

Exhibition and Book Review by Maria Valyaeva

THE FIRST ALEXANDRA EXTER EXHIBITION IN MOSCOW



1 • Installation of Alexandra Exter, Moscow Museum of Modern Art, May-August 2010

The exhibition of Alexandra Exter's creativity that took place in the summer of 2010 at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art was almost the first one-woman show of this distinguished Russian avant-garde artist. During her life time only once was she honoured with her own exhibition: it was held in the Prague Museum of Applied Arts in 1937, but the works shown there were limited to her designs for sets and costumes for the theatre.

Moscow – The 2010 Exter exhibition curator Dr. Georgy Kovalenko had the aim to bring together all the aspects of the artist's oeuvre and to organise an outstanding retrospective devoted to the artist from her early period to the end of her career. The originality of Kovalenko's conception was reflected in the arrangement of the exhibition space: a special room was designed as a cinema hall where the films of the 1920s in which Exter participated were shown. The public could see the famous scenes from *Aelita*, the screen version of Alexei Tolstoy's Martian fantasy where the characters moved about in Exter's exotic Constructivist costumes. So from the

very beginning visitors were absorbed in the atmosphere of the enthusiasm of the early 20th century.

Rooms showing oil paintings, book illustrations and works for the theatre were organised according to classic museum traditions. Restrained and soft light fell on the canvases and graphics on the walls hanging at rhythmical intervals. The exhibition opened with quite early paintings of the beginning of the century, most of them still lifes having the characteristics of Cézannist and Fauvist aesthetics common to the work of many young avant-garde artists who strived to become free of the academic style. Next to these there were Exter's first daring independent discoveries. In the landscapes and still lifes of the 1910s she worked out a manner that later was given the title of Russian Cubo-Futurism. She was more informed about the new European trends than many others because she travelled to France early on where she had a permanent studio, as well as to Italy where she had a chance to get closely acquainted with Futurism. A small *Still Life* of 1915 in the Tretyakov Gallery



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is among the pearls of this collection of early paintings (depicted on the cover of G. Kovalenko, *Alexandra Exter*, Vol 1, below). It was a pity that only a single piece from this national museum was put at the exhibition organizer's disposal while such a masterpiece as the Tretyakov Gallery *Florence* of 1914 remained in its own museum.

Nevertheless, with his curatorial professionalism, Dr.Kovalenko was able to reveal Exter's evolution to a high standard. He concentrated his focus on the non-objective period of her art of 1910 to the 1920s. Several of Russia's provincial museums were invited to take part in the show as were some private collections. Thanks to them there were rooms with the artist's *Color Dynamics* and abstract *Compositions* that were at the peak of Exter's artistic development and which became the high point of the exhibition. Bright colors and brilliantly composed plastic forms in these works attracted and inspired the public. I saw how "flocks" of young students admired the paintings and recorded their impressions in their notebooks. One of the best abstract works recently acquired by the MMMA

permanent collection was thoroughly examined during the exhibition by its staff for an analysis of the materials in view to future studies on Exter's manner of working.

Following the artist's mature figurative easel works the book illustrations of her French period were on view in small intimate rooms. And the real finale of the exhibition was in the stage sets and costumes for the performances of the Moscow Chamber Theatre. The series of *Famira Kifared*, *Salome* and *Romeo and Juliet* included large gouaches on paper and different variants of sketches which beautified the walls of last rooms. The Moscow Bakhrushin Theatre Museum kindly gave many works from its stores proving itself much more generous than the Tretyakov Gallery was.

In general the exhibition undoubtedly fulfilled the task of a complete review of Exter's development. Its attendance was good despite the summer time. And not only the Moscow public and tourists could see the collection because, after it closed, it departed to the town of Samara where it was also a great success.



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Georgii Kovalenko, *Alexandra Exter*

A fundamental two volume monograph, *Alexandra Exter*, was published on the occasion of the exhibition at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art in 2010 within its special publication program. The edition was supported by the Moscow Government and the Russian Academy of Arts. Five large financial, industrial and service companies were also partners and this made it possible not only to publish the monograph but to give the author the opportunity of including a lot of images of the artists' works from thirty seven Russian and European museums and private collections. Therefore one of the most complete series of Exter's creations could be reproduced on the pages of these two volumes.

The author of the monograph is Dr. Georgii Kovalenko who is an acknowledged Russian art history scholar and researcher in the creative activities of Alexandra Exter. Previously, Dr Kovalenko had published four books and more than 250 articles on this subject both in Russia and abroad. The monograph can be considered to be the climax of his long-term examination of archives and collections where documents and works by Exter are kept. Many years ago he began with the analysis of the artist's theatre experiments. Now he is the one who is able to summarize all the periods of Exter's evolution and the many aspects of her work.

Dr. Kovalenko has arranged his monograph mainly according to the chronological principle. There are ten chapters in two volumes and an important scientific annex containing articles, letters and memories of Exter, a chronology of her life and art, a list of exhibitions and a bibliography.

The book is opened by the chapter, "The First Kiev Years". "Towards Cubism", "Cubism", "Cubo-Futurism", "Color Dynamics" and "In the Kamerny Theater" follow it, closing the first volume with many of the best of Exter's early work for the stage. The works of the turn of the late 1910s to the 1920s are considered in chapter VII, "Kiev – Odessa – Kiev" which opens the second volume. Here the panorama of the artist's activities widens. Applied arts, posters and book illustrations, dresses and exhibition design join her theatre experiments that together demonstrate her interest in Constructivism in this period of time.

Exter was a unique person among serious professional artists who in the 1920s tried her hand in a new field – film design. In 1924 she created the fiction story, *Aelita*, that was quite original but severe in style. "Exter's constructivist language was clear and simple, a language of forms that was not hidden and did not hide anything", as Kovalenko laconically characterises her manner in scene design, the cinema and the easel works of the 1920s in chapter VIII, "In Moscow (1920-1924)".

Chapter IX, "Paris", shows how gradually Exter's style had been changing after she left Russia. Chapter X, "Les Livres Manuscripts", is the last and is devoted to Exter's unique work for the book during the 1930s – 1940s in France. Few people could have ever seen these special plastic dialogues of the artist with poets and "almost nothing has been written about them" because most of the books are in private collections. In the monograph, Dr. Kovalenko has published a number of them, acutely observing their pictures, contents and scripts.

This new monograph, *Alexandra Exter*, is published



Cover of *Alexandra Exter*, Volume 1



Cover of *Alexandra Exter*, Volume 2

in Russian and English. Volume I has 303 pages and and volume II has 361 pages. The edition successfully served as a catalogue for the *Alexandra Exter* exhibition in the Moscow Museum of Modern Art in 2010. Soon it surely will become a real rarity.

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