, such as Oleksander Hryshchenko

2 These exhibitions are mentioned in chapter 11. For post-Soviet reassessments of the avant-garde by Russian scholars see Krusanov 1996, 2003, Petrova 2001. For fresh approaches by Western scholars see Antonova and Merkert 1996, Rowell and Wye 2002. For the best recent volume on Ukrainian artists in Paris see Susak 2010.

3 For a list of 250 Ukrainian artists in Paris see Susak 2010, 361–90. She writes that in 1910, there were 120 members in the Hromada, the colony of émigré Ukrainian artists in Paris (48).

4 On Archipenko’s years in Paris see Susak 2010, 67–73.

(Alexis Gritchenko, Grischenko) and Mykhailo Andriienko-Nechytailo (Michel Andreenko), still found their way to Paris.⁵

Some figures were only briefly in the West, but still made a large impact on the international avant-garde. Tatlin visited Berlin and Paris. His mother was Ukrainian and he was known for wearing an embroidered Ukrainian shirt, singing *dumas* and other ancient songs, and even constructing banduras. In 1913 he found himself in Germany with an orchestra of Ukrainian bandura players, pretending to be a blind musician.⁶ Apparently the Kaiser himself expressed an interest in his playing and singing. Later in France, Picasso was reportedly thrilled by his performance and invited the player to his studio. Here the blind man opened his eyes in enthusiastic appreciation of Picasso's art. In spite of Tatlin's offer to be an assistant (washing brushes, preparing canvases), Picasso is said to have shown him the door (Bazhan 2004, 77). Since Archipenko was creating his early constructivist forms in Paris at the time, it is likely that Tatlin saw them. After returning from Paris, he began to make his own, now famous counter-reliefs in 1914 and 1915.

Other cities, such as Munich, Berlin and Geneva, also attracted artists, among them Meller, Burliuk and Archipenko. After 1922, the work of Tatlin, Malevich and Exter became known in Germany, where it had a strong resonance. Malevich was in Berlin in 1927, and Boichuk visited the Bauhaus in 1926 and 1927. The latter's Mezhyhiria Art and Ceramics Institute, created in 1928, was partly modeled after the German art school.⁷ Numerous artists from Lviv in Western Ukraine also worked in Archipenko's Berlin studio in the early twenties before moving on to Paris, although the strongest contingent of artists was always in the French capital.

Conceptualization of the Ukrainian avant-garde has been hampered by the fact that it has often been subsumed under the term "Russian." For some artists this might be an adequate characterization, especially for those who were originally from Ukraine, spent time in Western Europe before the First World War, but then lived most of their creative lives in Moscow or St. Petersburg (Petrograd/Leningrad). Among them one might count Aleksandr (Oleksandr) Shevchenko, who was born in Kharkiv,

5 On the Parisian life of Hryshchenko and Andriienko see Susak 2016, 98–105, 112–19.

6 The bandura is Ukraine's national instrument. It became popular in the sixteenth century, when wandering minstrels used it to accompany the singing of epic ballads. The instrument has between thirty-two and fifty-five strings and combines features of the lute and harp.

7 The Mezhyhiria Art and Ceramics School was founded in 1921 and 1922. It was renamed the Mezhyhiria Art and Ceramics Technicum in 1923, the Mezhyhiria Art and Ceramics Institute in 1928, and the Ukrainian Technological Institute of Ceramics and Glass in 1931.

and then worked at Eugene Carrière's studio and the Académie Julian in Paris (1905–6); Nathan Altman, who was born in Vinnytsia, studied under Kiriak Kostandi at the Odesa School of Art, and was in Paris on two occasions (1911–12 and 1928–35); and David Shterenberg, who was born in Zhytomyr, studied in a private studio in Odesa (1905) and then in the École des Beaux-Arts, the Vitty studio in Paris (1906–12) and Fernand Léger's studio, exhibiting in various Paris salons before moving to Russia. However, the identity issue is a complex one. Interaction among Ukrainian artists, even when they lived in one of the two Russian capitals, was often intense, and their links with colleagues in Ukraine frequently remained strong. Shevchenko's close collaboration with Hryshchenko (Gritchenko) in Moscow is one such case. Aware of these difficulties, art historians have sometimes identified these artists as members of both the Russian and Ukrainian avant-gardes. Another complication is the fact that many artists from Ukraine were of Jewish origin. Often their careers began in Kyiv and then moved, sometimes via Paris or German cities, to Moscow.⁸ They, of course, brought their own perspective to the rich interaction that produced avant-garde experimentation. As a result, many figures simultaneously belonged to, and are claimed by, the Ukrainian, Russian, Jewish, and Western European avant-gardes.

Nonetheless, it is clear that a number of the most prominent figures in this European avant-garde not only came from Ukraine but drew attention to this fact. Such a self-identification was made by Burliuk and Malevich. The work of a number of others, among them Sonia Delauney, Archipenko, Exter and Tatlin, can be linked to a Ukrainian inspiration. This raises some rarely examined questions. How was their work in Europe and interaction with Western artists influenced by their origins? Are there common features among avant-garde artists who came from Ukraine? As members of Western European, Russian or other avant-garde circles, to what extent were these artists also part of the Ukrainian avant-garde movement, one with its own distinct traits and sensibility?

