

amazons
OF THE
avant-Garde

ALEXANDRA EXTER,
NATALIA GONCHAROVA,
LIUBOV POPOVA, OLGA ROZANOVA,
VARVARA STEPANOVA, AND
NADEZHDA UDALTSOVA

EDITED BY JOHN E. BOWLT AND MATTHEW DRUTT

GuggenheimMUSEUM

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SIX (AND A FEW MORE) RUSSIAN WOMEN OF THE AVANT-GARDE TOGETHER

CHARLOTTE DOUGLAS

In Natalia Goncharova's *Self-Portrait with Yellow Lilies*, 1907 (fig. 3, plate 13) the painter stands before a wall chock-full of work, holding a bouquet of tiger lilies. She confronts the viewer without pretense, withholding nothing, directly and openly pleased with the paintings behind her. We see her plain, her hair held close to her head by a scarf. The feminine ruffle on her sleeve is countered by the awkward, muscular right hand emerging from it, a powerful hand, which seems only temporarily to have exchanged the painter's brush for orange flowers.

Goncharova gives us here a splendid image of the women of the Russian avant-garde: like the artist looking out at us from *Self-Portrait with Yellow Lilies*, most of these women were vital and direct, hardworking, competitive, and uncompromising in their view of themselves. As the subject of an exhibition they would seem the ideal group — women artists who lived in the same time and place, who knew each other, and whose art is substantial enough to merit the attention of even a male-privileged history.

Yet in looking at this exhibition the viewer should be cautious, for the show raises certain interpretive questions. On what basis can we treat these six artists as a "group"? There is no evidence that they considered themselves a separate category — "female artists" — and in fact they would certainly have considered such a distinction a form of marginalization. Their letters, diaries, and memoirs, as far as we know them, reveal little consciousness of gender identity, at least in terms of their art.¹

Perhaps the best reason for isolating these women from their male colleagues is to enable us to consider in detail their striking successes and the centrality of their work in their time, which seem so unusual in the experience of the rest of the Western art world. Why, we want to ask — for our own sake — these women at this time in this place? It is an interesting historical question. Even so, we should not lose sight of the fact that the artists themselves would have felt it artificial to single them out, and quite beside the point. They accepted and worked almost completely within the male exhibition-and-sales paradigm, and they considered themselves artists first, zealous participants in a great aesthetic revolution. In this, a gendered identity seems to have played hardly any role at all.

But the viewer should take care not to judge these women — their identities as modern artists or their summary artistic merit — on the basis of paintings alone. As we view the exhibition we should remember that in no case did their artistic record consist only of painting; like many of their vanguard peers, they responded to the demands and interests of their times with a variety of artistic forms. True Modernists, who felt they could and should change the look of the world at large, they were stage designers, sculptors, photographers, and designers of books, textiles, and clothing. Therefore, I include here the activities of Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, Varvara Stepanova, and Nadezhda Udaltsova beyond their engagement with the tradition of studio art.

An important question is how the women interacted. Did they know and identify with one another? Did they work together? Share artistic or other interests? Have similar experiences? Influence each other? Most shared a social class. Of the six artists in the exhibition, four were financially and socially secure. In their artistic activities Goncharova, Exter, Udaltsova, and Popova exercised the self-assuredness of the urban middle class; their male counterparts, by contrast, were more likely to be less well off and from the provinces. The friends and connections of the women undoubtedly offered certain advantages — in the reception of their exhibitions, in publicizing their work, and in the recruiting of potential patrons.

Goncharova was the oldest. A year older than Exter, four years older than Sonia Delaunay, five years older than Udaltsova and Rozanova, she served as a role model and set the stage for the others. Behind the deceptively demure exterior that looks out at us from old photographs of her was a delightfully irreverent, sexy woman, passionately outspoken about artistic matters. Goncharova sometimes favored an extremely low décolleté, sported trousers on occasion, and without any thought of marriage lived openly with the painter Mikhail Larionov. Her exuberance and directness scandalized society, and she often outraged critics and official guardians of public morals, who expectantly examined her art for evidence of hidden meanings. Such attention more than once hindered the progress of her career.

Goncharova's connection with future members of the avant-garde dates from

1906, when she was associated with the Symbolist journal *Zolotoe runo* (*The Golden Fleece*) and also met the future impresario Sergei Diaghilev, who facilitated her entry into the Russian section of the Paris *Salon d'Automne*. The next year she joined a group of Symbolist painters, Venok-Stephanos (a coupling of the Russian and Greek words for "wreath"). With Larionov; Aristarkh Lentulov; Liudmila, David, and Vladimir Burliuk; Goncharova exhibited Impressionist still lifes and landscapes in December 1907 at the gallery of the Stroganov Art Institute in Moscow, an exhibition that moved to St. Petersburg the following spring. A year later, in November 1908, she, the Burliuks, and other colleagues from Venok-Stephanos joined with Exter, a graduate of the Kiev Art Institute, to produce an exhibition in Kiev that brought together young artists from Russia and Ukraine. Appropriately called *Zveno* (*The Link*), this exhibition was one of the first to unite key participants in the future avant-garde. Here, for the first time, works by Goncharova appeared with those of Exter.

