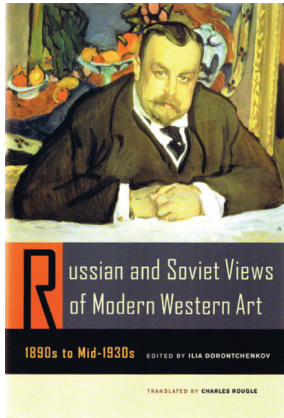


Book Reviews



RUSSIAN AND SOVIET VIEWS OF MODERN WESTERN ART 1890s to Mid-1930s

Edited by Ilia Dorontchenkov

Translated by Charles Rouble

Consulting Editor Nina Gurianova

University of California Press 2009

£20.95 / €25.50 / \$29.95

347 pp. 42 mono illus

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That Russian modernist painting arose out of European modernist trends is well known. And although it is also known that Russian artists and writers had much to say about these trends, both European and Russian, these texts, originally appearing in a wide variety of periodicals and newspapers that may not be easily available, have been difficult of access and consequently little published. That is why this anthology of 130 texts is so welcome to all those working on Russian art, from Symbolism to Socialist Realism. It is an invaluable source of cultural history and art history and their interaction in Russia's changing times and fortunes from the late 19th century to early Stalinism.

The editor, Ilia Dorontchenkov (Professor, Repin Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, and European University, St. Petersburg), has divided the anthology largely chronologically and by artistic trends. This makes it easy to trace the history of Russia's modernism in its many facets.

Hence, the sections include, broadly sketched, Symbolism, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism; Matisse, Picasso, and the Russian collectors of their works; Cubism and Futurism; Russian traditional and folk art; new Russian trends and new visions of Western art; Expressionism; Socialist Realism and the rejection of Western art.

The section on French Impressionism and Post-Impressionism is rich in new material, the extensive texts on the Sergei Shchukin collection and Izdebsky's Salons, for example, providing information and insights that add much to both the veneration of these styles and criticism of it.

Equally rich are the number of texts on Cubism, both for and against. As with the writings on Impressionism, the opinions put forth on Cubism reveal a sub-text in this anthology, that of art criticism and artists' reactions to it.

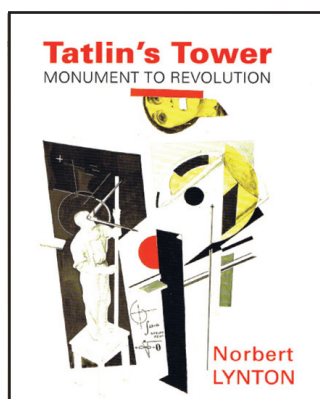
The theme of Russian icon and Byzantine art and the plea for an art arising out of Russia's own traditions are found in the long-needed extracts from Alexei Grishchenko's important writings. They are complemented by several artists' texts.

This debate about the European influences on Russian art, as well as its rejection, is not new to art historians, but with these texts the reasoning behind artistic-cultural notions can now be better understood. Although it is known that socio-political factors began to dominate over purely artistic ones after the October Revolution of 1917, the many aspects of this in relation to Western art are presented here in new depths. Writings by those having strictly political agendas explain the new breed of political painters. Various Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist analyses of art-politics for a proletarian society reveal how art must be separated from Western trends representing, as they did, values contradictory to a state that was becoming a totalitarian regime. To defend Western trends could now mean death, the fate of Nikolai Punin for having defended the art of Cézanne and Picasso.

Dorontchenkov provides a guide to each of the sections based on themes in the texts. His general introduction is an excellent overview to the history of Russian modernism in its artistic traditions, ideas that powered aspects of the Russian Avant-Garde, to culminate with the end of all debate first in a "revolutionary art" and then in Socialist Realism. Dorontchenkov's depiction of how art was forced to succumb to the State is poignant.

Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art is highly recommended for the idea itself in the selection of the texts, in the perspectives they present to understanding the diversity and the complexity of Russian modernism, and in the editor's syntheses of these in his commentaries. This book must be the place to start as a basis for well-informed art history and its social history in Russia.

Patricia Railing



TATLIN'S TOWER – MONUMENT TO REVOLUTION

Norbert Lynton

Yale University Press 2009 / £35 / €35.50 / \$50.00

277 pp. 84 col. & mono illus

ISBN 978-0-300-11130-9

It is inevitable that the opening sentences of a review of Norbert Lynton's long-awaited book on Vladimir Tatlin should begin with a tribute to the author. His book on Tatlin was something he often talked about, sharing his thoughts with his friends and colleagues as the book progressed over the years. It is wonderful, then, to see it in print, Lynton finishing the final manuscript soon after his 80th birthday and just weeks before his death in October 2007.

Lynton says at the outset that the subject of his book "centres on the meaning of [Tatlin's] project for a Monument of the Third International, often referred to as Tatlin's Tower". The method Lynton uses is to place everything in context. From Tatlin's development as an artist, from his sea-faring subjects to the reliefs and counter-reliefs, from around 1911 to 1919, Lynton goes on to discuss Tatlin's artistic circle, then the October 1917 Revolution from which developed a new Russia in turmoil. Now there were Civil War, famine, and daily changes in politics and policies being handed down from above. Lynton describes all this as well as the artistic situation that ensued, the international exhibitions which aimed at spreading the idea of international communism, and Tatlin's contemporaries, the Constructivists. All this is part of the context which situates the wide-ranging ideas that contributed to Tatlin's state commission, his extraordinary project, the Monument to the Third International.

Tatlin was thoroughly involved in this Russia in transformation. In 1918 he was appointed to the Board of the Museum of Artistic Culture, and he was also responsible for the programme of the Monumental Propaganda section, temporary sculptures of great historical figures, then he taught in the Petrograd Academy of Art until 1925 and after that in Kiev.

There are several chapters about the various socio-political ideologies at the time ranging from a Christian-based socialism to the hard-line materialist-based Marxist system that came to dominate. Lynton provides a very interesting picture about certain prominent political philosophers, from Trotsky and Lunacharsky to Bogdanov and Fedorov, for example, who created the utopian and intellectual atmosphere which made up Tatlin's reality. These writers, among others, were inspiring his ideas about the role of art in society and what it should and could do to fulfil its purpose for that society. Indeed, Lynton discusses some of the books known to have been in Tatlin's library, including Khlebnikov and Leonardo da Vinci, and what they may have contributed to the artist's creative ideas.

As Lynton remarks in several places, Russian mentality is to celebrate victory with a monument, the victory over Napoleon having resulted in "the largest church in Russia", the Church of the Saviour on Red Square in Moscow. Having been head of the department of Monumental Propaganda in 1918 and 1919, Tatlin had thought much about the monument and its role, especially those monuments that would be created for the yearly celebration of the two post-Revolutionary events: the October Revolution and May Day. Tatlin himself had been commissioned to create a monument and it would seem that it was in 1919 that "Tatlin decided that his monument to the Revolution would have to be a tower." And this tower would not only signal "Communist evangelism to the whole world", "the two great arches from which the Tower [would] rise were intended to straddle the Neva at the heart of Petrograd". It would "be a giant lighthouse for Petrograd, emulating the Pharos of Alexandria". As the linguist, Viktor Shklovsky, remarked, the Tower would be "built of iron, glass, and revolution".

This vision of such an extraordinary structure was intended to be both a beacon of International Communism and a practical structure: a bridge, a conference centre, and a radio tower. Lynton also sets this vision into its contemporary context – an ideal image of mankind, the work of visionary architects, of visionary engineers and technology, and visionary cosmology.

Indeed, Norbert Lynton's *Tatlin's Tower* is about Tatlin the visionary grounded in the wide context of utopian ideas in his social and political times. It is Tatlin seen in his context that makes this book so important because the reader becomes immersed in creativity within a social history of revolutionary Russia.

