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# **CONSTRUCTIVIST COSTUME, TEXTILE & THEATRICAL DESIGN, 1917 - 1934.**

**A study of Constructivism set in the Socio-Cultural, Political  
and Historical Context of Post-Revolutionary Russia.**

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by

**Wendy Bark**



# **CONSTRUCTIVIST FASHION, TEXTILE AND THEATRICAL DESIGN, 1917-1934.**

## **A STUDY OF CONSTRUCTIVISM SET IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF POST-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA.**

This thesis follows the life of the art movement known as Constructivism through the turbulent post-revolutionary years, up to the onset of Socialist Realism, a doctrine imposed on the Arts by governmental directives. It focuses on the areas of fashion, textile and theatrical design, which themselves are strongly influenced by extra-artistic factors - economics, sociology and the historical era - as was the ethos of Constructivism.

After a brief introduction giving some background information on the art world and the main artist-designers of the study, the chapters go on to discuss the factors affecting the rise and then the waning popularity of the constructivist ideology, explaining the focal tenets of Constructivism, particularly in relation to fashion, textile and theatrical design. Since the majority of constructivist works were completed during the time span covered by NEP, those chapters relating to NEP have thus been given emphasis. Some biographical details about the main artists of the study are given at the end, and the Glossary lists the most common acronyms and abbreviations used in the text. The illustrations are intended as a companion to the text, since often the artistic effects of designers cannot be described adequately by language alone.

## FOREWORD

I wish to make the following points for the reader's benefit:

- 1.) The illustrations are numbered separately (ie. not paginated according to the text) and a brief explanation of each is offered at the end.
- 2.) The system of transliteration I have employed seems, on occasion, not to be a system at all, and this is because I have used the more well known spelling of certain names, such as Mayakovsky, Meyerhold and Anatoly Lunacharsky. However, in the Bibliography for example, a direct transliteration is sometimes used, e.g. Meierkhol'd. Also, where there may appear to be other irregularities in transliteration of article or book titles, these have been deliberately copied directly from source and thus follow the system used by that particular author.
- 3.) The footnotes are printed at the end of each chapter and enumerated accordingly (ie. beginning at 1 from the start of that particular section), and where any detail may be incomplete in the chapter notes, the full citational reference is in the Bibliography.
- 4.) Due to problems with the computer word processing package, there may be discrepancies with the standard system of usage of particular texts. For example I could not use the underlining facility whilst in a Russian Font, or using italic script, but I have attempted to obviate these problems as much as possible.

\* \* \*

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the people who have helped and supported me throughout my period of study. First of all, my tutor Dr. Avril Sokolov has always given me valuable advice and assistance, and shown great care, consideration and patience during times when I have been under considerable stress. I have found the interest shown in my study by other lecturers (at Durham and elsewhere) most uplifting and encouraging, as my queries and letters always found a prompt response. I therefore feel that they merit a very special vote of thanks. In addition the Inter-Library Loan Staff at Durham University Library have worked extremely hard on my behalf to find the rare and unusual books that I have requested; the Russian Departmental Secretaries have always helped me with any queries and requests; and all the Language Centre Staff, notably Mr. Irven Clark, have given of their time most generously when I have been in difficulties.

\* \* \*

I hope this thesis evokes the idealism of Constructivism, and brings the trials and tribulations of constructivist artists "into life" - not only from the perspective of the immediate post-Revolutionary years, but in a manner which enables us to judge the essence of contemporary design. Perhaps we can still say,

"Death to art! Constructivism is Life!!"

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## INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on six artist/designers:- Vladimir Tatlin, (1885-1953), Alexander Rodchenko, (1891-1956), Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), Liubov' Popova, (1889-1924), Alexandra Exter, (1882-1949), and Nadezhda Lamanova, (1861-1941). Although they were not part of a cohesive group, they all produced works using the principles of Constructivism during the 1920s. Some were committed Constructivists in its full social, political and economic sense - Tatlin, Rodchenko, Stepanova and Popova (until her untimely death in 1924). Exter and Lamanova occupy a more ambiguous position, but it is clear from their writings and from the work they produced that they were indeed advocating a design methodology all but identical to Constructivism. These artist-designers were drawn to the theory of Constructivism in a variety of ways, being affected by numerous artistic influences, and, most importantly, the Revolution. This implied a new social role for art, and Constructivism evolved as a response to political, economic and social factors, as much as it was the culmination of artistic experimentation derived from diverse art movements, such as Cubism, Futurism, Cubo-Futurism and Suprematism. It is useful to examine the cultural life of pre-revolutionary Russia to understand the background to the development of Constructivism and its expression as production art.

Towards the end of the 19th century there was a revival of traditional handicraft industries, folk and *kustar*<sup>1</sup> art. This was





inspired by the efforts of Savva and Elizaveta Mamontov at their estate near Moscow - Abramtsevo - where they set up an artistic colony with various workshops in which many prestigious artists worked utilising traditional techniques. For example, Vrubel' worked on ceramics and Vasnetsov created some interior designs for Mamontov's estate. Other members of the aristocracy/intelligentsia became involved in reviving handicraft activities, such as Princess Maria Tenisheva at her estate near Smolensk, and Maria Fedorovna Yakunchikova at Solomenko in Tambov Province. There were many varied workshops, which were supported financially by the patrons in the pursuit of creating beautiful peasant artifacts, such as embroideries, lace, tapestries, rugs, peasant blouses, traditional furniture, *lubki* (a *lubok* is a popular printed broadsheet), woodcuts, ceramics and musical instruments with folk art ornamentation. These *kustar* workshops significantly increased the prestige of the applied arts, as they produced high quality, aesthetically pleasing, beautiful items. This created an awareness of the artifact as a work of art, an idea which was propagated in the journal *Mir iskusstva*.

Another new idea which was advanced in *Mir iskusstva*, but originated in the 1880s at Abramtsevo, was the notion of the artist as a stage and costume designer for theatrical productions, plays and operas. The importance of costume and decor to the production as a whole was advanced by the German Meinigen Theatre which toured Russia in the late 19th century - the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which the production synthesizes all the

different aspects into an integrated whole - a complete work of art rather than a mere recital of texts. Stanislavsky (Elizaveta Mamontov's nephew) was influenced by the ideas of the Meinigen Theatre, and employed a principal artist to make the sets and costumes for his productions at the Moscow Art Theatre (which he opened with Nemirovich-Danchenko) instead of a craftsman and a tailor, as had previously been the case. At this time Meyerhold also used artists to design for his productions, which reflected his interests in Commedia dell'arte and Oriental theatre. Through the work of artists in the theatre, the idea emerged that an artist could contribute to man's habitat - translating the experience of stage design to interior design - and artists began to be engaged to decorate the interiors of buildings. For example the 1906 exhibition of Russian Art in Paris with decor by Bakst, railway stations and the Metropole hotel.

The advent of Futurism (c.1910) was an important stage in the progress of modern Russian art, as a new generation of artists and writers came together and exchanged ideas. The pace of advance in the art world was rapid, as influences from Europe were absorbed and integrated by artists either experiencing contemporary European art first hand in Paris (Exter, Popova, Tatlin), or viewing some of the latest art works in the galleries of Russian collectors, such as Morozov and Shchukin.

Artists formed rival groups, issuing manifestoes and proclaiming the originality of their particular art, such as the

Hylea group, the Donkey's Tail, Blue Rose, the Knave of Diamonds, etc.. Generally speaking, the emphasis remained on craft as art, and artists began to be trained in the applied arts at the Stroganov School - no longer a training ground for artisans. There was as yet no hint of the artists pursuing their social role and there was no suggestion of 'useful' art. In fact, almost the opposite was widely practised - pure abstract visual art and *zaum'* in poetry - with the importance of the material (art as paint and poetry as the word) predominating. This interest in the material itself was focused on by Tatlin from the mid-1910s, and constitutes the beginnings of his work on 'material culture' and Constructivism.

However, since Constructivism was based on the political, social and economic bases of Soviet life, the most crucial advances in the development of its theory began only after the Revolution. Some critics cite various works dating from Tatlin's "counter reliefs" of the 1910s and constructions of the first few post-revolutionary years as constructivist, despite the fact that Constructivism did not exist at this time. The first period, 1917-1921, can be called the 'laboratory' or 'experimental' phase of Constructivism, because, without any doubt, it was the artists' analysis of their own activity, the consequent hypotheses about the elements and nature of art, and their continuous progress and innovation, which led them to the theories which were united under the banner of Constructivism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term *kustar* is used in its applied art sense, inferring a quality, crafted product, in distinction to its other usage to describe a shoddy, poorly-made object, produced under more industrial conditions.

# **THE ROAD TO CONSTRUCTIVISM. THE EVOLUTION OF CONSTRUCTIVIST FASHION, TEXTILE AND THEATRICAL DESIGN, SET AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF POST-REVOLUTIONARY TURMOIL, 1917-1921.**

## INTRODUCTION

The political turmoil of 1917 came to a climax on November 7th,<sup>1</sup> when Lenin and his Bolshevik followers began the uprising which became known as the October Revolution and brought them political control of the country. The Revolution naturally had a resounding effect on the whole of Russian life, as it inaugurated a new ideology, a new government, and a new Commissariat - the Commissariat of Enlightenment,<sup>2</sup> for the administration of the Arts, among other things. Many artists were deeply affected by the social ramifications of the new political regime. As Fischer notes regarding Tatlin's art:-

"Tatlin's dream is the artist's eternal wish: that the spiritual revolution of his creativity should act as directly and as powerfully on actual everyday life as does the political revolution."<sup>3</sup> Art was given a new social role, and artists were invited by the Bolshevik administration to become involved with agitation and propaganda, to spread their political messages to the people in the universal language of art.

The insurgence of politics into art began immediately after the Revolution, with the establishment of a special section within

Narkompros to deal with the Fine Arts, known as IZO<sup>4</sup>, set up in February 1918. Avant-garde artists and left-wing intellectuals willingly gathered within IZO, and were strongly supported by the Commissar of Narkompros, Anatoly Lunacharsky. Lunacharsky later explained the alliance of IZO Narkompros with the avant-garde to foreign Komintern delegates in 1922:-

"...я протянул футуристам<sup>5</sup> [руку], главным образом потому, что в общей политике Наркомпроса нам необходимо было опереться на серьёзный коллектив творческих художественных сил. Их я нашел почти исключительно здесь, среди так называемых "левых" художников."<sup>6</sup> Lunacharsky had other reasons for accepting the avant-garde: he admired their art, considered them more reliable politically, and thought that they possessed the vitality to carry out necessary reforms.

Vyacheslav Polonsky pointed out that the avant-garde's contempt for literary and artistic idols and their passion for formal innovation made them natural allies of the new regime.<sup>7</sup> For the avant-garde, an aesthetic revolution was integral to the political revolution, and they saw a political alliance with the new regime as a necessary prelude to the realisation of their aesthetic aims. The Futurists aimed to play the same role in cultural life as the Bolsheviki did in politics: the role of the vanguard - the minority who would dictate the direction art as a whole had to follow.

The Revolution seemed to herald the destruction of the old

art, and the Futurists, as innovators in art and literature, were at the head of this campaign. The desire to remove all the vestiges of the Autocracy, including art produced during Tsarist times, was very strong and widespread. Many works of art, notably statues and Tsarist emblems, were pulled down and destroyed, as the proletariat<sup>8</sup> tried to eradicate material evidence of a past they wanted to forget.