The Link had significance beyond the presence of these two major women artists: it created an important connection between the Art Nouveau–inspired arts-and-crafts movement in Russia (associated with Mariia Tenisheva's school in St. Petersburg) and the fledgling Russian and Ukrainian avant-garde. Over the next ten years, this early connection was to condition the association of applied-art and avant-garde styles. The number of women artists in *The Link* is remarkable: of a total of twenty-six artists, eleven were women. The group from St. Petersburg, led by Liudmila Burliuk, included Agnessa Lindeman and Erna Deters, already recognized for their Art Nouveau embroidery, and Natalia Gippius, a sculptor and one of the three talented sisters of the flamboyant and well-known Symbolist poet Zinaida Gippius. Other participants included the graphic artist Mariia Chambers (recently married to the artist Ivan Bilibin) and Evgenia Pribylskaia, like Exter a graduate of the Kiev Art Institute. Pribylskaia soon began to direct workshops in the Ukrainian village of Skopty that produced women's handwork, reviving traditional patterns and producing new folk designs.² In *The Link* Exter showed still lifes, pointillist scenes of Western Europe, and embroidery, an art form in which she also had a strong interest. From this time on she regularly exhibited embroidery and designs for embroidery alongside her painting. In succeeding years, she organized a group of women to produce abstract embroidery for avant-garde artists, including Sofia Karetnikova, Popova, Rozanova, and Kazimir Malevich.³

Both Exter and Goncharova pursued an active exhibition schedule with avant-garde groups in the major cities. Unlike Goncharova, who early in her career had personal and professional friendships with a variety of established artists, Exter from the first was drawn primarily to the developing avant-garde. After her graduation from the Kiev Art Institute and subsequent marriage to Nikolai Exter, a prominent Kievan lawyer, she threw her energies into a life of art both at home and

abroad. The actress Alisa Koonen describes in her memoirs how different in nature and appearance the two women were, Goncharova seeming very Russian, Exter more Western. But they were similarly militant, she notes, when the conversation turned to questions or principles of art.⁴

Exter was part of *The Salon*, an exhibition of Russian and Western artists that opened in Odessa in December 1909, moved to Kiev in February 1910, and then on to St. Petersburg and Riga. Although Goncharova was not initially among the exhibitors, she managed to be added to the show when it reached St. Petersburg. In the spring of 1910, both women took part in the inaugural show of the Union of Youth, an association of progressive artists in St. Petersburg.⁵ The Union, which included the female artists Elena Guro, Anna Zelmanova, and, from 1911, Rozanova, had wide-ranging interests, following German developments especially.⁶ The direct emotion, economy of means, and bright color of painters such as Erich Heckel, Ernst Kirchner, Max Pechstein, and Kees van Dongen (a Dutch-born artist who exhibited with Die Brücke) particularly appealed to them. Up until 1912, when many Russian painters began to develop styles inspired by Cubism and Futurism, the German painters were an important source of inspiration for this wing of the avant-garde. Both Exter and Goncharova were also represented in the December 1910 exhibition of the Moscow Jack of Diamonds, an ad-hoc exhibition group organized late that year.

Goncharova would not travel abroad until 1914, but Exter was a consummate traveler, and beginning in 1908 she lived abroad for months at a time. Her frequent travels between Russia and the West — Switzerland, France, Italy — provided subjects for the Post-Impressionist studies of the Swiss countryside and the Paris streets that she brought to exhibitions in Kiev and St. Petersburg. It was Exter who was often responsible for the Russian avant-garde's almost instantaneous information about the contents of the most recent Paris shows, or about the latest discussions on Cubism. In Paris she worked at the studio of Carlo Delvall, at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and maintained her own studio as well. She came to know everyone — Guillaume Apollinaire, Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, Ardengo Soffici — and was readily accepted in Western exhibitions. During her time in Paris, Exter also met Sonia Delaunay, who moved in the same circles. Delaunay too had been born in Ukraine, but as a child she had been adopted by a wealthy aunt and uncle and was then brought up in St. Petersburg. After her marriage to Robert Delaunay, she maintained a household in Paris that was particularly welcoming to Russian and Ukrainian artists, who visited the Delaunays and sometimes stayed with them for lengthy periods.

After the first *Jack of Diamonds* exhibition closed, in January of 1911, several of its organizers filed the documents necessary to incorporate the "Jack of Diamonds" as an official artists' organization.⁷ Goncharova and Larionov with-

drew, however, sensing their lack of control of the group, and instead began plans for a new organization that would emphasize their particular interests, and in which they would clearly be the leaders. David Burliuk and Lentulov took over as the organizers of the Jack. Neither Goncharova, Exter, nor for that matter any other woman was among the signatories of the Jack's registration papers.

Exter sent seven works to the second *Jack of Diamonds* exhibition, which opened late in January 1912. The show also included the German artist Gabriele Münter and other contributors to the contemporaneous second exhibition of the Blaue Reiter group in Munich. In connection with the Moscow exhibition, Burliuk arranged evenings of lectures and debates,⁸ and toward the end of the first of these, as audience members were participating in a discussion, Goncharova made a dramatic entrance and objected loudly to the artist Nikolai Kulbin's characterization of her as a member of the Jack of Diamonds. In fact, she declared, she belonged to the "Donkey's Tail"! The audience burst into laughter. "There is no reason to laugh at the name. First see the exhibition when it opens — then laugh. To laugh now is ignorant."⁹ Goncharova then gave a long disquisition on the origins of Cubism and its relation to primitivism, and claimed to have been the first Russian Cubist. She also criticized the Jack of Diamonds for artistic conservatism, excessive theorizing, and weakness of subject matter. A few days later she repeated her accusations in long letters sent to several newspapers.

Goncharova's performance was smart publicity: a month later, when The Donkey's Tail group exhibited for the first time, at the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, there was great anticipation. The exhibition, a combined show with fifteen members of the Union of Youth, included some half a dozen women, most notably Rozanova. Goncharova was the only woman in The Donkey's Tail section of the show, but this was compensated for by the size of her contribution — she exhibited fifty-four works.

The alliance of The Donkey's Tail and the Union of Youth brought Goncharova and Rozanova into many of the same exhibitions. Rozanova had sent eight works to the Union of Youth section of *The Donkey's Tail* exhibition that March, and Goncharova participated in The Donkey's Tail section of the Union of Youth's December show in St. Petersburg. Both artists contributed strong paintings, yet radically different ones: Goncharova was then pursuing an interest in peasant themes and naïve art, while Rozanova's style was quick and expressive, and her subjects were urban.