Even a cursory examination of the artists' biographies reveals a startling amount of travel, which, of course, facilitated the exchange of creative ideas. Discussions of the "Eastern" avant-garde have usually conceptualized influences as flowing from West (Paris, Munich, Berlin, Vienna) to East, although this view has always been challenged.⁹ It is now more widely

8 On Jewish artists from Ukraine who worked in Paris see Susak 2010, 122–53.

9 During the third trip of his Kamernyi Teatr to Germany in 1930, the Moscow theater director Aleksandr (Oleksandr) Tairov, who was born in Ukraine, declared that the "influence is from East to West and not the opposite" (quoted in Koliazin 1996, 174).

accepted that influences in the pre- and post-war years also ran from East to West. However, artists from Ukraine also traveled in large numbers north, to the two Russian capitals. Since the focus of art historians and critics has generally been on events in these cities, they have invariably conceptualized the flow of influences as traveling exclusively from North (St. Petersburg and Moscow) to South.¹⁰ The reality here is also more complex. A pioneering, democratizing, anti-establishment impetus originated in the “South” in part as the expression of a marginalized identity. This suggests that a better conceptualization of “traffic patterns” is required, one that would allow developments in Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Chornianka (Chernianka), and other nodal points to be seen in a context that accounts for the Ukrainian dimension. A brief look at the career of Exter, for example, demonstrates the important role played by the creative ferment in Kyiv.

Exter

Exter appeared regularly in Paris after completing the Kyiv Art School in 1906. She studied in Carlo Delvall’s studio in the Académie de la Grande-Chaumière in Paris (1909), and contributed to the earliest avant-garde exhibitions in the Russian Empire, including the Link (Zveno or Lanka) Exhibition in Kyiv (1908). Through Serhii Yastrebtsov, with whom she had entered the Kyiv Art School and who wrote French poetry under the pseudonym Serge Ferat, she was introduced to Guillaume Apollinaire’s circle. Joining forces with Picasso, Braque and Léger, she began exploring cubism. In 1911 she met Sonia Delauney and was affected by the latter’s chromatic futurism. From Paris Exter then brought back to Kyiv works for Oleksandr Bohomazov, the Burliuk brothers, and others to see. In 1914 she produced the first monograph on Picasso.

The interaction of the Kyiv futurists (especially of Exter, Bohomazov and Burliuk) generated some of the first avant-garde activities within the

10 Krusanov speaks of the “advance of the left into the provinces” but also admits that between January 1915 and February 1917 there were over ninety various futurist events outside Moscow and Petersburg and about sixty in the two cities (Krusanov 2003, book 2, 9). His book is constructed as a study of the dissemination of futurist ideas from the two capitals to the provinces and shows no interest in local or indigenous agency, even though he admits that from October 1917 until the Spring of 1922 Ukraine, Crimea and Southern Russia were cut off from “the center of the country” (Krusanov, 75). When he does turn to Ukraine, he focuses heavily on the activities of Russians and Russian-language publications, even though their activities in the twenties were marginal as compared to those of the Ukrainians.

Russian Empire. All three were influential in teaching and publicizing the new art. They first presented themselves in the November 1908 Link Exhibition in Kyiv, where the main contributors were David and Vladimir (Volodymyr) Burliuk, Bohomazov, Exter, and Baranoff-Rossiné (Baranov). They again exhibited together in Kyiv in 1914 at the Ring (Russian: Koltso, Ukrainian: Kiltse) Exhibition. Artists from Russia also participated in these exhibitions and the Kyivans exhibited in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but during the years of war and revolutionary upheaval (1914–22), when Kyiv was cut off from both Western Europe and Russia, a strong indigenous avant-garde appeared. During these years an intimate awareness of Western artistic developments allowed Exter to create a unique style in both painting and set design. Beginning in 1918 Exter and Vadym Meller designed costumes for Bronislava Nijinska's dance studio and a number of theaters in Kyiv and Moscow. Exter taught at her own studio in Kyiv (1918–20), then at the Higher Art and Technical Studios in Moscow (1921–22) before emigrating to Paris in 1924, where she opened another personal studio. She also exhibited at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes and taught at Fernand Léger's Académie d'Art Moderne. Her influence was also exerted indirectly through the work of numerous outstanding painters and stage designers whom she trained. They included numerous Jewish artists: Nisson Shifrin, Isaak Rabinovich, Isaak Rabichev, Boris (Borys) Aronson, Solomon Nikritin, and Aleksandr (Oleksandr) Tyshler.

Exter's international reputation was secured by her permanent move to Paris, where she was able to spread an "Eastern" influence. She blended cubism, constructivism, and primitivism in her theater designs, costumes, and art. It is less well known that in Kyiv she supported "naïve" artists, usually women artisans from villages who produced embroidered scarves and towels or woven rugs. Her interest in brightly colored folk murals, embroideries, and Easter eggs was stimulated in Kyiv, where she prepared posters for an exhibition entitled "The Folk Art of Bukovyna and Galicia," which opened on April 16, 1917, and where on March 31, 1918, at the opening of an exhibition devoted to the decorative works of Yevheniia Prybylska and Hanna Sobachko, she gave a talk describing the colors and rhythms of decorative folk art, linking the popular love of color in "young" Slavic nations to ancient icons (Exter 1990, 18).

In post-war years the Ukrainian influence in Paris was strengthened by the arrival of immigrants, who brought an awareness of the distinctive work produced in Kyiv by Exter, Meller, Bohomazov, Issakhar-Ber Rybak, and their circle.

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