Lenin and many Bolshevik leaders, including Lunacharsky, were greatly concerned by the loss of important artifacts and works of art, and were conscious of the need to preserve the art of the past despite its "bourgeois" connotations. Therefore Lunacharsky set up the Department of Museums and Conservation of Antiquities within Narkompros in February 1918. In addition, on the 12th April of that year, the Soviet of People's Commissars passed the Decree, "On the Monuments of the Republic". This was Lenin's "Plan for Monumental Propaganda", which removed tsarist monuments (to be preserved via the organs of Narkompros) and sought to replace them with statues that would "serve the aim of extensive propaganda".<sup>9</sup> Thus we see the aspiration to link the fine arts with mass agitation and propaganda work in the name of larger tasks of ideological education. Lenin was fully aware of the educational possibilities of art, but perhaps more so of its use as a tool of the Party to reach the hearts and minds of the ordinary people. He had insisted that under socialism art would no longer serve the elite of society,

"...it will rather serve the millions and tens of millions of

labouring people, the flower of the country, its strength and its future."<sup>10</sup> The Plan had a double social function: educational and propagandist, both of which were now aspects of art in the new society and would help in the task of building socialism.

The Plan envisioned the "decoration of the cities for May Day and the replacement of all slogans, emblems, street names, crests, etc., with new ones expressing the ideas and feelings of the workers' revolutionary Russia."<sup>11</sup> Artists of varied orientation were involved in decorating the urban environment so that its Tsarist past could be masked and a more socialist city created for the revolutionary festivals. Mayakovsky, in his first "Order to the Army of Art", printed on the first page of the first issue of *Art of the Commune*, the official journal of IZO, proclaimed:

"The streets are our brushes. The squares our palettes," as he urged artists to take to the streets and decorate the city with new socialist art. Thus art was intimately connected with socialism and the attempt to communicate its ideas to the masses and create a new socialist environment.

It was the policy of IZO in Moscow and Petrograd to use artists of all persuasions in the decorations of the cities for the revolutionary celebrations. However, despite the fact that they were few in number, the Futurists received the greatest attention for their festival designs, and their works, notably in Petrograd for the First Revolutionary anniversary celebrations, attracted abundant and virulent criticism. Out of the ninety or



so artists who participated in the decoration of Petrograd, at the most ten were "left-wing", and only a few truly Futurist. Yet they were subjected to accusations of setting up a dictatorship within the art world, as well as charges of "incomprehensibility" and "individualism". However, there were many other powerful groups claiming to be the sole advocates of the new socialist art, such as Proletkul't,<sup>12</sup> whose substantial opposition successfully counteracted any possibilities of a Futurist dictatorship. The press carried many articles criticising the Futurists, for example Pumpyansky wrote an article in the journal The Flame, which noted the Futurists' lack of understanding of the level of experience of the ordinary people:-

"Far more important were the shortcomings that resulted from a disparity between the spiritual make-up and rhythm of modern art and the rhythm, experience and feelings of the revolutionary popular masses."<sup>13</sup> Stronger criticism was expressed by N.G.Mashkovtsev in *Rabochii mir*:

"The painted bushes in the public garden on Theatre Square provoke downright indignation...This is yet another of those decadent Futurist ideas, and it has no place in a proletarian festival."<sup>14</sup>

This, along with other criticism noting how "alienated and puzzled" the crowds seemed to be by the Futurist decorations, resulted, from early 1919 onwards, in the agitational propaganda displays at revolutionary festivals presenting a more comprehensible and realistic interpretation of topical themes.

Thus it was abundantly apparent that, even at this stage, innovatory art would find great difficulties in being accepted as worthy socialist, proletarian art, and it was already having to compromise its principles in order to fit in with governmental requirements. Futurist art, that is "leftist", abstract, "formalist" art, did not appear to have popular support and therefore, despite its willingness to be a servant of the state and the support of Lunacharsky, its future was at the very least uncertain. The problem may well have been, as Malevich noted, that people simply did not want to understand the new art:-

"Всегда требуют, чтобы искусство было понятно, но никогда не требуют от себя приспособить свою голову к пониманию."<sup>15</sup> Coming from a low cultural background, the average man appeared to want art works to be in the style of the Peredvizhniki, easily understandable with approachable subjects. In 1919 Nikolai Punin noted the revival of Peredvizhnik popularity:-

"Пролетариат, в особенности не коммунистический и мало культурный, инстинктивно тянется к ним, к их грубым вкусам, даже к их явному безвкусию, невыразительному и дубоватому. Эта художественная группа, пользуясь массовой популярностью, как раз и претендует больше всего на звание пролетарского искусства и на то, чтобы её представители назывались подлинно пролетарскими художниками."<sup>16</sup>

This was central to a crucial argument of the time - just what was proletarian art and who could provide it? Certainly the Futurists thought that they were the only group who could provide

art worthy of the proletariat, an art that was the most advanced of its time, in concord with the proletariat as historically the most advanced class (according to Marxism). However, opposition to the Futurists extended to the very highest echelons of the Bolshevik Party, where opinion as to what proletarian art exactly entailed diverged from that of the Futurists. Many of the Bolshevik leaders valued the art of the past, and for them an aesthetic revolution was not integral to the political revolution. It was ironic that Lenin, as a Marxist, shared a desire that the avant-garde tried to implement during the post-revolutionary years: to bring art into the lives of the workers. Lenin once remarked to Clara Zetkin:-

"Art belongs to the people. Its thickest roots go down into the midst of the broad toiling masses. It must be understood and loved by them. It must unite the feelings, thoughts and will of these masses. It must produce artists among them and develop them."<sup>17</sup> Although "leftist" artists also wanted to bring art to the masses, Lenin did not agree with the abstract nature of the works of art produced by this group. He tended to be ambivalent towards experimentation in art and overtly disliked the Futurists, notably Mayakovsky and his works, despite Mayakovsky's determination to render service to the cause of the Revolution. Lenin thought it was necessary to assimilate the past critically because it was impossible to create a culture from nothing and was therefore antagonistic to the Futurists who rejected pre-revolutionary art and culture as a "load of junk".<sup>18</sup> Lenin favoured Russian realist writers and artists, and envisioned a

socialist art within a realist framework, but he was too busy at this time to turn his attention to the arts. During these early years (1917-1920) the Bolshevik regime did not intervene in the ongoing arguments about the nature of proletarian art and who could provide it. It left the Futurists and their arch enemies Proletkul't to battle it out between themselves in the short-term.

Proletkul't was founded by Bogdanov,<sup>19</sup> (a literary critic and long-standing Party member who had previously argued with Lenin on the subject of art and culture) around the time of the October Revolution, in order to develop a specifically working class culture. Proletkul't was very popular with the workers, and at one point had hundreds of thousands of members in its own art studios and workshops. Proletkul't's view was that the workers themselves would create the new proletarian culture: a culture created by the workers, for the workers.

The Futurists's view, as conveyed through Osip Brik, was that it was wrong to believe that any worker could be taken from the factory floor and made into an artist creating proletarian art,

"... обучить его искусствам и всё, что он производит, будет пролетарским искусством."<sup>20</sup> He stated that the result would not be proletarian art at all, but merely a, "бездарная пародия на давно изжитые формы искусства прошлого."<sup>21</sup>

Proletkul't harshly criticised Futurism as "bourgeois", "individualistic", and for not having any real popularity with the

proletariat, or any real links with them, since the Futurists themselves came from the intelligentsia. To combat this Mayakovsky made frequent appearances before Petrograd workers in late 1918, propagandising for Futurism in order to bring it closer to the workers, and thus proving that the Futurists had serious grounds when they spoke of Futurism as the art of the proletariat and the Revolution. This resulted in the foundation of *Kom-Fut* in January 1919, but the Party refused to give it official status. The group consequently dissolved, but the name lived on to denote those Futurists who, with respect to their ideas and creative work, were close to Communism.

Proletkul't was also brought into conflict with the political leadership because it wanted independence from the Party and the government and because their theories of how to develop proletarian culture clashed with Marxism. Trotsky maintained that there could never be any proletarian culture because:-

"The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture."<sup>22</sup>

Trotsky's point of view was essentially supported by Lenin, and it was an opinion already familiar to revolutionary Marxists in the writings of Rosa Luxemburg. They realised that an attempt to create a proletarian culture was bound to fail. Lenin felt it necessary to bring Proletkul't under Party control in October 1920, when it was subordinated to Narkompros, after which it underwent various regroupings and lost much of its popularity.

The Futurists did not escape Lenin's venture into cultural matters. He identified them as "petty-bourgeois elements" and called them "advocates of an idealist philosophy hostile to Marxism."<sup>23</sup> Lenin had grown suspicious of the avant-garde because of their anarchism, defiance and dedication to the idea of permanent revolution. He did not like their strong influence on young artists, which came through their posts in education. As Gabo explains, the Party had only ever tolerated the existence of the avant-garde, and as soon as it was able turned its attention to the cultural sphere:-

"We were not supported by the government but only tolerated. The official leaders of the Communist Party did not have any sympathy for us. In the years of the Civil War, that is until about 1920, they simply did not have time to deal with us."<sup>24</sup>

Yet during the difficult post-revolutionary turmoil the Futurists had been the Bolshevik's most ardent supporters, and had worked in a number of media for agitational propaganda purposes. Mayakovsky designed political posters and signs for the window displays of the Russian Telegraph Agency, (ROSTA) encouraging people to work for the new regime, to join the Red Army and to buy state-produced goods. The posters used pictorial language, which was laconic and maximally expressive, and was particularly important due to widespread illiteracy. Other avant-garde artists, such as Alexandra Exter, helped to decorate the so-called "agit-trains", which, filled with propaganda leaflets, books, films and posters, transported Party agitators around the country

to spread the word of Communism directly to the peasantry. These were decorated with revolutionary designs and slogans, glorifying the Party and the ideals of Communism. There were also "agit-trucks" and "agit-boats", which were steamships, decorated in the same manner, and sent to places which were considered to be in need of a propaganda boost - for example regions which had seen the harsh reality of Civil War and had been under "White" control. These "agit"-vehicles travelled far and wide, and were decorated differently according to their destination, although the locale in which they were created sometimes also had an effect on the style of the designs. In the Ukraine, where Exter and her students worked, the "agit-trains" were highly coloured and decorated in the style of folk art akin to peasant marital trunks and traditional Easter egg decorations. Trains destined for Asia, the Caucasus and Poland were decorated in the artistic traditions of these places. At the height of this agitation in 1919-1920, trams, cars and carriages were used for this highly effective means of propaganda.

Artists at the State Porcelain factory (formerly the Imperial Porcelain factory) also turned their hand to propaganda work, using such themes as the class struggle, the new revolutionary morality, the conflict between the old and the new, and extracts from speeches by or about Lenin in their ceramic work. The Cubo-Futurist artists working at the factory included I.Puni, K.Boguslovskaja, V.Kozlinski and others, but the strongest influence in the design workshop was that of the World of Art

group, whose artists had already been working in the factory for some ten years. Some of the "agit-porcelain" designs that were produced are linked with posters and decorations for the revolutionary anniversaries and street festivals, such as the plate depicting N. Altman's Futurist constructions for the First Anniversary of the October Revolution.

It can therefore be seen that the Futurists, as previously noted, were concerned with bringing "Art into Life"<sup>25</sup>, and it was thought that the best way to do this was to cooperate with industry in order to mass produce goods for the whole of society. New functional forms had to be created by artists that were suited to industrial production, and thus by working for industry the artist could fulfill his new social role and serve society. However, it was extremely difficult for the artist to enter into industrial production at this time because output had slumped to a fraction of pre-war levels, and the economy was in ruins after the combined effects of war, civil war, foreign intervention and the trade embargo. Nevertheless attempts were made to develop links between art and industry as early as Spring 1918.

Lunacharsky and Narkompros advanced a programme encouraging links between art and industry in order to foster the creation of industrial art. Lunacharsky began to involve artists directly in the planning and regeneration of industry and the applied arts, since the alliance of art and industry was seen as a step towards socialism. In 1919 at the First All-Russian Conference on Art and



Production, Lunacharsky declared:-

"If we really are to advance towards socialism, then we must attach more importance to industry than to pure art."<sup>26</sup>

Osip Brik, a key figure in IZO Narkompros, held views on the role of the artist that were to give rise to an almost utopian policy in the department. He believed that the artist, as a craftsman and producer, was to shape and direct life by creating real, material things. Brik exhorted:-

"Go into the factories; this is the only task for artists."<sup>27</sup>

Brik wanted to end the isolation of the ordinary people from art, and make it once again a pervasive feature of daily life as it had been during the Renaissance. Therefore, in collaboration with factory committees IZO set up workshops, art schools, exhibitions and lectures near industrial plants, intending to discover and develop the creative capacities of the workers.