Goncharova and Larionov introduced Rayism (sometimes known as Rayonism), their new, near-abstract style of painting, at *The Target* exhibition in March 1913. Anecdotal history says that the Rayist Manifesto, though written by Larionov, had been instituted by Goncharova.¹⁰ At the same time, Goncharova was preparing a solo exhibition, a survey of her works from the preceding ten years.

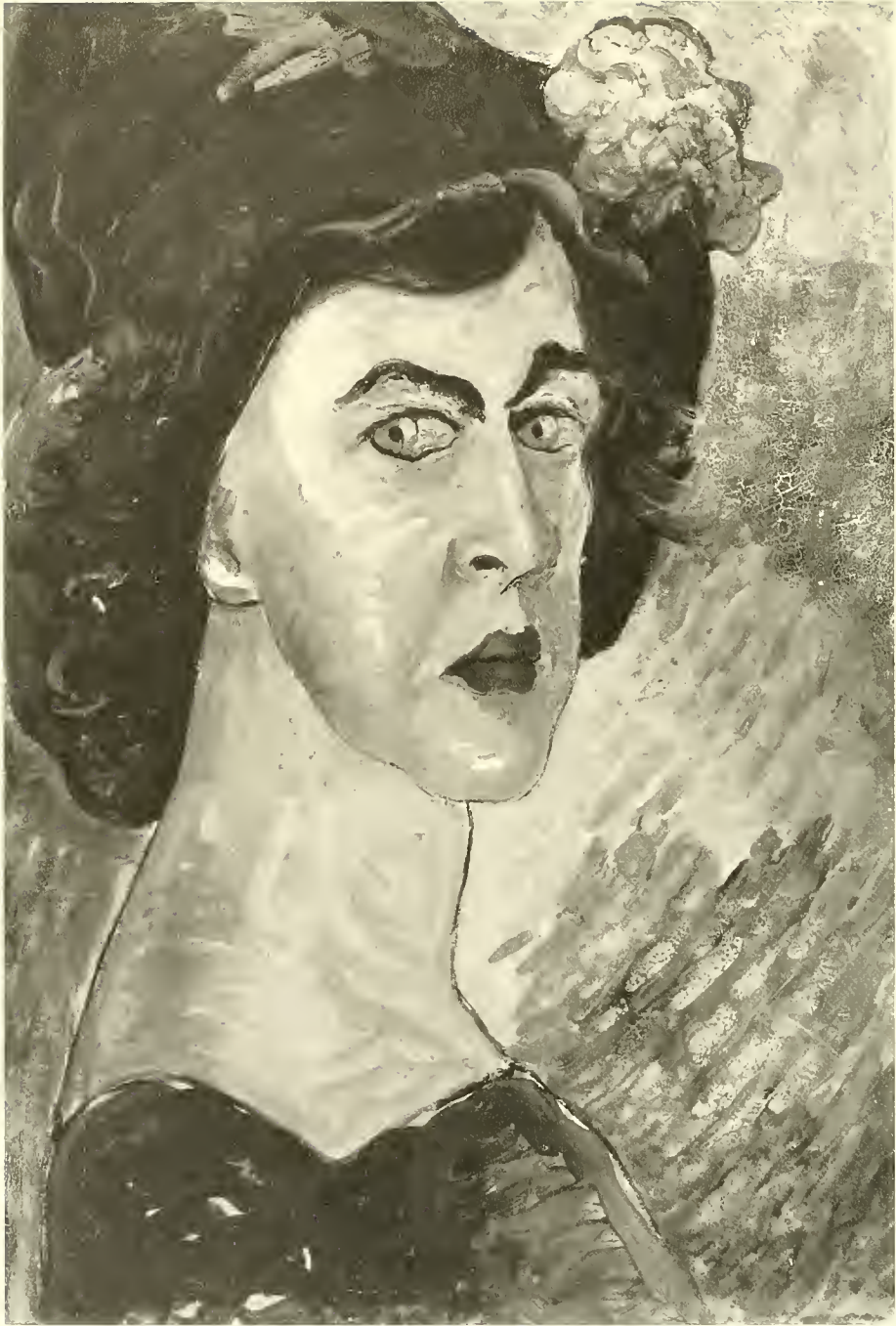


figure 4. MARIANNE WEREFKIN
[Marianna Verevkina]
Self-Portrait I, 1910
Tempera on cardboard, 51 x 34 cm
Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich

Opening in fall 1913, the show presented a staggering 760 artworks in a variety of media and styles — oils, pastels, tempera, primitive, Rayist, Cubo-Futurist, Egyptian.¹¹ The following spring, 250 of the works went to St. Petersburg for another solo show. The exhibitions were a highlight of the season, and impressive enough to reverse critical opinion of the avant-garde in general and Goncharova in particular. Goncharova, Diaghilev wrote, “has all St. Petersburg and all Moscow at her feet.”¹²

The years 1912 to 1914 were also successful in terms of exhibitions abroad for Goncharova, and for Exter as well. Both had good contacts in Western Europe, Exter through the French, the Italians, and many Russians living in Paris, Goncharova through Vasily Kandinsky, Diaghilev, and, in London, the artist Boris Anrep. For these two years Exter led an active life divided between Russia and Western Europe, contributing to at least sixteen exhibitions in Kiev, Moscow, Paris, Brussels, and Rome. In March 1912, she was exhibiting at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris, and in October half a dozen of her works could be seen in the same city at the *Section d'Or* exhibition at the Galerie de la Boétie. While Exter's work was on view at the Salon des Indépendants, Goncharova was exhibiting at the Hans Goltz gallery in Munich, the second Blaue Reiter exhibition: that same year, she also showed in Berlin (at Der Sturm) and in London, in the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, which opened in October at the Grafton Galleries.¹³ In April 1913, works by Goncharova and Marianne Werefkin (Marianna Verevkina) were shown at the *Post-Impressionism* exhibition in Budapest, and both artists, as well as Delaunay and Münter, took part in the first *Herbstsalon*, which opened in Berlin in September. Exter and Delaunay appeared together at the March 1914 Salon des Indépendants show; a month later Exter and Rozanova, along with Kulbin and Archipenko, sent work to Rome for an exhibition at the Galleria Futurista.