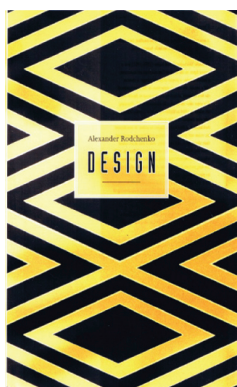
There is also Tatlin the man who Norbert Lynton presents in so many silhouettes. Towards the end of the book, the author quotes a letter to Anna Akhmatova of 1926 from Nikolai Punin, author of the brochure on Tatlin's Tower: "Tatlin came to see me and we had a peaceful conversation.... What a light feeling one has when talking to Tatlin after Malevich: simple

and direct thoughts; what a feeling for art.... I especially like this sense of art when I meet it in people and I have rarely met it in such a harmonious state as it exists in Tatlin.... I love the tenderness of his gesture, his eyes, and voice – he is one of the

is most charming people of our time.”

Norbert Lynton's, *Tatlin's Tower*, is truly a homage to Tatlin, artist and inventor.

Patricia Railing



RODCHENKO DESIGN
John Milner
Antique Collectors' Club
2009 / £12.50
96 pp.
Many col. and mono illus
ISBN 978-1-85149-591-7

EL LISSITZKY DESIGN
John Milner
Antique Collectors' Club
2009 / £12.50
96 pp.
Many col. and mono illus
ISBN 978-1-85149-619-8



The Antique Collectors' Club has been publishing major studies on Russian modernism for several years, with a special emphasis on the Russian Avant-Garde. They recently began a series on *Design* and to their previously published titles on British designers they have now added books devoted to two of the most prominent Russian Avant-Garde designers.

Although contemporaries and colleagues in Moscow in 1921 at the very avant-garde art school, the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops, VkhUTEMAS, Aleksandr Rodchenko and El Lissitzky were very different kinds of designers.

Teaching furniture design in the metalwork faculty, Rodchenko was developing his ideas three-dimensionally, his lamps, tables, chairs emerging from the artist's basic constructivist vocabulary of the straight line and the plane surface. With these artistic tools he also turned to flat design. His many book and magazine covers as well as advertising images (he did over 100 ads for biscuits, carpets, shoes, and so on) were bold and always striking, Rodchenko relying on repeat patterns and oversized letters. His posters had the same ability to catch the eye using the same principles. When he incorporated his innovative photographic angles into advertising or political posters, dramatic spatial perspectives took over the role of the typographic word.

Lissitzky was but a passing figure in the Moscow VkhUTEMAS, but during his previous three years teaching architecture and graphic design in Vitebsk at the Practical Art Institute with Kazimir Malevich he had produced posters

whose visual appeal relied on great Suprematist depths of space along diagonals. It was in Germany during the 1920s that Lissitzky excelled as a designer, producing books and then installations that literally cut through space in all directions. His training as an architect gave him a spatial awareness that he incorporated into all his design work.

These two beautifully presented little books reveal the breadth of creativity of each of these Russian designers of the 1920s. The author, John Milner, introduces the sections of plates with brief biographical outlines, to then situate each artist in the cultural context of post-Revolutionary Russia.

Rodchenko worked in Russia on state commissions for his posters, advertising and book design, while his covers for the journal *LEF* and *New LEF* were done within that group and in collaboration with writers and poets, Vladimir Mayakovsky in particular.

Lissitzky's career was on the stage of International Constructivism. His most important commissions were in the museum setting and in international trade exhibitions where he could combine his talents as an architect and as a designer.

It is fine to have these two books as basic references on two of the most important Russian Avant-Garde designers. John Milner provides excellent summaries of information and ideas and the reproductions of the works are in themselves visual essays. This series, *Design*, is particularly useful for students, just as it is a pleasure for all those interested in the creative imagination that manifests in design.

Patricia Railing