Brik's ideas were expounded mainly in the journal *Art of the Commune*, the official publication of IZO.<sup>28</sup> Although *Art of the Commune* contained articles which raised a range of eclectic aesthetic ideas, it included concepts and terms which were to be crucial in the development of Constructivism, for example, the use of the word "*konstruktor*" in relation to art. The idea that art should be concerned with the material creation of real objects was initially expressed in the first issue of *Art of the Commune*. This inaugurated a different concept of art, one which removed the philosophical and metaphysical ideas from art and placed it in the

field of concrete action:-

"Not ideas but a real object is the aim of all true creativity."<sup>29</sup> Brik opened the way for art and production to merge by definitely placing art in the category of industrial work and referred to "all art as production".<sup>30</sup> These early theories of Production art were not immediately accepted, and they did not treat in depth the way in which the artist and industry would merge, especially in regard to the material problems of the day. However, despite the many varied problems, Narkompros continued its efforts to unite art and industry.

Rodchenko was deputy head of IZO Narkompros at this time, and there can be little doubt that Rodchenko's work to regenerate industry and pursue the Department's policy to integrate art and industry had a formative effect on his artistic evolution, and were critical in his later ideas about artistic production and industry. Yet during these early post-revolutionary years Rodchenko's work was more analytical and in the nature of formal research, rather than being directly applicable to industry. From 1918 to 1920 Rodchenko's work centred on the manipulation of material elements, *faktura*, revealing the materials employed and their process of application, and the use of geometric forms, including the straight line, to "construct" rather than "compose" paintings. He employed geometrical elements because of the impersonality, that is they comprised common intellectual property and were not exclusively linked to anything. Therefore his works with geometric forms, such as the wooden constructions of 1920 are

impersonal, mathematical and have a certain unemotional purity. Rodchenko would eventually take this one stage further and relinquish all the personal elements in his work. During these early years Rodchenko became involved with *Zhivskulptarkh*<sup>31</sup> and experimented with new architectural forms. He worked on projects for kiosks and tribunes, which, by entering the environment of the ordinary worker brought "art into life".

Tatlin was involved in the fusion of artistic and industrial activities at the Petrograd Free State Artistic Teaching Studios (PGSKhUM), which had replaced the former Academy of Arts in late 1918. In the formative stages of PGSKhUM, Tatlin conceived of a Studio as a creative collective producing objects that would promote the idea of "art into life". In his work on "counter-reliefs" Tatlin had already merged creative art and the production process into an organic whole. In his plan for the Studio Tatlin advanced the principle of the inseparability of art and labour, and the fusion of artistic and industrial activities. From a modern perspective it can be seen that this plan for a new kind of studio was an anticipation of a modern design studio, with its own experimental-industrial basis. An article of the time noted the novelty of an industrial bias in an artistic environment:-

"It [Tatlin's Studio] will be equipped with metalworking machine tools and joiners' benches. As is known Tatlin has been working with iron, wood and bronze rather than with clay or marble. He produces objects which can be immediately utilized, so to say."<sup>32</sup> At the Studio the teaching process was associated with

practical work on orders placed by the government. The Studio became known as the Studio of Materials, Volume and Construction, and Tatlin's group of students were known as the Group of Material Culture, due to Tatlin's investigations into the sphere of design and technology which he called by such phrases as "материальная культура", "культура материалов", and "организация материала в вещь". Researchers, such as A. Strigalev, have pointed out that these were all synonymous expressions that stand very close to the modern concept of design, and also can be seen to pre-empt the term Constructivism. Tatlin interpreted "material culture" as a phenomenon which was independent of changes in style or fashion, and which produced artistic formations of lasting value. By 1919-20 Tatlin's views had received widespread recognition and acclaim, proceeding separately, but apace with Brik and the other Productivist theoreticians' ideas on merging art and industry. Tatlin's opinions anticipated and influenced the reforms which established the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops in Moscow, known as VKhUTEMAS, in November 1920, moving art education closer to production.

Many of the artists who were to become Constructivists were involved in art education, notably the VKhUTEMAS, which aimed to train artists of high quality for the benefit of the national economy, that is, to take part in industrial production. Rodchenko taught at the VKhUTEMAS from 1920 on the Basic Course in discipline number five: Construction. Formed from the Free State Workshops in Moscow, they were replaced by a system of

departments, and Rodchenko worked in the Metalworking Faculty and the Graphics *Konsentr*. Other disciplines of the Basic Course included "Maximum revelation of colour", "Revelation of form through colour" and "Colour on the plane". The first of these was taught by Popova, who also taught on the course "Plane and Colour *Konsentr*". However VKhUTEMAS' course programme lacked stylistic stability. It was constantly changed due to theoretical developments and was affected by the artistic debates and discussions taking place within INKhUK<sup>33</sup>, the breeding ground of Constructivist ideology. As a result the revised courses demonstrated a greater commitment to Constructivism, but this did not mean that VKhUTEMAS as a whole was devoted to the ideals of the Constructivists. Indeed within only a few years the Constructivist element within the school declined dramatically.

The importance of the influence of INKhUK on artistic life went beyond the alteration of education programmes - it played a vital role in the development of the Constructivist aesthetic and was the birthplace of the First Working Group of Constructivists. INKhUK was established in March 1920 under the aegis of IZO Narkompros. Its first director was Wassily Kandinsky, who worked out its programme which entailed the,

"...settling [of] questions concerned with the science of art in all its aspects."<sup>34</sup> Thus initially it was not set up as a Constructivist body, yet by the autumn the influence of aesthetic ideas, which were to relate closely to Constructivism, was beginning to make itself felt. Kandinsky and his supporters

favoured a more subjective psychological approach, and formed the basis of the Section of Monumental Art within the Institute. Those in conflict with Kandinsky's methods gathered around Rodchenko, creating a parallel Praesidium and setting up their own theoretical group - the General Working Group of Objective Analysis, which held its first meeting on the 23rd November 1920. They strengthened their ranks at the Institute's General Assembly in January, and Kandinsky's group became a minority. Kandinsky then resigned and the new official Praesidium of INKhUK consisted of Rodchenko (President), Brik, Babichev, Bryusova and Stepanova, with nominees Popova and Krinsky. Then new disagreements began to emerge in early 1921 concerning the definition of the basic elements constituting a work of art. The differences that now became apparent led to the creation of the First Working Group of Constructivists on the 18th of March 1921, officially organised within INKhUK by Rodchenko, Stepanova and Alexei Gan. This in turn culminated in a sequence of events which, by the autumn of 1921, resulted in all artists who did not share the Productivist platform adopted by INKhUK leaving the Institute. Thus it was only at the end of this period (late 1920) that the term Constructivism was first mooted as,

"...a term specifically formulated to meet the needs of these new attitudes towards the culture of the future classless society."<sup>35</sup>

The culmination of the experimental and agitational work of this period led the artists of this study directly to become part

of the Constructivist movement. The ideas and methodology they had evolved during these years by working on three-dimensional objects with a specific interest in the materials used, taking into consideration the political and social ramifications of their work and the technological constraints of mass industrial production, came to be encompassed by the term Constructivism. Constructivism can be seen as a child of the Revolution, since it is highly unlikely that the worker would have been the subject of artists' attentions in a capitalistic society. Socially and politically committed to the new order, the Constructivists aimed to improve the artistic consciousness of the ordinary worker by improving his environment - "art into life". However the Party did not favour the Constructivists, despite their resolute adherence to the ideology of Marxism, possibly due to the fact that they had been labelled "Futurists", and some indeed had been involved with the Futurist movement. The Party's opinion of avant-garde art was clarified in the Decree on Proletkul't in December 1920, which, as well as definitively subjugating Proletkul't to Narkompros, noted the harmful influence of Futurism on workers' artistic tastes:-

"...в области искусства рабочим прививали нелепые, извращенные вкусы (футуризм)." <sup>36</sup>

The developments in the political arena of art, the arguments between the Futurists and Proletkul't, the Party's influence in art and IZO's policies linking industry to art and education, all form an important background to the emergence of Constructivism.

The work of avant-garde artists during these early years provided them with the formal vocabulary to pursue their ideas with an ideological and practical goal. The desire to bring art into life was paramount, and was achieved with varying degrees of success in different aspects of everyday life. Now, against this background, we will see the developments within the areas of fashion, textile and theatrical design.



## FASHION DESIGN, 1917-1921.

It is widely believed that there are strong links between socio-political and economic conditions and the character of clothes of various eras. Plekhanov wrote in his article "Искусство и общественная жизнь", concerning the era of Romanticism:-

"Надо вообще заметить, что на стараниях людей придать себе ту или иную внешность всегда отражаются общественные отношения данной эпохи."<sup>37</sup> The Marxian belief that "environment determines consciousness" inevitably leads to the need to assess one's environment, and therefore it follows that objects of everyday life, including clothing, have an effect on the will and consciousness of the masses to a certain extent. After the Revolution it was important to express the new socialist way of life in social and cultural spheres, and the field of clothing presented itself as one area which could mark the changes in socio-political life. However, it was not exactly clear how to create clothes on the principles of socialist culture.

In the past the Russian aristocracy and bourgeoisie had followed Parisian fashions, and the poorer classes had tried to imitate these luxurious, impractical designs. It was obvious that:-

"Моду диктует класс."<sup>38</sup> This pattern should have been halted by the class-levelling, egalitarian effects of the Revolution, but the clothes of the upper classes were still extant, and the



"petty-bourgeois" desire to own beautiful, expensive clothes pervaded all echelons of society. Even Party members, usually drawn from middle class backgrounds, the intelligentsia or the aristocracy, were guilty of parading in their finery around the city streets, as is shown in photographs of Party delegates taken at this time. Nevertheless, Party supporters generally felt that the proletariat should free itself from traditional fashions, which had predominated in Tsarist times, and also from foreign clothing designs, which would have been created on the basis of capitalistic, "bourgeois" influences. In the place of such garments a new socialist clothing was needed - the fashion of the proletariat, inspired by the ideals of the Revolution. There was no official policy on fashion design and clothing during these early post-revolutionary years, and the main effects on the clothing of the average person were inspired by economic exigencies and the political climate.

The trade embargo imposed on Russia by her former allies of World War One brought to a halt the influx of French fashion garments and accoutrements, which inevitably left the Russian fashion industry to its own devices. However, the state of the sewing industry, which was being centrally reorganised, was chaotic, and it only had old machinery at its disposal and this was in disrepair. Production had come to a virtual standstill due to shortages of fuel, skilled labour and materials. So even if a government policy had been initiated on fashion and the type of clothes that were to be produced, it could not have been put into

practice anyway. What production there was in the sewing industry was devoted to army orders. In addition to these problems, there was the aggressive attitude that sprang up after the Revolution to the concept of fashion or "мода". Even the word "мода" itself became synonymous with the terms pre-revolutionary, "bourgeois", reactionary and alien to the spirit of Communist life, and consequently disappeared from common current usage. People who supported the Party and its aims rejected the word and the concept of fashionable clothing as part of the old society and they viewed its decorative excesses as non-functional in an age when practical expediency and necessity were the order of the day.

All this led the proletariat to create their own fashions expressing their revolutionary fervour, such as the red kerchief and the workers' peaked cap. Ascetic, modest clothing was judged to be proletarian and socialist, and anyone dressed in a manner considered to be "bourgeois" was likely to be ostracised. At this time the exigencies of the Civil War and the economic harshness of War Communism succoured a fashion of their own. It was a style born of necessity, as ready-made clothing fell into acutely short supply and materials of any kind became increasingly hard to buy. Women were forced to use any material they had to hand, including household fabrics (for curtains, etc.), blankets and tablecloths, to make clothes and survive. There were instances of dresses being made from «мундир», similar to the cloth known as Victorian shoddy - a thick, coarse textile used for military garments, simply because there was no other material available.