Such frequent exposure gave Goncharova and Exter currency as members of the Western art world as well as the Russian one. Most certainly, their reception abroad influenced their later decisions to emigrate. The younger women artists were less well-known in the West; in fact, with the exception of Rozanova's single entry in the Rome exhibition, World War I and subsequent political upheavals prevented them from showing their work in Western Europe for the next eight years.

Goncharova and Exter began their careers unknown to one another; Popova and Udaltsova were close friends from their student days. Together with several other young women artists — Vera Mukhina, Vera Pestel, Liudmila Prudkovskaia (Udaltsova's sister), and Sofiiia Karetnikova (born Til) — they now formed an alliance of female artists, which had its beginnings in Moscow's studio schools.

Private studios were crucial to the history of Russian art. For a major part of the future avant-garde, they were places of incubation, places where aspiring artists in

their late teens and early twenties — middle-class women in particular — not only got to know one another but found common purpose, supported and inspired one another, and developed into mature artists. Between 1905 and 1908, Udaltsova (her last name was then still Prudkovskaia), her sister Liudmila, Popova, Pestel, and Mukhina attended the Moscow school run by the talented artist Konstantin Yuon and his colleague Ivan Dudin.¹⁴ (Udaltsova and Pestel arrived first, in 1905 and 1906 respectively, and were followed in 1908 by Liudmila Prudkovskaia, Popova, and Mukhina.)¹⁵ At the school Popova became a close friend of Prudkovskaia, and the two sometimes spent summers together. When the urbane Hungarian artist Károly Kiss arrived in Moscow (from Munich, in 1909) and opened a studio school, Udaltsova, Pestel, and Karetnikova immediately transferred to his tutelage.¹⁶

The women were an intense and energetic group. Yuon was a great admirer of the Post-Impressionists, and his students were *au courant*. They attended Moscow and St. Petersburg exhibitions, read the latest journals, and studied Post-Impressionism as it became possible to see it in Russian exhibitions and private collections. They were well acquainted with Sergei Shchukin's famous collection;¹⁷ Udaltsova was particularly attracted to Gauguin. There is no doubt that the women developed together during this period, provoking and influencing one another. Mukhina, for example, credits Popova with deepening her basic aesthetic understanding:

It was Popova, who first began to reveal to me the essence of art. Until then I conveyed only what I saw. But if an artist conveys only what s/he sees, s/he is a naturalist. One has to convey what one feels and knows. She made me understand that. She taught me to look at color, at the relationship of colors in the Russian icon, for example. Everything new touched her. She loved to talk about a work of art. I began to see.¹⁸

Even early in their lives and careers these artists were far from untraveled provincial young women; while still teenagers they had been exposed to the sights and major museums of Western Europe. In 1904, when she was just fifteen, Mukhina had traveled throughout Germany; Pestel traveled to Italy and Germany in 1907; Udaltsova in 1908 went to Berlin and Dresden; Popova had gone with her family to Italy in 1910. So it is not surprising to find Yuon's former students assembling on their own in 1912 for the winter season in Paris. Popova, Pestel, Udaltsova, and Karetnikova left Moscow for Paris late in 1912. (Liudmila Prudkovskaia missed the trip because she was ill.) The women stayed at a pension run by one Madame Jeanne, where Exter was already living.¹⁹ Their apparent freedom, which may seem to us somewhat surprising, was due in part to the fact that



figure 5. Iza Burmeister with Vera Mukhina. Paris. 1912–13.

three of the four — Udaltsova, Pestel, and Karetnikova — were by that time already married.²⁰ They were young matrons of means, and marriage afforded them a certain independence: not only did their reputations no longer require very close supervision, but it was assumed that a married woman had the social protection of her husband. Perhaps equally important, it was common for women of propertied families to receive their inheritance and investment income upon their marriage. For the sake of propriety, as well as to help the women with domestic chores, the unmarried Popova brought along on the trip her former governess, Adelaida Dege.

Popova, Karetnikova, and Udaltsova enrolled at La Palette, where Henri Le Fauconnier, Jean Metzinger, and André Dunoyer de Segonzac gave lectures and weekly criticism. There the artists acquired the basis of the Cubist construction that would mark their mature work. Strangely enough, however, they had not made the trip with this in mind. Udaltsova would remember, “Our intention had been to work with Matisse, but his school was already closed, so we went over to Maurice Denis’s studio. But there we ran into an Indian with feathers sitting against a red background and we fled. Someone then told us about La Palette, the studio of Le Fauconnier. We went there and immediately decided that it was what we wanted.”²¹ They studied the work of Picasso, Renaissance artists at the Louvre, and applied art at the Musée Cluny; and they made the obligatory visit to Gertrude Stein.

Mukhina also came to Paris at this time, and studied sculpture with Émile-Antoine Bourdelle at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière.²² Under Popova’s influence she took time from her sculpting at Bourdelle’s to learn Cubist drawing at La Palette: “Popova talked a lot about the Cubists, praised them, and grew quite excited. Behind it you could feel something great. I was bothered by the question, whence and why? Why do people think in a certain way?”²³ In the spring of 1913, Popova and Udaltsova returned to Moscow; but first Popova and Mukhina made a brief trip to Palus, in Brittany, to take advantage of Madame Jeanne’s summer accommodations. They were accompanied by Boris Ternovets — another resident of Madame Jeanne’s, and Mukhina’s fellow student at Bourdelle’s.²⁴

Udaltsova would not return to Paris. Her mother died in September 1913, and she was left with the care of her younger sisters, including Liudmila, who was by

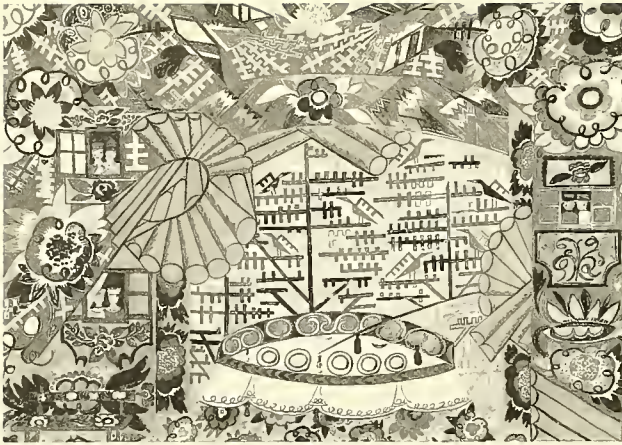


figure 6. NATALIA GONCHAROVA
Curtain design for *Le Coq d'Or*, 1914
Watercolor on paper, 53.3 x 73.7 cm

that time seriously ill. Popova, however, was back in Paris by mid-April the next year, to join Mukhina and sculptor Iza Burmeister on a tour of France and Italy.²⁵ The three women traveled to Nice, Menton, Genoa, Naples, Paestum, Florence, and Venice, and spent two weeks in Rome, everywhere sketching, painting, and exploring Gothic and Renaissance architecture.

While they were away, Goncharova arrived in Paris to attend the gala opening of *Le Coq d'Or* at the Opéra. It was her first time in the city, and the spectacular sets and costumes she had created for this ballet-opera were a dazzling success. They were her first theater designs; the commission had been a direct result of her ambitious 1913 retrospective. Within a month after the opening of *Le Coq d'Or*, an exhibition of more than fifty of Goncharova's paintings, along with a smaller number of works by Larionov, opened at the Galerie Paul Guillaume.²⁶ Apollinaire, in his catalogue essay, called her art "a revelation of the marvelous decorative freedom that has never ceased to guide Oriental painters amid their sumptuous treasure of forms and colors."²⁷ Apparently Goncharova chose not to go to London with the company to attend the English premiere at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane.²⁸ At the outbreak of the war, she and Larionov were taking a holiday, and her boldly orchestrated move into the Western art world was cut short by their hasty departure for home.

The wartime isolation of Russian artists had an enormous effect on avant-garde art there; now denied any possibility of travel and any firsthand knowledge of Western art activities, their aesthetic lives seemed to concentrate and intensify. During the disastrous military campaigns of 1915 and 1916, women made significant innovations in artistic style and character. With the exception of Goncharova, who suddenly left for Switzerland in response to a summons from Diaghilev, and Stepanova, who had not yet penetrated avant-garde artistic life in Moscow, the women showed together for the first time in the *Tramway V* exhibition, which opened in Petrograd early March 1915. Exter, Popova, Rozanova, and Udaltsova exhibited their very personal varieties of Cubo-Futurist work. The following



figure 7. Olga Rozanova, Ksenia Boguslavskaja, and Kazimir Malevich seated in front of Malevich's Suprematist paintings at the 0.10 exhibition, Petrograd, 1915.

December, Pestel, Popova, Rozanova, and Udaltsova were four of the six women in the historic 0.10 exhibition in Petrograd, and in February, Exter, Pestel, Popova, and Udaltsova were shown in the storefront space of *The Store* in Moscow. Surely a habitual gallery-goer, by this time, might mistakenly have consolidated them into a female "group."²⁹

World War I was an impetus to work in applied art. Rural villages were hit extremely hard by the war, and women attempted to lessen the burden through the production and sale of handwork. At the same time, the design of fabric by professional artists also increased. In November of 1915, when the *Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art* opened at the Lemerrier Gallery in Moscow, it showed forty items designed by Exter; embroidery by Ksenia Boguslavskaja; embroidered pillows and scarves by Boguslavskaja's husband, Ivan Puni; four handbags and eleven designs for embroidery and other items by Georgii Yakulov (who may have been inspired to take up this work by his prolonged visit with the Delaunays in Paris two years previously, just when Sonia was working on her Simultanist clothing); and handwork by Natalia Mikhailovna Davydova and Evgenia Pribylskaia. Malevich contributed designs for two scarves and a pillow. Most of the needlework was done by the women from Skoptsy and Verbovka.

At the *Exhibition of Industrial Art* in Moscow in late 1915—early 1916, avant-garde designs appeared together with the Symbolist and Style Moderne work of the Abramtsevo and Talashkino art colonies. These included Art Nouveau fabric designs by Lindeman and others; Abramtsevo's Art Nouveau and neo-folk dishes, vases, and ceramic mythological creatures; and dress designs, pillows, lampshades, handbags, and decorative appliqué by Pribylskaia, Exter, and Boguslavskaja. The catalogue points out the artists' ambitious plans to produce wallpaper, printed textiles, and book endpapers.

In Russia, 1916 was a difficult year, and the means for producing cloth became increasingly unavailable. Handwork was still possible, however, and throughout 1916 and 1917 the avant-garde continued to create designs for needlecraft.



figure 8. Act I of *Romeo and Juliet*, Chamber Theater, Moscow, 1921, with sets and costumes designed by Alexandra Exter.

Hundreds of handwork designs appeared in 1916, produced by virtually every member of the avant-garde. Several major exhibitions included this work. After the *o.10* show closed at the beginning of the year, Davydova, Pestel, Popova, Rozanova, and Udaltsova joined Malevich in an attempt to propagate Suprematism through a journal they called *Supremus*. This periodical was never published, falling victim to the war and finally to the February Revolution, but a section on applied Suprematism was planned for it, and here the women intended to publish designs featuring embroidered Suprematist logos.