The nature of the new socialist dress was subject to discussion in the contemporary press and there was intense interest aroused by the problem of finding a new form of clothing. In 1919 an article, "Рабочий костюм" was printed in the journal *Zhizn' iskusstva*, which noted,

"Великая русская революция должна оказать свое влияние и на внешний покров человека. Новый костюм должен быть не только удобен и изящен, но он должен также находиться в полной зависимости от современных экономических условий и соответствовать гигиеническим требованиям."<sup>39</sup> The formulation of the new clothing was thus progressing in a practical, functional direction, allowing the body full freedom of movement and taking into account the biological demands of a person. It was felt that clothes should not be designed according to seasonal fashions, but to the requirements of the seasons - to protect the body from the cold in winter and keep it cool in summer.

A vital consideration in the creation of the new socialist dress was that it had to be suited to mass industrial production. The constructor of mass clothing must design garments with the conditions of mechanised sewing production foremost in his mind, whereas the fashion designer usually works from a model individually prepared by hand. In mass production each stitch has to be vital to the finished garment, otherwise materials are wasted. It was therefore believed that any detail without a function would naturally disappear because they complicate the

production process unnecessarily. The simplicity of the clothing was seen as desirable both ethically and aesthetically, redirecting attention away from personal self-interest (in the past the richness of a person's dress was a symbol of their power) to the sphere of general intellectual and social activity.

Lamanova stated:-

"Художники должны в области одежды взять инициативу в свои руки, работая над созданием из простейших, но красивых форм одежды, подходящих к новому укладу трудовой жизни."<sup>40</sup> The rationalisation and standardisation of dress was perceived as a positive influence on the masses, constituting a part of the collectivist ethos, as opposed to one-off garments made to individual order.

Another aspect of the new clothing was that it had to be appropriate for the wearer's occupation or activity, either at work or socially. Clothing that was expressly designed for working conditions was called *prozodezhda* (a concept central to the Constructivists working in fashion<sup>41</sup> design and discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3) and many of the specifications necessary for the new mass clothing were also valid in the design of *prozodezhda*: simplicity, practicality, functionality, hygiene, expediency, comfort and rationality. The idea of *prozodezhda* was discussed within Narkompros in 1919 and also at the highest Party levels. Lenin signed a Decree prepared by the Labour and Defence Council in October 1920 "On the Provision with *Prozodezhda* and *Spetsodezhda*<sup>42</sup> of Workers in Coal Mines".

However, transforming these theories on the new mass clothing into actual garments was not easy, in fact it was virtually impossible during the years up to 1921, and indeed for some years after that. The sewing industry was in economic crisis and still had a primarily *kustar* base - just before the Revolution a total of 3% of production came from industrially mechanised factories. These problems were given to the Department of Ready-made Garments and Linen within the textile industry's centralised body *Tsentrotekstil'* in mid 1918. In April 1919 the Department was made into an independent branch, headed by the Central committee of the sewing industry *Tsentroshvei* within VSNKh,<sup>43</sup> and the first organisations for mass clothes production were formed, such as *Moskvoshvei* in Moscow. Attempts were made to nationalise and centralise the industry and reorganise it along socialist lines. In January 1919 the Central Institute of the Sewing Industry (TsIShP<sup>44</sup>) was created as a learning institution for this branch of industry. In a report for the sewing industry TsIShP noted that industry must conform to the socialist system of organisation, liquidating the *kustar* enterprises and creating large scale factories for the production of hygienic, comfortable, beautiful and elegant clothes. Part of the educational drive to prepare artists for the fashion industry was the opening of the first higher educational establishment (similar to a Polytechnic) or VUZ<sup>45</sup> - Sokol'nich'i, in Moscow in 1919. But perhaps the most important learning facility for the industry with a broad spectrum of activities to train the designers of the new clothing was

founded at the beginning of 1919. This was the Studio of Artistic Production Dress (Студия художественного производственного костюма), a part of the Workshops of Contemporary Dress, formed within the Art-Production sub-section of IZO Narkompros on the initiative of Lamanova. She produced an outline of the Studio's aims and objectives which were fully in accordance with the concept of the new socialist dress, for example:-

"To bring clothing design into line with our contemporary way of life and its needs", and incorporated some elements that are Constructivist in essence:-

"The construction of clothes using geometric forms as an expedient way of solving problems."

Although Lamanova had worked as a couturier to the aristocracy before the Revolution, she accepted the new order and her new material position without hesitation and began to work exclusively for Soviet art and industry. Her design principles evolved on lines similar to the Constructivists', since she was concerned with the constructive and logical approach to clothing design and wanted to organise the mass production of garments. Yet some of her design work retained elements of traditional folk decoration, with its emotional imagery, and she was occasionally prone to lavish ornamentation which brought her into conflict with constructivist practice. (This is examined in more detail in Chapter 4).

At the beginning of the 1920s Lamanova became involved with



Alexandra Exter and Vera Mukhina. Exter and Mukhina had been working together in a studio (given to them by Popova's sister - Popova herself came slightly later to the field of design) where they had become interested in creating fashion accoutrements. Mukhina later described their first tentative steps into the fashion world:-

"Придумали делать пояса и шляпы из рогожи. Красили, отделывали эти пояса горохом - зеленые, красные, получались удивительные вещи. Экстер была знакома с Ламановой. Ламанова - невероятный новатор. Она восхитилась нашими шляпами и стала давать нам заказы."<sup>46</sup> Thus began a long association between the three, with Exter and Mukhina going to work for Lamanova in the Atelier of Fashion (*Atel'e moda*) when it was opened in 1923.

Exter had already engaged in design work on dresses, scarves, pillows and other items as early as 1915. Ya. Tugendkhol'd noted that at an exhibition in Moscow in 1915 Exter displayed a set of decorative works embroidered after her own designs. In these embroideries Exter was said to have used the practical skills of the peasant women craftsmen of the Verbovka village in Kiev Province. This is particularly important since Exter may well have established links between the Suprematist group existing in Moscow, of which she became a member, and the Verbovka embroidery workshop during 1916. Members of the Suprematist group were among the first artists to become involved in the design of dresses, handbags and household items. Erika Hoffmann-Koenige states that Olga Rozanova (1886-1918) of the Suprematist group was the first

artist to go into fashion design as well as embroidery design.<sup>47</sup>

The work of the Verbovka workshop is discussed in the following section on textiles, but it is important in fashion design because it links folk costume to post-revolutionary models. To some extent modern interpretations of folk costume had begun during the 1910s when Natalia Goncharova and Tatlin exploited the convenience and functionality of its patterns<sup>48</sup> in their theatrical costume designs. This was developed by Rozanova who created interpretations of the typical clothing of the peasant woman of the Ukraine and Central Russia for wear in everyday life. Her dress designs stress the geometrical cut of skirts, and in their colouring Rozanova contrasts the geometrical, graphic juxtaposition of colours against a white background in typical Suprematist style, which was actually similar to the traditional colour patterns of peasant women's clothes. The colours are bright and distinctive, and can be seen to be connected to the tradition of folk art and the *lubok*.

It is reported that Suprematist designs were also used in knitwear. Malevich's mother was said to weave sweaters and scarves with Suprematist designs, which were worn in the 1920s by friends and relatives of Malevich. L.Zhadova says of their design:-

"...these sweaters and scarves were modern and attractive with their bright and distinct ornament of, for the most part, black and white colours."<sup>49</sup> Thus it can be seen that some of the

earliest examples of fashion design by artists merged modern suprematist motifs with traditional folk handicrafts. These designs link the old and the new, pre- and post-revolutionary ideas, and form an important continuation from the heritage of the past to present-day life in the new socialist Russia.

The new Red Army uniform serves as a good example of design incorporating elements of traditional peasant costume and the new principles of functionality, comfort and expediency. A competition was organised to develop the new uniform, which had to be lightweight, yet warm, democratic, sporty, and symbolise the heroic nature of the soldier. Artists Kustodiev and Vasnetsov took part in the competition, but precise authorship of the new uniform is unclear. It is likely, however, that they were responsible for the design of the cloth helmet, which is similar to a steel one of the fifteenth century. Historical aspects are also evident in the design of the overcoat, which is derived from the traditional kaftan in its outline, and is double-breasted. Unfortunately, the state of the sewing industry was such that only a few divisions of the Red Army were initially clothed in the new uniform.

As we have seen, the industry faced numerous problems, and the exhortations of the theoreticians of Production Art to the artists at this time to "go into the factories", could not be fulfilled in practice. Indeed the concept of a professional artist as a fashion designer was not widely popular, since it was

the habitual domain of the applied artist. Therefore forays by artists into the realm of costume design in the early post-revolutionary years were few but the other works they were pursuing at this time did lead them to develop this field after 1921. For example, around 1919 Stepanova was involved in the geometric modelling of works known as "Figures", which were derived from graphics and decorative art. Alexander Lavrentiev states that:-

"Only one step separated these compositions from her new conception of clothing and geometric fabric designs."<sup>50</sup> And in Chapter 3 we will follow the steps that Stepanova and other designers took into the clothing industry.

## TEXTILE DESIGN, 1917-1921.

The history of the textile industry during this period corresponds to that of the sewing industry in many respects because of their interdependence. They faced similar industrial problems and experienced difficulties adapting their wares to the new socialist life. The integration of new artistic styles into textile and fashion designs had begun before the Revolution, and one of the major driving forces behind this was Natalia Mikhailovna Davydova.

Following on from the revival of the arts and crafts movement at Abramtsevo and Talashkino, Davydova wanted the handicraft industry to use new images and artistic ideas, and she also saw the opportunity for professional artists to find practical application for their designs. In her enterprise, the Verbovka embroidery workshops, the craftswomen followed sketches made by artists using Suprematist and Cubist images. The Suprematist designs incorporated geometric elements of various colours on a white background, and this style was similar to some traditional colour patterns of peasant fabrics, thus creating a natural combination of old traditions and new artistic trends. Udaltsova's compositions, for example, are in part derived from intense colour ornamentation used in traditional folk textiles and also combine Suprematist and Cubist motifs, with their spatially active rhythms, in the designs. Natalia Adaskina states that Popova and other artists were attracted to folk crafts because of

their, "technological functionality".<sup>51</sup> Indeed these designs, by artists such as Rozanova, Udaltsova, Exter, Bogoslavskaja and Malevich, for fabric, dresses, skirts, scarves, handbags, kerchiefs, blotting pads, and other household items, appear to be some of the first steps from easel/fine art to Production/object art.

The sketches which survive of Popova's designs for Verbovka, made around 1917, are close to her easel compositions of this time in their Suprematist orientation, although their colouring is vigorously brighter. Adaskina points to the fact that Popova's compositions for Verbovka,

"resemble her searches for a logo for *Supremus*<sup>52</sup>, right down to precise coincidences."<sup>53</sup> When Popova returned to textile design in 1923 she was able to make use of the creative method she had developed in her many-layered collages for Verbovka, since this technique went well with the work of the printing press. However, at this point in 1917 Popova's work was greatly removed from the Constructivist-Productivist ideas of mass industrial production, being more of a variation on easel painting than designing items for mass consumption. Only gradually did she become convinced of the necessity and social benefits of the industrial machine nature of Production art. The traditional folk textiles retained their importance in the years immediately following the Revolution because the rural element in culture, which had always been very significant, remained strong since Russia was still a peasant country, despite the decisive shift towards industrialisation at

the end of the 19th century.

The textile industry was particularly slow to adopt new designs after the Revolution and continued (where possible) to produce traditional floral designs. Innovation in the textile industry was extremely rare, although the influence of modern artistic tendencies had been felt in the industry, especially during the period connected with Cubism and Futurism, resulting in a few new fabric designs. These modernistic patterns were created for dress, furniture and curtain fabrics, and were made at the Tsindel' and Prokhovskaia factories. Before the Revolution the Tsindel' factory was the most progressive in creating fabrics, but since the factory had close links with France, the designs had strong European artistic influences or were derived from French fashions. In general all the design workshops in the textile factories had foreign designers, usually French or Alsatian, at their head, or else had Russian designers making direct copies of, or slight modifications to, Parisian designs<sup>54</sup> and samples. As a matter of course the foreign designers produced compositions according to their training (abroad) and personal inclinations, and these factors thus virtually excluded the possibility of a truly Russian style being developed in the industrially produced textiles of the time.

Another aspect which prevented an influx of new designs was that the final decision on which fabric print actually went into production did not rest with the designers. In pre-revolutionary

times each factory employed "agent-voyagers" ('travelling reps./ salesmen'), who travelled around the various regions of Russia to acquaint themselves with the traditions and textile demands of the different areas. They had no artistic education, but developed an understanding of traditional folk textiles from region to region. Once a certain print had proved popular in a particular area, they were unwilling to chance a new fabric print in case of lack of demand, preferring to stick with classical prints, such as the «белоземельная», an uncomplicated pattern of small vegetables or abstract forms on white fabric, or the «милфлер», fine flowers or bouquets on a white or more usually a coloured background.

After the Revolution the "agent-voyagers" continued to influence the type of textiles that were produced on the basis of their pre-revolutionary knowledge of the textile industry. They had no inclination towards using textiles as a weapon of propaganda and culture, and had no idea about the ideological impact of a design or its emotional effect. In addition they did not appreciate the far-reaching, all-embracing effect of the Revolution on all aspects of life, including the type of textiles that the workers and peasants were demanding. The views of the agents about demand became outmoded, but the deep-rooted conservative nature of the industry meant that new designs met with great difficulties before they were approved and put into production, if at all. The influence of the agents lasted long after the Revolution because they became part of the centralised ruling apparatus of the textile industry, acquiring their



positions due to their wealth of experience, and as "specialists" they were expected to give sound advice.

The inertia of the textile industry and its inability to respond to the demands of the new socialist everyday life was also due to the lack of proper education facilities and training for young designers. At this stage, (before 1920) new designers were in the main simply trained by old designers who did not create designs but copied archival materials and foreign samples, and did not comprehend the cultural and ideological implications of their work.

The economic situation further retarded the process of developing new quality fabrics, since the industry had been in crisis from the outbreak of the First World War, and by the end of 1914 there were almost no all-Russian mills in operation.<sup>55</sup> After the Revolution the situation became very serious indeed, with productivity lowered to almost zero in 1919 and even the Tsindel' factory came to a standstill in this year due to fuel shortages. The old machinery at many factories had stood redundant so long, due to the shortages of raw materials and fuel and the depletion of the workforce, that it became delapidated and in some cases beyond repair. The lack of production from an industry which creates such a necessity caused great concern to the new Communist government. In 1918 Lunacharsky appointed Olga Rozanova as head of the Subsection for Industrial Art within IZO Narkompros in order to try and revive this section of industry. But the

continued economic problems due to the ravages of the Civil War, foreign intervention, trade blockades and attempts at nationalisation, meant that the crisis could not be alleviated for some time yet. Most of the production that was possible was devoted to military orders, and any other cloth that was produced was of very poor quality. However, since demand for even the coarsest cloth far outstripped supply, every scrap of material on the market was snapped up by consumers. The pattern on a fabric was often used to disguise the poor quality of the cloth, and patterns were produced as simply as possible in an attempt to keep costs down and use fewer raw materials.

Despite these economic problems, artists and theorists of production art began to proclaim their interest in industry. Industrial production became entangled with socio-cultural considerations, and textile design appeared to be one route through which the artistic consciousness of the masses could be raised. The possibility of also raising their political awareness was not missed, and it was believed that textiles could be used to promote the new socialist way of life. This was because textiles, as a basic necessity, came into contact with the workers and peasants on a national scale and were likely to be among the first objects from the new culture to reach the outlying areas bereft of other socialist influences. The importance of producing new socialist textiles industrially was noted by David Arkin in 1920, who wrote:-

"Artistic consciousness and creation have already clashed

sharply with both the machine and the mechanisation of production (and, therefore, with life itself, which has production at its base). If in the final analysis any artistic culture aspires to *transform life*, then this immense event for everyday life, the victory of the machine, cannot help but exert a powerful influence over the course of development of contemporary artistic culture."<sup>56</sup> But the problem remained that Russian industry was in no state to incorporate would-be textile artists, who in the main had no appropriate technical expertise or training, into their design studios.

The state of the industry began to improve in September 1920, when the large plant at Ivanovo-Voznesensk was opened and the Trekhgornaia (formerly the Prokhorovskaia) mill in Moscow began operations again. Then, at the beginning of 1921 the All-Russian Textile Syndicate (VTS) was set up, centralising and nationalising the industry into trusts, uniting a number of factories into each trust, each with its own designated field of production. It cut down on the number of designers and design studios in the factories by five times. Indeed, the VTS wanted to close all the outlying design studios and replace them by one centralised studio within the syndicate. However, since this could lead to a situation in which all the textile production of the Soviet Union would merely reflect the taste of one leading centralised studio or artistic collective and would therefore be likely to stifle new design ideas, this plan was dropped (although it remained in the minds of the VTS planners throughout the 1920s).

The task of the textile industry was to make factory produced materials that would be,

"активным строителем художественной культуры."<sup>57</sup> Designers had to face problems not just of aesthetic considerations, but of finding designs which expressed contemporaneity and had an effect on it. The new social relationships brought about by the Revolution, the destruction of the class system and the advancement of the proletariat, created the opportunity for the appearance and development of textiles which reflected the socialist way of life. Design ideas appropriate for such textiles would eschew luxurious and over-exuberant colouring, ornamentation and embroidery, since these were considered "bourgeois", and have a practical basis, in order to be suitable for the everyday lives of the workers. Clothing and textile patterns should therefore be created with their direct use in mind, striving for the maximum adaptability to everyday functions.

The question of what the new textile pattern should be was the subject of discussion and disagreement for many years to come, and is examined in Chapter 4. Constructivism had yet to emerge as a coherent movement, and before it made roads into the textile industry it had to overcome certain internal divisions over the applied art nature of textile design. Despite some criticism, constructivist textiles became one of the most successful and popular products of the move "into the factories", as artists became constructors in the new production age.

## THEATRICAL DESIGN, 1917-1921.

In November 1917 the Bolshevik government transferred by Decree all theatres to state control under the auspices of the Theatrical Department of Narkompros. The Bolsheviks understood the power of the theatre as a tool for their propaganda, and they were aware that public interest in the theatre had immediately intensified after the Revolution. Theatrical performances occupied an unusually important role in the lives of ordinary people because of widespread illiteracy - only the theatre could serve as a language comprehensible to all. The theatre was no longer the domain of the aristocracy and the intelligentsia, the audience changed to factory workers and soldiers, who were mainly from the peasantry. However at this stage there were few good quality revolutionary plays and, more importantly, the directors of most theatres did not want to align themselves with the Bolsheviks. Even by 1920 the Revolution had left no impression on the Russian theatre and not one Academic Theatre<sup>58</sup> had attempted to stage a Soviet play, nor had any serious attempt been made to exploit the professional theatre for propaganda purposes since Mystery-Bouffe, a play written by Mayakovsky (for detail see below). Only one director, Meyerhold, put his theatre at the service of the Revolution and joined the Bolshevik Party in 1918.

There was some disagreement and confusion over what revolutionary theatre should actually be, and what was its best mode of expression. Should it be pageants in the streets; should

the performances be based on folklore, on universal myths, on revolutionary history, or on the class struggle? Proletkul't claimed that the past should be completely rejected and a new theatre of the proletariat be established. Proletkul't did set up its own theatrical groups across Russia, and these were immensely popular for some years. But, as previously noted, Lenin and other Bolsheviks could not accept Proletkul't's independence from the Party and in addition liked old classic plays by Gogol' and Ostrovskii, which Proletkul't rejected as art of the past and therefore inappropriate to proletarian reality. When their extensive influence was curtailed and Proletkul't was brought under Party control in 1920, there was a corresponding decline in the popularity of their theatrical groups. Other groups sprang up in the theatrical fervour, such as the "Blue Blouse" theatre troupes and the Red Army's propagandist theatres, clubs and studios, numbering some 2000 by 1920 and acquiring huge importance.

For the First anniversary celebrations of the Revolution, Meyerhold produced Mayakovsky's Mystery-Bouffe at the Petrograd Conservatoire, with costumes and settings by Malevich. This was the first truly revolutionary contribution in the theatre - it was Mayakovsky's allegory of the triumph of the international proletariat. Meyerhold's treatment of scenic space was bold, and anticipated much of his future work. Yet for all the originality of the costumes and backdrops, the production still involved actors moving on a flat stage against a two-dimensional painted

background.

At the time Meyerhold was working as deputy head of the Theatrical Department of Narkompros, and also organised courses in production technique in Petrograd. Unfortunately his health deteriorated and he left for a sanatorium in Yalta in May 1919. He was arrested by the Whites, eventually released, and then became active in the political department of the Red Army. Lunacharsky learnt of Meyerhold's actions and invited him to Moscow to take charge of the Theatrical Department for the entire Soviet Republic. In his new powerful position Meyerhold attacked the Academic Theatres in Moscow, proclaiming "Theatrical October", but Lunacharsky protected the Academic Theatres, keeping them under his direct control. The programme of "Theatrical October" presupposed that theatrical revolution should directly follow the political and social revolution, and that the old art must be destroyed and a new art created on its ruins. Therefore war was to be declared on the apolitical character of the old stage art and renovation and innovation were demanded. Meyerhold wanted to create new means of theatrical expression and aesthetic forms which could contain and express the spirit of the Revolution. Even his own appearance at this time seemed to be a clear declaration of his political views:-

"He was wearing a soldier's greatcoat and on his cap there was a badge with Lenin's picture...In spite of its apparent simplicity, his appearance was somewhat theatrical, because although he was dressed modestly and without any superfluous

'Bolshevik' attributes, the style was still *à la Bolshevik*: the carelessly thrown on greatcoat, the boots, the puttees, the cap, the dark red woollen scarf - it was all quite unpretentious, but at the same time effective enough."<sup>59</sup> Meyerhold's keen awareness of the need to dress according to one's political beliefs and show a clear distinction from pre-revolutionary and "bourgeois" fashions may have favourably predisposed him towards those Constructivists who were interested in fashion and textile design. These constructivist designers (Popova and Stepanova) attempted to produce clothing appropriate to the new socialist way of life, and Meyerhold would shortly come to rely on them to create the sets and costumes of his productions in the early 'Twenties.

For the production to celebrate the Third anniversary of the Revolution Meyerhold chose Verhaeren's The Dawns, which contained much that was in tune with the ideas of the Revolution, but Meyerhold altered the play to bring it nearer to the situation of the Civil War. It was produced in the First Theatre of the RSFSR, the former Zohn theatre, where material conditions were spartan, reflecting the ascetic spirit of the Revolution. Meyerhold had even stripped the stage bare, revealing the very bricks of the theatre in total contrast to the old luxurious theatres of Imperial Russia. The production recalled the shape of a revolutionary rally, and the actors were, in essence, orators at a political meeting. It was therefore crucial in the development of Soviet theatre because it had the spirit of a mass spectacle and was also political. The Cubist set was designed by V.Dmitriev,



and consisted of silver-grey cubes, cylinders, prisms, and triangles on a bare stage, against a background of two plywood circles, one red, one gold, with the scenery made from iron, wood, rope and wire. It was a unified, non-representational set which Dmitriev had developed from Tatlin's relief sculptures, inspired by the use of real materials, and can be seen as a move towards Scenic Constructivism (for further detail see Chapter 5). However it was noted that the audience did not understand the symbolic meaning of the set. For example Lunacharsky commented that the workers were:-

"...embarrassed and nearly sweating from the awareness of their lack of culture, pointing at one or another detail in the set," and asked him, "what does it all mean?"<sup>60</sup> As with Mystery-Bouffe, the Party was discomfited by the manifestation of the style of its Futurist supporters.