In winter 1917, Davydova organized the *Second Exhibition of Decorative Arts* of the Verbovka group. It opened at the Mikhailova Art Salon in central Moscow on December 6 in the midst of massive strikes and demonstrations and stringent rationing of bread. The artists from the earlier Verbovka show were now joined by the new Suprematists Pestel, Popova, Rozanova, and Udaltsova. The sewing was done by the village women. Of the four hundred items shown, many of the fabric designs were based on the visual vocabulary developed in the *Supremus* Society, being translated from painting or collage. This exhibition was followed by the *Contemporary Art* show, which opened before the end of the year with an entire section of embroidery, and by the *Decorative-Industrial Exhibition*, which included porcelain and embroidered items. The Verbovka group made another appearance in Moscow in 1919 at a joint exhibition of the Free Art Workshops (Svomas) and several other applied-art organizations, showing avant-garde fabric decorations, pillows, scarves, and handbags.

During World War I the Russian theater was a malleable refuge from the real world, which, as the German offensive intensified, became increasingly depressing and deadly. In the progressive theater, two great directors, Alexander Tairov and Vsevolod Meierkhold, supplied competing aesthetics and objectives, and in 1915 and 1916 — the darkest years of the war — the work of Exter, Goncharova, Mukhina, and Popova contributed much to Tairov's brilliant new Chamber Theater



figure 9. LIUBOV POPOVA
Romeo in a Mask, costume design for
Romeo and Juliet, ca. 1920
Gouache on paper, 38.5 x 31.5 cm
Private collection, Moscow

in Moscow. Though relatively small, the theater offered an opportunity to create environments out of costumes, sets, and lighting; and at a time when war and revolution were creating great privation, it gave major scope to the artists' vision.

Theater continued to be a major site of artistic innovation into the 1920s. At a time when the avant-garde no longer saw painting alone as a viable artistic option, theater afforded a way to communicate directly with a new "democratic" audience on topics of immediate social relevance. At the same time, it offered artists a wide scope for invention. Between 1917 and 1924, Exter, Goncharova, Popova, Mukhina, and Stepanova produced hundreds of designs for theatrical costumes and sets. Not all the projects were realized, of course, and when a production was proposed, it was not always clear from the beginning who would be the chosen artist. Both Exter and Popova worked extensively on *Romeo and Juliet* for the Chamber Theater; and while Stepanova designed *The Death of Tarelkin* for Meierkhöld's studio, Exter designed the same play for the studio of the Moscow Art Theater. The artists worked in close partnership with singers, actors, dancers, and directors, and in the resulting productions the visual element assumed a prominent, often primary role.

Exter returned to Moscow from a year-and-a-half-long interlude in Kiev during fall 1920, and to the shock of many she married again. Georgii Nekrasov was a minor actor four years her senior; old friends considered him beneath her station in life, and added responsibility for her in a difficult time. But Nekrasov proved a faithful mate, supportive of her art, and helpful in practical ways. For the Chamber Theater, Exter took up a project she had dropped three years earlier: decor for *Romeo and Juliet*, which she had last worked on in the less complicated days of the summer of 1917. Popova too began to develop ideas for the play, both women

responding to Tairov's interpretation of Shakespeare's tragedy in purely theatrical terms, as the clash of ancient elemental forces, rather than as a historically based psychological drama. Indeed, Tairov had cautioned against too much verisimilitude. The characters don't have to be young or old, he said; "women can substitute for men, and vice versa."³⁰ The two sets of designs, though very different from one another, suggest that the two women were well aware of each other's sketches and developed ideas back and forth in competition.

It was Exter's designs that were produced. On May 17, 1921, the curtain rose on *Romeo and Juliet* to reveal an elaborate Italianate decor (see fig. 8); while making no detailed reference to any specific period or place, the artist hoped to convey a feeling she remembered from her visits to Venice and Florence. Popova's water-colors for *Romeo and Juliet* show similar scrolling, but the space is more clearly articulated; where Exter's designs are colorful and exuberant, Popova's are precise and restrained. Exter's figures are the result of her work on rhythm and motion with Bronislava Nijinska and Tairov. Popova's are reminiscent of her Cubo-Futurist painting of 1915 and 1916 (see fig. 9). Exter's set became an active player in the plot of the play, as Popova's schematic and revolving construction would be the next year for Meierkhöld's production of Fernand Crommelynck's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* in 1922.

Stepanova too would work in the theater. The youngest of the six women, she was also unlike most of them in that she came from a working-class background; while she was growing up, her mother had worked as a maid. After marrying Dmitrii Fedorov, a young architect, Stepanova had spent three years at the very reputable Kazan art school. Here she began to write poetry, work as an artist, and exhibit. In the spring of 1914 she returned to Moscow, without finishing her art education, and began to support herself by working as a seamstress, typist, and bookkeeper in a hardware store. At the same time, she continued to study art, at the Yuon/Dudin school and at the school of Mikhail Leblan. In 1916, having left her husband, she began to live with Alexander Rodchenko, a similarly impoverished young artist with whom she had fallen in love at the Kazan art school. They would remain a couple for the rest of their lives.

Even after moving to Moscow, Stepanova drew and wrote in an Art Nouveau style influenced by English artist Aubrey Beardsley. She was introduced to avant-garde art only in 1916, but she progressed quickly; her works on paper from 1917 and 1918 might be considered a last bright spark of Russian Cubo-Futurism. She also began to write "transrational" or "non-objective" poetry, and to produce some of the most delightful and successful, and at the same time radical and abstract, artist's books. Her move into book graphics followed the path of Sonia Delaunay and Rozanova, but her work is distinctive in its own right.

The October Revolution did away with the private shops and offices in which

Stepanova had made her living, but the various art institutions established by the Soviet government provided her with a new means of livelihood. Soon after the Revolution, she took on administrative duties as a deputy director of the Literature and Art Subsection of IZO Narkompros. At the same time, she served on the Presidium for the Visual Arts of the artists' professional union, Rabis. Between 1920 and 1925 her position on the arts faculty at the Academy for Social Education gave her an opportunity to work out her artistic ideas with students. When Inkhuk was formed, in 1920, she was one of its founding members, and served as academic secretary during its organizational phase.