It is therefore apparent that from the early post-revolutionary years the Bolsheviks were generally antagonistic toward all manifestations of Futurist art, be it in the theatre, on the streets or in exhibitions. In his book Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque, Symons expands on a possible reason why the authorities were opposed to avant-garde productions such as The Dawns and Mystery-Bouffe. He explains that Meyerhold, in these plays, was demystifying the "ritual" of Soviet ideology and the Revolution by miming rather than playing it. The form of theatre art which Meyerhold was developing was one in which satire, demystification, mime and masks were vital parts. Therefore, even

though Meyerhold was attempting to serve the Party and the Revolution, the style of his theatrical expression undermined this. His depiction of revolutionary events and themes on the stage did not deepen the glorious myths of the Revolution, but, to some extent, exploded them. Jan Kott states:-

"To mime a Mass is a profanation, but to mime love is to demystify love, to mime power is to demystify power, to mime ritual is to demystify ritual."<sup>61</sup> Yet at this stage (1920), Meyerhold was able to continue to produce plays in freedom, as regards their style, even though the Party felt that Meyerhold's artistic line was not close enough to their cultural ideology. Other directors felt that the Revolution marked an opportunity to give free rein to their artistic creativity, and one such man was Alexander Tairov.

Founded by Tairov in 1914, the *Kamerny* Theatre was the only experimental theatre to survive the Revolution. Tairov appreciated the significance of the Futurist movement in painting and Larionov, Goncharova, Yakulov and Exter all worked with him as stage designers. Tairov rejected Meyerhold's stylized theatre and sought instead to create a synthetic theatre,

"...to fuse all the arts of a spectacle - scene design, costuming, lighting - into a unified expression of the "atmosphere" of the play."<sup>62</sup> Exter had worked with Tairov prior to the Revolution in 1916 on his production of Famira Kifared. Rudnitsky hails this as the "first theatrical victory for Cubism",<sup>63</sup> and it preceded by some four years Meyerhold and

Dmitriev's The Dawns. For the first time Exter had created a set and decor which could be called non-objective. The decor consisted of different coloured geometric forms, circles, triangles and irregular shapes, which were suspended and animated by electric motors. The abstract Cubist set did not avoid representation, but all the same it was seen as "left-wing" innovation and led to both Exter and Tairov being labelled "Futurists". Exter created further innovations in the costume designs, keeping the costumes to a strict minimum, and painting the actors' bodies, accenuating their muscles to create an impression of natural dynamism. Due to his "Futurist" label, Tairov was hardly likely to be approved of by the Party anyway, but then, not long after the Revolution he also stated that there should not be any kind of special art for the people. He did not think that it should be lowered to a cultural level the masses could understand, or that to democratise art meant using a language comprehensible to all. He was also completely against using the theatre as a propaganda tool for the Party, and stated:-

"A propagandist theatre after a revolution is like mustard after a meal."<sup>64</sup>

Exter's next production for Tairov was Salomé in 1917, and continued down the same creative path, using Tairov's artistic principles, she created some extravagant, dynamic costumes. The costumes had geometrical elements made out of pieces of wood and metal attached to them creating counter-reliefs on stage, echoing Tatlin's earlier work. Her set was also geometrical,

architectonic, and attempted to extend beyond the confines of the pictorial surface to an interaction of forms within space. This was the starting point for her later constructivist constructions for theatre and film, when she was to build rather than decorate the stage.

Popova's involvement in the theatre began with Tairov in 1920, although she later became famous for her constructivist sets for Meyerhold. She began with work on sets for Tairov's production of Romeo and Juliet, but the design she created in Cubist and Cubo-Futurist style did not satisfy Tairov. Popova then went on to work on dolls' costumes for the Children's Theatre, and to produce some costumes for The Locksmith and the Chancellor, a play by Lunacharsky in the Comedy Theatre, for which she also contributed to the design of the dynamic, cubo-futurist sets. In a very short time Popova was to develop into an artist-constructor of constructivist sets, and it was the emergence of the Constructivists at INKhUK and her involvement with them that was to precipitate this great change. Thus her first foray into theatrical design was a failure, and having rejected Popova as his designer for Romeo and Juliet, Tairov once again turned to Exter.

For this production Exter designed, or rather constructed, stylized costumes from brilliantly coloured materials, again with the addition of pieces of metal, wood and aluminium attached to their surfaces. The stage was set on seven levels, with numerous

platforms connected by bridges and staircases. The setting was practical, yet non-representational, and it was entirely appropriate for the expression of the drama's violent action. Tairov believed that the stage area, devoted to the power of art, had to remain separate from the audience and the imaginary wall between actor and spectator should be retained. However, he did accept that the audience could be emotionally affected by the art on stage. Tairov did not use this potential power in the service of the Party, but it was exploited by many others to glorify the Revolution.

On festival days theatre companies were brought out onto the streets, moving from square to square giving revues and improvising sketches to celebrate the victory of the proletariat. Such events were commonplace in the early post-revolutionary years, and many workers had been involved in mass theatrical and cinematic productions, such as The Storming of the Winter Palace, which had a cast of thousands, and other similar large-scale projects.

Meyerhold revived this idea in the spring of 1921 with The Struggle and Victory of the Soviets. He conceived of it as a grand mass spectacle, a revolutionary type of popular festival parade, to take place on *Khodinskoe* field for the Third Congress of Comintern. Popova and Alexander Vesnin were invited to help stage the festival, which presented many organisational problems due to its vast scale. Although the scenario had a theatrical

plot, the list of proposed participants would appear appropriate for a military parade, as it included 200 cavalry, 2300 infantry cadets, 16 artillery weapons, 5 aeroplanes, 5 armoured cars, tanks, motorcycles, military orchestras and other items. This use of factual materials rather than aesthetic representations was continued in later constructivist productions, and this type of festival certainly brought "art into life", removing the production from the confines of the theatre and placing it in the open air. However, the spectacle was never staged because the excessive cost of such extravaganzas was too great for the economy to bear in the bleak fiscal conditions of early 1921 - the government issued a Decree prohibiting mass festivals and celebrations. The idea alone still played a great part in the evolution of theatrical performance and in the formative artistic experiences of two artists who would become Constructivists and design remarkable sets and costumes for the stage. Indeed, it was the possibility of open-air theatre that drew Meyerhold to Popova a few months later. And, as we shall see, it was Meyerhold who provided the vital link between the Constructivists and the theatrical expression of their credo, which without him may not have achieved its full potential.

During this first period Rodchenko was also involved in some work on costume design for Alexei Gan's play "Мы". Rodchenko produced a series of costume designs with a Cubist, decorative basis, and some of his sketches show an increasing interest in the shape of the costume itself. However they were still far removed

from his later, strictly utilitarian designs, created on the tenets of Constructivism. Tatlin too was working on costume designs which show attention to aspects of garment construction that he developed after 1921. For example, his costume sketches for the opera The Flying Dutchman (c.1917) already had a practical bias - the coat of the helmsman was waterproof, with a button-in lining and separately cut shoulder parts and arms. This latter aspect affecting the construction of the coat demonstrates that in the design process Tatlin was considering the problems of making-up the garment, a concern vital in the mass-production of clothing. He was to use this skill in later fashion designs, mainly between 1921 and 1928, when constructivist fashion designers were most active.

It can be seen that the artistic concerns of these early post-revolutionary years had a great effect on the creative experience of most artists. Furthermore it is precisely these concerns:- how to adjust their art to the new political situation; how to find their own place within the changing society; how to translate their desire to be socially useful in artistic practice; to find a role for art beyond the "bourgeois" gallery; to express contemporary issues in a style which breaks free from the past and celebrates the new bases of society, - that influenced their work during this period and led them to formulate the artistic contentions which were codified into the Constructivist Programme.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It became known as the October Revolution when Russia adopted the Julian calendar.
- <sup>2</sup> This was commonly known as Narkompros, a shortening (acronym) of its full title - the *Narodnyi kommissariat prosveshcheniia*.
- <sup>3</sup> W.G.Fischer, "Tatlin's Dream: A note on the exhibition", Tatlin's Dream: Russian Suprematist and Constructivist Art 1910-1923, Fischer Fine Art Limited, London, 1973, p.7.
- <sup>4</sup> IZO Narkompros was the acronym taken from " Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv ". Tatlin was the head of the Moscow branch of IZO from 1918-1919, and, among other things, was responsible for the implementation of the Plan for Monumental Propaganda.
- <sup>5</sup> Lunacharsky appears to be using the term "Futurists" as a blanket expression to denote all artists of the Avant-garde who had a "left-wing", abstractivist orientation. In fact they were mostly not Futurists at all, but representatives of the new art form as opposed to traditional artistic depiction. I will continue to use the term Futurists interchangeably with others such as "avant-garde artists", "abstract artists", "leftists", and "left-wing artists". Supporters of traditional realist art coined the term as a pejorative nickname, using it in a derogative sense.
- <sup>6</sup> A.Lunacharsky, " Ob izobrazitel'nom iskusstve ", quoted from B.Jangfeldt, Majakovskij and Futurism 1917-1921, Almqvist and Wiksell International, Stockholm/Sweden, 1976, p.37.



<sup>7</sup> See V.Polonskii, Ocherki literaturnogo dvizheniia revoliutsionnoi epokhi, Moscow and Leningrad, 1929, p.25. Quoted in V.Barooshian, "The Avant-Garde and the Russian Revolution", Russian Literature Triquarterly, Fall, 1972, p.350.

<sup>8</sup> The use of the words 'proletarian', 'proletariat', and 'the masses' is intended as a reflection of the language prevalent at the time, weighted as it was with political overtones. The present-day terminology: 'working class', 'ordinary man in the street', and 'people', is equally appropriate and has been used interchangeably in the text in order to eradicate the suggestion of any political bias.

<sup>9</sup> A.Lunacharsky, "Monumental'naia agitatsiia", Plamia, No.11, 1918. Quoted in C.Lodder, "Liubov' Popova: A Revolutionary Woman Artist", Revolutionary Russia, No.2, 1990, p.151.

<sup>10</sup> V.I.Lenin, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, Vol.12, p.104, quoted in V.Tolstoy, (Editor and Introduction), Street Art of the Revolution, Thames and Hudson, London, 1990, p.11.

<sup>11</sup> C.Lodder, *op.cit.*, p.151.

<sup>12</sup> Proletkul't was an abbreviation of Proletarian Cultural Educational Organisations.

<sup>13</sup> L.Pumpyanskii, "The October Revolutionary celebrations and the artists of Petrograd", Plamia, No.35, 1919, pp.11-14. Quoted in V.Tolstoy, *op.cit.*, p.81.

<sup>14</sup> N.G.Mashkovtsev, "The First National Exhibition", Rabochii mir, No.18, 1918, pp34-35. Quoted in V.Tolstoy, *op.cit.*, p.67.

<sup>15</sup> K.Malevich, O novikh sistemakh v iskusstve, Vitebsk, 1919, p.10.

Quoted in B.Jangfeldt, op.cit., page is not enumerated since it is the introductory quote.

<sup>16</sup> N.Punin, "Proletarskoe iskusstvo", Iskusstvo kommuni, 13 April 1919. Quoted in E.Kovtun, Avangard ostanovlennii na begu, Avrora, Leningrad, 1989, p.3.

<sup>17</sup> P.Reddaway, "Literature, the Arts and the Personality of Lenin", Lenin: the Man, the Theorist, the Leader. A Reappraisal, eds. L.Schapiro and P.Reddaway, London, 1967, pp.51-52.

<sup>18</sup> "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste", A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, Moscow, 1912, quoted in V.Markov, Russian Futurism: a History, London, 1969.

<sup>19</sup> Bogdanov was a pseudonym. His real name was Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Malinovskii, born 1873, died 1928.

<sup>20</sup> O.Brik, "K hudozhnik-proletarii". Iskusstvo kommuni. No.2, 1918, p.1, quoted in B.Jangfeldt, op.cit., p.88.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid..

<sup>22</sup> M.Eastman, Artists in Uniform, Octagon Books, New York, 1972, (Reprint of the 1934 edition), p.131.

<sup>23</sup> "Khronika literaturnoi zhizni", Istoriia ruskoi sovetskoi literatury 1917-1929, Moscow, 1958, 1, p.574.

<sup>24</sup> Drengenberg, "Die sowjetische Politik", p.309, quoted in A.Senkevitch Jr., "The Sources and Ideals of Constructivism in Soviet Architecture", Art into Life, The Henry Art Gallery, p.228.

<sup>25</sup> A contemporary slogan popularised by avant-garde artists, in particular Tatlin.

<sup>26</sup> J.E.Bowl, "From Pictures to Textile Prints", Print Collectors Newsletter, New York, 1975, Mar-Apr., pp.16-20, p.16.

<sup>27</sup> O.Brik, source uncited, quoted from D.Elliott, Art into Production, p.65.

<sup>28</sup> Art of the Commune ( *Iskusstvo kommuni* ) was published from December 1918 to April 1919 in Petrograd.

<sup>29</sup> O.Brik, "Drenazh iskusstvo", Iskusstvo kommuni, No.1, 1918, p.1. Quoted from C.Lodder, Russian Constructivism, Yale University press, New Haven and London, 1990, p.77.

<sup>30</sup> N.Chuzhak, "Pod znakom zhiznestroeniia", LEF, No.11, 1923, p.27.

<sup>31</sup> *Zhivskulptarkh* - a centre of innovative artistic research set up in 1919 under IZO to deal with problems of synthesis between painting, (*zhivopis'*) sculpture, (*skulptura*) and architecture (*arkhitektura*).

<sup>32</sup> An anonymous news item, "Masterskaia rukovoditel'na Tatlina". Zhizn' iskusstva, No.37, 14 December 1918, quoted in Zhadova, Tatlin, Thames and Hudson, 1987, p.338.

<sup>33</sup> INKhUK - the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow, which existed from 1920 to 1924.

<sup>34</sup> "Obshchii plan programmy nauchno-teoreticheskogo otdela Tsentrosektsii AK IZO Narkomprosa", MS, private archive, Moscow. Quoted in C.Lodder, Russian Constructivism, op.cit., p.38.

<sup>35</sup> C.Lodder, Russian Constructivism, op.cit., p.3.

<sup>36</sup> B.Jangfeldt, op.cit., p.102, cited from the Party Decree "O Proletkul'takh", Dec.1, 1920, KPSS v resoliutsiakh i resheniakh s'ezdov konferentsii i plenumov CK 1898-1970, Moscow, 1970, t.2. p197-198.

<sup>37</sup> Plekhanov, "Iskustvo i obshchestvennaia zhizn'" quoted in E.Eikhengol'ts, "Problema massovoi oдежды", IZOFRONT, P.Novitsky et al, Moscow and Leningrad, 1931, p.55.

<sup>38</sup> E.Eikhengol'ts, op.cit., p.58.

<sup>39</sup> "Rabochii kostium". Zhizn' iskusstva, No.142, 1919, p.1.

<sup>40</sup> Protokoli I-Vserossiiskoi konferentsii po khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti, Moscow, 1920, August, pp.37-38, quoted in T.Strizhenova, Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiuma, Moscow, 1970.

<sup>41</sup> The word fashion when related to the design practice of the Constructivists bears no relationship to the field of fashion design today. It merely denotes the fact that the designs were produced for clothing and the phrase clothes design could be used instead. Present-day usage of the word fashion creates an image of catwalk models displaying lavish, outrageous garments, and this could not be further away from the Constructivists' foray into 'fashion' design.

<sup>42</sup> *Spetsodezhda* - clothing that was specifically designed for a particular profession, such as a fireman's uniform.

<sup>43</sup> VSNKh, or Vesenkha, as it was known, is an acronym for the Supreme Council of the National Economy, the state body responsible for the running of the planned economy.

<sup>44</sup> TsIShP - (tsentralnyi institut shvetnoi promyshlennosti).

<sup>45</sup> VUZ - vysshee uchebnoe Zavedeniye - a further educational establishment such as a polytechnic.

<sup>46</sup>

"Zapis besed A. Beka i L. Toloi (17 besed) s V. I. Mikhlinoi sdelannaya v 1939-1940 godakh dlia bibliograficheskoi knigi o skulptore, kotornia tak i ne byla napisana",

Panorama iskusstv 12, Moscow, Sovetskii

Khudozhnik, 1989, p.96.

<sup>47</sup> E.Hoffmann-Koenige, "Russian Constructivist Clothing: Just one more utopia?", Russian Women Artists of the Avant-Garde 1910-1930, Exhib.Cat., Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne, 1979, p.53.

<sup>48</sup> Here the word pattern is used in the sense of a dress-makers cut-out pattern.

<sup>49</sup> L.Zhadova, "Some notes on the history of clothes design and other everyday items", in Tatlin, op.cit., p.67.

<sup>50</sup> A.Lavrentiev, Varvara Stepanova: A Constructivist Life, ed. J.E.Bowl, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988, p.43.

<sup>51</sup> D.M.Sarabianov and N.L.Adaskina, L.S.Popova 1889-1924, ARS, 1990, Moscow, p.132.

<sup>52</sup> Supremus - the journal of the Suprematist group, conceived and prepared for the press in 1916-1917, intended by its creators to become the mouthpiece for Suprematism.

<sup>53</sup> D.Sarabianov and N.Adaskina, Popova, Thames and Hudson, London, 1990, p.273.

<sup>54</sup> Volumes of pattern designs were bought by Russian manufacturers for their designers to copy and amend according to the tastes of the Russian market.

<sup>55</sup> For further detail see N.N.Sobolev, "The History of Design in Textiles", published in the catalogue for the First Art Exhibition of Soviet Domestic Textiles, 1928, reproduced in D.Elliott, Art into Production, op.cit., p.95.

<sup>56</sup> D.Sarabianov and N.Adaskina, Popova, op.cit., p.299.

<sup>57</sup> F.Roginskaia, Sovetskii tekstil', Moscow, 1930, p.64.

<sup>58</sup> Academic Theatres, such as the *Maly*, the *Bolshoi*, the *Kamerny* and the Moscow Art Theatre, wanted to continue with the old repertoire, regardless of the Revolution.

<sup>59</sup> Igor Ilinsky, Sam o sebe, Moscow, 1962, p.106, quoted from E.Braun, Meyerhold on Theatre, p.161.

<sup>60</sup> A.V.Lunacharsky, Teatr i revolyutsiia, Moscow, 1924, pp.106-107, in K.Rudnitsky, Russian and Soviet Theatre 1905-1932, p.61.

<sup>61</sup> Jan Kott, "Theatre and Literature", Theatre Notebook 1947-1967, trans. Boleslaw Taborski, New York, 1968, p.268.

<sup>62</sup> A.Tairov, Notes of a Director, trans. and intro. by N.Kuhlke, University of Miami Press, Coral Gables, Florida, 1969, p.21.

<sup>63</sup> K.Rudnitsky, op.cit., p.61.

<sup>64</sup> Vestnik teatra, Moscow, 1920, No.78-79, p.16.

# THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF NEP, 1921-1928.

Constructivism has been defined by many different people in many different ways, and therefore there are many misconceptions about what actually constitutes a constructivist work because of the various definitions. Constructivism was an art form that emerged out of the first few turbulent post-revolutionary years - the First Working Group of Constructivists was founded in March 1921 - although certain advances in modern art before this time certainly had an effect on the movement. In order to advance a succinct working definition of Constructivism one must look to the first pronouncements of constructivist artists - their "Programme". This demanded that their art should be put at the service of Communism, creating real objects for the benefit of all, based on the three concepts of tectonics, *faktura*, and construction.

Tectonics is a principle which involves the use of the most modern industrial materials and techniques in the creation of functional objects suitable to the new socialist way of life.

*Faktura* is the process of working the material, its handling or treatment, which should remain visible to reveal the intrinsic qualities of the material. It necessitates a conscious choice of material, followed by appropriate usage, which must not detract

from its construction or limit the tectonics.

Construction is the actual creation of a functional form by the effective and expedient organisation of appropriate materials in an anti-aesthetic manner, devoid of standardised concepts of taste, for a given purpose.

Two of the main concerns of the First Working Group of Constructivists were:-

"КОММУНИСТИЧЕСКОЕ ВЫРАЖЕНИЕ МАТЕРИАЛЬНЫХ СООРУЖЕНИЙ И НЕПРИМИРИМУЮ ВОЙНУ ИСКУССТВУ."<sup>1</sup> They declared that technology was the "eternal enemy of art",<sup>2</sup> and that the "communistic expression of material structures", or the creation of objects appropriate for application in a socialist state, was to be based on the three aforementioned concepts. They maintained that their laboratory<sup>3</sup> constructions must now be validated by their practical end use, and this social function must be founded on Communist ideology. Their Programme states that their,

"only ideological foundation was 'scientific communism, based on the theory of historical materialism'."<sup>4</sup> The Communistic imperative was clear in the Constructivists' Programme, and it is evident that they wanted to make their creative activity, as opposed to artistic activity, useful to the state and the Proletariat.

The Constructivists approached the design of an object in two ways:-



1. from the material aspect, investigating the nature of a material and its possibilities for the creation of an object;

2. by paying little attention to the material and instead exploring the possibilities for the mathematical construction of a structure using geometric forms. Examples of this method were the engineering-type constructions shown at the Second<sup>5</sup> OBMOKHU<sup>6</sup> exhibition. The Constructivists called the creation of a functional object suitable for industrial production "intellectual production". This phrase incorporates the implication of a logical and rational formulation of a design for a practical object. It suggests an objective, as opposed to subjective, approach to the design by the artist because he has used his intelligence rather than his intuition in the creation of an object, thus rendering the creative process more scientific, and supposedly refuting any aestheticism.

Many constructivist/productivist<sup>7</sup> artists and theoreticians adopted a stand against fine art in general and aestheticism of any kind. They believed that by emphasising the technical, functional, and rational principles governing the construction of an object in addition to its utilitarian, social and political content, the creative activity they were advocating was thus deprived of any contact with art and aesthetics. However, technical design is subject to the artistic laws of form and is constructed through the basic elements of design, which also function in painting and other art forms: line, shape, mass, colour, texture, volume, space. Yet because the field of design

was still relatively unexplored and the division between art and engineering remained a grey area, the view that work in this realm was devoid of artistic laws appeared credible to many people. It is difficult to assess the extent to which this belief was engendered by polemics and adopted for reasons beyond the purely creative - certainly the constructivist Alexei Gan was almost fanatical in his vehement denunciation of art:-

"Death to art!...Marxists must work in order to elucidate its death scientifically and to formulate a new phenomena of artistic labour within the new historic environment of our time."<sup>8</sup>

The Constructivists applied line, colour, volume, space and texture to their material approach, which involved an economic appraisal of the industrial possibilities of a material, its properties and value in the expression of Communism, and thus created a functional, practical object with political content - realising the theory of Constructivism in practice. Their methodology is quite similar to the modern concept of design, but at the time it was not fully appreciated in artistic or industrial circles. It was viewed by many as an artistic activity similar to applied art, to which the Constructivists were diametrically opposed, or as an aesthetic style. A prominent critic, Nikolai Tarabukin noted that the Constructivists were prone to dilettantism and in a tragic situation because they were neither artists nor technical designers, lacking the necessary technical knowledge of industrial techniques and appropriate training. However, the years of laboratory work on material and construction

provided the Constructivists with much of the basic knowledge required for the utilitarian design of three-dimensional objects and also for work in two-dimensional art forms. It is important to remember that the period leading up to the founding of the First Working Group of Constructivists was highly productive and that artists' views changed rapidly as they advanced their knowledge and attempted to apply it to their situation in a newly evolving society with its particular social, economic and political exigencies.