Popova, Stepanova, and Udaltsova took leading roles in the Inkhuk discussions of the social significance, purpose, and "laws" of art. The two-part $5 \times 5 = 25$ exhibition in September and October 1921 demonstrated their conclusions. The exhibition's title was indicative: on one level it meant that five artists — Exter, Popova, Stepanova, Alexander Vesnin, and Rodchenko — contributed five works for each show, but the mathematical equation also gave notice of practical aims. These shows were to be the artists' concluding statements in painting and graphics; they were meant to be mined for their utilitarian ideas.

Udaltsova did not take part; she had given birth to a son just weeks earlier.³¹ There was also another reason, however: she strongly disagreed with the Constructivists' resolution to abandon easel painting in favor of more practical art forms. In fact, Udaltsova and artist Andrei Drevin left Inkhuk and spent the next years painting in a productive new style, in search of a way out of the formal and theoretical dead end that seemed to them inherent in Constructivism.

After the defining $5 \times 5 = 25$ exhibitions, Exter, Popova, and Stepanova began to expand Constructivist principles onto the stage. This move coincided with the culmination of the avant-garde's withdrawal from psychologically oriented theater influenced by the introduction, by Meierkhhold and others, of techniques borrowed from the circus, vaudeville, popular reviews, and film. Meierkhhold and sympathetic critics defended the new theater as a move away from the elitism of the pre-Revolutionary stage, an appeal to the public through genuinely democratic forms.

The close relationship between Popova and Stepanova was cemented by the work both did for Meierkhhold's theater. Their productions played in close proximity. Popova's set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, with its slides and ladders, revolving doors and large rotating wheels, made its debut at Meierkhhold's Free Studio at the State Higher Theatrical Workshops on April 25, 1922. The collapsing furniture and turning human "meat grinder" that Stepanova invented for *The Death of Tarelkin* appeared on November 24, at the GITIS Theater; and from November 28 to December 3, 1922, the two productions played alternate evenings in a double bill. Both Popova and Stepanova were listed as "constructors" of their respective creations.



figure 10. VERA IGNATIEVNA MUKHINA
The Worker and the Collective Farm Woman, 1937
Stainless steel, 24 meters high

Goncharova had left Russia during the war, well before the Revolution, and did not return when she might have. Exter remained in Russia while her mother was still alive, and while she could eke out a living; she prudently left for Paris in 1924, when the nature of the Soviet regime, her art, and her origins put her in jeopardy. In Western Europe the careers of both women ultimately foundered. Karetnikova, Pestel, Popova, Rozanova, Stepanova, Udaltsova at first threw themselves into artistic work under the stringent conditions of the Revolution and the Russian Civil War, but with varying results. Rozanova and Popova died in 1918 and 1924 respectively, of diseases brought on by war, revolution, and the collapse of the country's infrastructure. Udaltsova survived, but her father did not; he was shot by revolutionary functionaries in September 1918. Her sister, Liudmila, died three weeks later, the result of her long illness; and Udaltsova's husband, Drevin was executed in 1938 as an "enemy of the people."

As the 1920s proceeded, the post-Revolutionary avant-garde gradually lost its ascendancy, first falling victim to the political fundamentalism of younger artists and their own ready abandonment of fine art. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, economic and political pressures and physical threat did away with almost all innovation in the arts. In the end, women were exposed to the same random and harsh fates of so many at the time. In the late 1920s and early '30s Stepanova did photomontage for books and journals extolling the state. During the Stalinist terror she turned to painting landscapes and still lifes. She and Udaltsova lived quietly in

Russia, publicly playing down their involvement with the avant-garde and keeping their thoughts to themselves and their intimates. Of the other women mentioned in this essay, Mukhina was recognized by the regime for her sculpture *The Worker and Collective Farm Woman*, which stood atop the U.S.S.R. Pavilion at the Paris World's Fair in 1937, but she and her son were briefly arrested, and her husband, Alexei Zamkov, a physician, was imprisoned and exiled. Karetnikova was arrested in the 1930s and sent to Siberia; her husband and son were also arrested and died in captivity. When she heard about the death of her son, Karetnikova committed suicide.

Is Russian art history, as seen from the point of view suggested by the lives and practices of these women artists, sharply different from the male experience? Not very. They participated in the same historic exhibitions, sought the same kinds of success. Perhaps greater weight should be given to their work in stage design: Exter, Goncharova, Popova, and Stepanova are all responsible for notable innovations in the theater. And textile design plays a greater role in their artistic profiles than in the male paradigm. Collectively, they had more experience in Western Europe than the men in the movement, although it is clear that their greatest opportunities came at home, during World War I and the Russian Civil War. While friendly with one another to varying degrees, they could also be bitterly competitive — a circumstance in which they are also no different from their male counterparts. In fact, if we now see these women as belonging to a different category from the men, it is because we are accustomed to seeing male artists as the norm, and women as somehow deviant from it. There is some evidence that the same attitude initially held true in regard to the women themselves, but such comments became rarer with time, as society was inundated by war and revolution. Perhaps, as they wished, we should simply consider them superb artists.

1. The letters and diaries of various Russian women artists have now been published, usually by their families. Most of the published versions have omissions and ellipses, however, and are generally not forthright about the basis of such exclusions. After 1991, there was little reason to omit the artists' expressions of their political sentiments, but Russians are still apt to be reticent about publishing anything of a personal or sexual nature, or political views that might be embarrassing to families or living persons.
2. After the Russian Revolution, Evgenia Prihlyskaia would organize the crafts section of the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, in Paris.
3. On embroidery and the Russian avant-garde, see Charlotte Douglas, "Suprematist Embroidered Ornament," *Art Journal* (New York) 34, no. 1 (April 1995), pp. 42–45.
4. Alisa Koonen, *Stranitsy zhizni* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975), p. 225.
5. The show included a number of other women, among them Mariia Chambers, Elizaveta Kruglikova, Anna Ostrumova-Lebedeva, and Marianne Werefkin. Non-Russian women included Marie Laurencin, Gabriele Münter, and Maroussia (Lentovska).

6. Elena Genrikhovna Guro (1877–1913) was a writer, poet, and painter; she died at an early age, of leukemia. Anna Zelmanova exhibited extensively in Russia before the Revolution, then later lived in the United States. She died in 1948.
7. G. G. Pospelov, "Stranitsa istorii 'Moskovskoi zhivopisi,'" *Iz istorii russkogo iskusstva vtoroi poloviny XIX – nachala XX veka* (Moscow: Iskustvo, 1978), p. 92.
8. David Burluk spoke on "Cubism and Other New Directions in Painting," and Nikolai Kulbin on "Free Art as the Basis of Life."
9. Benedikt Livshits, *Polutoraglaznyi strelets: stikhotvoreniia, perevady, vospominaniia* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1989), p. 363.
10. Mikhail Larionov himself did not inspire confidence about his work. Composer Igor Stravinsky, who knew the couple well, said of Larionov, "He made a vocation of laziness, like Oblomov, and we always believed that his wife did his work for him." Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), p. 99.
11. The exhibition was held in the Art Salon at 11 Bolshaia Dmitrovka, Moscow.
12. Sergei Diaghilev, quoted in Mary Chamot, "The Early Work of Goncharova and Larionov," *Burlington Magazine* (London), June 1955, p. 172.
13. Goncharova sent three major works to the "Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition": *The Evangelists*, *A Street in Moscow*, and *The Grape Harvest*.
14. Vera Mukhina also worked in the studio run by the sculptor Nina Sinitsyna. Konstantin Yuon was a member of the Union of Russian Artists and active in the Society of Free Aesthetics. He and Ivan Dudin opened their studio for classes in 1900.
15. The women were at Yuon's in the following years: Nadezhda Udaltsova 1905–08, Vera Pestel 1906–07, Liubov Popova and Liudmila Prudkovskaia 1908–09, Mukhina 1908–11.
16. Károly Kiss was born in Arad (now Romania) on October 24, 1883; he died in Nagybnya (now Baia Mare, Romania) on May 30, 1953. He studied at Nagybnya, Munich, and Budapest, and his name is listed among students at the Nagybnya free school for 1902 and 1903. In 1904 he was among Hollósy's students in Munich. During World War I, Kiss was interned in Moscow for four years as an enemy alien. After returning home, he withdrew to Vilgos, near Arad, and in 1931 he settled at the artist's colony in Nagybnya. See Jenő Muradin, *Nagybnya: A festőtelep művészei* (Miskolc, Hungary, 1994). The author thanks Katalin Keseru and Oliver Botar for pointing out this information.
17. Sergei Shehukin, a Moscow industrialist, was collector of an extraordinary number of works by Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso, among others, before World War I. His collection now forms the core of the Post-Impressionist holdings of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. He opened his mansion to local artists and students for study on Sundays.
18. Mukhina, quoted in Olga Voronova, "Umolchaniia, iskazheniia, oshibki. K biografii V. I. Mukhinoi," *Iskusstvo* (Moscow), no. 11 (1989), p. 20.
19. Madame Jeanne catered to her Russian clientele by serving Russian food.
20. Udaltsova had been married in October 1908, to Alexander Udaltsov.
21. Udaltsova, "Moi vospominaniia. Moia khudozhestvennaia zhizn," in Ekaterina Drevina and Vasilii Rakitin, *Nadezhda Udaltsova: Zhizn russkoi kubistki. Dnevnik, stati, vospominaniia* (Moscow: RA, 1994), p. 10.
22. Other young women from Moscow at Émile-Antoine Bourdelle's school included Iza Burmeister, Sofia Rozental, and Nadezhda Krandievskaiia. On the many Russian students at Bourdelle's see

- Alexandra Shatskikh, "Russkie ucheniki Burdeha," in *Sovetskaya skulptura* (Moscow), no. 10 (1986): 211–34.
23. Mukhina, quoted in Voronova, "Umolchaniia, iskazheniia, oshibki: K biografii V. I. Mukhinoi," p. 19.
24. The trip was made in May. Boris Ternovets was a young sculptor from Moscow; after the Revolution he became the director of the Museum of the New Western Art. He had moved to Paris in February, from Munich, where he had been a student of Simon Hollósy. See L. Aleshina and Nina Yavorkaia, eds., *B. N. Ternovets: Pisma. Dnevnik. Stati* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977), p. 58.
25. Iza Burmeister, also from Moscow, was a sculptor and friend of Mukhina at Bourdelle's. They remained in Paris after Udaltsova and Popova returned to Moscow.
26. *Le Coq d'Or* premiered on May 24, 1914. The exhibition was open from June 17–30.
27. Guillaume Apollinaire, quoted in Leroy C. Bruenig, ed., *Apollinaire on Art 1902–1918* (New York: Viking, 1972), p. 413.
28. The premiere was on 15 June, 1914.
29. Other women in *The Store* show were Sofia Tolstaia (later Dymshits-Tolstaia) and Marie Vassilieff (Vasileva).
30. Alexander Tairov, quoted in Georgii Kovalenko, *Alexandra Exter* (Moscow: Galart, 1993), from Pavel Markov, ed., *A. Tairov, Zapiski rezhissera: Stati. Besedy. Rechi. Pisma* (Moscow: VTO, 1970), pp. 287–88.
31. Udaltsova's and Alexander Drevin's son Andrei was born on August 26, 1921.



figure 11. Anonymous 18th-century artist, *Empress Catherine II of Russia*
Oil on canvas, 85,8 x 68 cm
Portraitgalerie, Schloss Ambras, Innsbruck, Austria