The term 'Constructivism' is generally accepted to have originated during discussions involving Rodchenko, Stepanova and Gan at INKhUK in late 1920. A group of artists formed around Rodchenko, rivalling the leadership of Kandinsky, and in early 1921 he and his allies left the Institute. Those artists which remained were far from concordant in their views and did not constitute a cohesive movement. In general it was their diverging attitudes on the meaning of construction that separated them into two camps: one believed that construction was perceived aesthetically and appropriate to a two-dimensional painting; the other, the future Constructivists, posited the object as the medium of construction, rejecting aestheticism and instead focusing on material and mathematics as integral to construction.

Although the formation of the group and the crystallisation of their beliefs had come via a number of polemic debates, the First Working Group of Constructivists came together after a

series of logical progressions. The theoretical discussions within INKhUK, in addition to their own practical work and material investigations over the past 3-4 years had drawn them to the same conclusions and resulted in the formation of the movement known as Constructivism.

There is no evidence to suggest that the members of the First Working Group of Constructivists were motivated in the establishment of the group simply by a desire to be the founders of a new modern art movement. However, the inclusion of the word 'first' in the group's title does seem to imply an insistence on their own originality. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the Constructivists' commitment to their objectives, and it has been suggested that the word 'first' was only added to the title at a later date to differentiate it from the other groups which soon sprang up under its banner. The group's political orientation can be cited as another example of their integrity - the desire to mould their art within the confines of the social and political situation suggests a dedication to their work and devotion to the regime they thought they were serving. The conception of the artist's changed role in the new society and the idea of building a future socialist utopia with the aid of technological developments, drew the artists to reject the aestheticism of fine art in favour of practical work which would improve the quality of everyday life.

The Constructivists believed that their new social role

within the confines of socialism demanded Communist content in their art. The problem with this, however, was that Marx and Engels had not been clear in any of their writings on what precisely constituted Communist art. This left the way open for those opposed to avant-garde art to discredit it as unintelligible to the most people, and therefore not part of their culture and socially unjustifiable. This criticism was evolved from the Marxist view that,

"the ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas," from which it was supposed that art which could be appreciated by the Proletariat, whose cultural level was rather low and who were accustomed to representative art forms, was in accordance with Marxism and consequently the Party.

Undeterred by this however, the affirmation of the Constructivists' Communist basis in their Programme may well have been partially inspired by a desire to remain within artistic boundaries satisfactory to the Party and as a ploy to protect them from the vicious onslaughts of antagonistic critics. However, by introducing the overt political influence of Communism, and consequently the Party and Government, into their art, the Constructivists extended the Party's influence directly into art. This gave the Party the opportunity to manoeuvre them according to the professed political beliefs: to show their allegiance to Communism they must obey the Party line and produce the art that the Party wanted. Thus if the Constructivists' initial adherence to Communism was a protective measure, it was their greatest

mistake, because without any strict Marxist guidelines to follow, the Party could virtually decide what constituted Communist art. And, as we have already seen (in chapter 1), the upper echelons of the Party appreciated realistic, representative art, and had denounced Futurist art in 1920 in the Decree 'On the Proletkul't'. The fact that Constructivism did not find favour with Party leaders is therefore hardly surprising. But it is paradoxical that some of the government's policies found expression in constructivist art.

The government advocated the policy of infiltrating art into industry, and encouraged the advance of technology and the use of modern materials in the building of socialism and to hasten the renovation and regeneration of industry. The Constructivists initially adopted an industrial bias, which soon became the dominant principle in their work and pre-empted the advocacy of a Productivist platform within INKhUK. Tatlin was one of the first artists to assert that engineering and art were interdependent, and he wanted to convince those involved in production that in order to create better quality industrial objects and thus enhance the quality of life, the artist must be involved in the production process. Tatlin was attempting to introduce the designer into the factory using the concepts of modern design in the creative process: to produce objects that were not developed from arbitrary subjective decisions of taste, style or fashion, but were artistic constructions of lasting value, entirely suited to their function. This was Tatlin's conception of "material culture", which was

related to the notion of production art, first discussed in *Art of the Commune* in 1918, and then taken up by the Constructivists within INKhUK after the "5 × 5 = 25" Exhibition in Moscow in September 1921. Tatlin's own investigations in "material culture" show undeniable similarities with the work of the First Working Group of Constructivists, and Tatlin fully accepted the use of the term Constructivist in relation to his own work. The activities of the First Working Group of Constructivists and Tatlin were to progress along the same lines and involved them in Productivism and production art.

The "5 × 5 = 25" Exhibition consisted of five works by five artists: Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova, Exter and Alexander Vesnin. The paintings were criticised for remaining outside the realm of production and unrelated to the life of the ordinary worker, as Tarabukin stated:-

"In democratic art all form must be *socially justified*."<sup>9</sup>

The Constructivists themselves were conscious of this and felt obliged to abandon the remnants of aestheticism and self-expression of their easel art and pursue the construction of efficient objects for practical use. Thus the "5 × 5 = 25" Exhibition precipitated a distinct break with artistic representation and inaugurated the period of Constructivist production art and Productivism.

This was marked by a meeting within INKhUK on the 24th November 1921 during which twenty five artists accepted the

platform of Production art, and supporters of production art were elected into the administration of the Institute. All those who did not adhere to the concepts of production art: the rejection of easel art; emphasising the functionality of form; equating functionalism with beauty; putting utilitarian objects on a par with works of art; and stressing the social value of a design, left the Institute. Production art was an aspect of Constructivism which had arisen out of its own principles, and artists committed themselves to this aspect of Constructivism by, "espousing 'production art as an absolute value and Constructivism as its only form of expression.'"<sup>10</sup> Punin stressed the distance between applied art and production art:-

"It is not a matter of decoration, but the creation of new artistic objects. Art for the proletariat is not a sacred temple for lazy contemplation, but work, a factory, producing completely artistic objects."<sup>11</sup> This emphasises that those practising applied art were not part of the production process, merely embellishing the surface of an object rather than constructing it. Some artists attempted to copy the *style* of constructivist design, but they did not follow through the organic growth of an object or a design from the properties of the appropriate material used for its creation, to the organisation of its forms into a construction with the implied understanding of the technical properties of all the materials involved. Tatlin called these artists "Constructivists in inverted commas":-

"The Constructivists, in inverted commas, also operated with materials, but abstractly, for the sake of formal tasks,



mechanically applying technology to their art as well.

Constructivism, in inverted commas, did not take into account the organic connection of materials with its own efforts and work."<sup>12</sup>

Not only is it important to recognise the fact that there were numerous artists claiming to produce constructivist works, but not actually doing so, but also that some Constructivists ceased to use the term Constructivism to denote their activity within the boundaries of production art and called themselves Productivists. The difference between the two rests on their industrial orientation. For the Productivist, the starting point is the factory, industrial production processes and engineering technology. He creates a utilitarian object, the main design requirement of which is that it must be easily mass-produced and suitable to the industrial processes available. For the Constructivist, the material formation of a rationally constructed, practical, functional, efficient, utilitarian object, suitable to the new socialist way of life is the design task. To construct this object he must take all the design requirements into account, including the fact that it will be industrially mass-produced. However, the Constructivist is more concerned with the material form of the object than the process of its production. Thus, there is Constructivist production art and Productivist production art. Most of the work of this study is Constructivist production art, and because it was designed using the theories of Constructivism, is usually referred to simply as 'constructivist'. There was a great deal of confusion over the

nature of production art, which was exacerbated by a small collection of articles entitled Art in Production, published by the Art and Production Subsection of IZO. In the light of this confusion, the Constructivists adopted other terms to describe their creative activity: "intellectual production" (previously explained) and "life-construction".

'Life-construction' was derived from the Constructivists desire for their work to have social resonance, to move 'into life'. This term incorporates all those art forms which extend their influence into the environment, and consequently the social function had primary value. The term was first used in 1923 in an article in *LEF*<sup>13</sup> by Nikolai Chuzhak. 'Life-construction' was to be realised through the creative activity of the 'artist-constructor'. The 'artist-constructor', or 'engineer-constructor' as he (or she) was also called, needed to have a broad artistic education, which was matched by technical knowledge and an understanding of modern technology. In order to produce this new breed of designer, it was obvious that new artistic training would have to be formulated in educational establishments which was oriented to creating artists for industry. The VKhUTEMAS was home to such a teaching programme.

The VKhUTEMAS was divided into Faculties dealing with different areas of artistic training, which was altered during its existence a number of times. The most important development was the transformation of constructivist professors' courses to

incorporate and pursue the principles of production art. In 1923 there was a change of *rektor*<sup>14</sup> and this marked the initiation of a more practical line in the teaching programmes. Students were given practical tasks in the workshops which had real life ramifications and some of the projects they worked on were actually orders from various state enterprises. However, despite the new emphasis on production art, many faculties did not produce work that can be considered either constructivist or productivist. Rodchenko's constructivist teaching did achieve some positive results in the Metalwork faculty and the *Dermetfak*, formed from an amalgamation of the Woodwork faculty and the Metalwork faculty in 1926. In *Metfak* Rodchenko gave instruction on construction and composition, and in this he applied the principles of Constructivism relating to the investigation of the inherent properties of a material and their appropriate application in the construction of a form for a given purpose, within the confines of industrial production. Rodchenko's constructivist principles were apparent in the tasks he set the students for project work, which required,

"socially useful, consumer-efficient designed objects, satisfying the formal principles of creative activity, technical simplicity, functional efficacy [*tselesoobraznost'*], and economy of both execution and use."<sup>15</sup> Tatlin began teaching in the *Dermetfak* in 1927, running a course on the 'culture of materials', employing constructivist methodology. However, by the late 1920s Tatlin's approach was distinctly more organic and used curvilinear forms, but he still based the design of an object on materials'

inherent properties and their most appropriate combinations, as stated in an article of 1930;-

"With the task of creating a concrete everyday object with determined functions, the artist of material culture takes account of all properties of suitable materials and their inter-relationships, the organic form (man) for which a given object is created, and finally the social side: this man is a worker and will use the object in question in the working life he leads."<sup>16</sup>

Unfortunately Constructivist production art at the VKhUTEMAS had little practical success: their designs and design techniques were not adopted by industry, and therefore the extra-artistic aspects of the designs were nullified, having no effect on the cultural life of the workers. There was a lack of economic support for VKhUTEMAS projects from industry, and the Institute never achieved its full potential as a technical-artistic design workshop for industry. Paradoxically, Constructivist production art may well have had a very different reception in capitalist countries - Germany, for example.

The development of the VKhUTEMAS as a design school was paralleled to some extent by the synthesis of art and technology in art education in Germany, with the creation of the Bauhaus in 1919. However, it was only in 1923 that cooperation with industry was fully realised when the school was re-established in Dessau. Students were encouraged to develop a sense of functional design; economy and technology were important in the design process, as

was the principle that 'form follows function'. The Bauhaus' drive for good everyday design penetrated into industry and into life, and the general standard of design was raised, with results that,

"could be seen in all kinds of manufactured objects and affected every aspect of day to day life."<sup>17</sup> German industry was well accustomed to the infiltration of art into industry. In 1907 the Deutscher Werkbund was formed from a group of professional men, some industrialists, to encourage cooperation between art and industry. They believed that the only way to overcome the evils inherent in industrial production was for art to work with industry, rather than turning against capitalism and modern technology, as was advocated by the English Arts and Crafts Movement of William Morris. By around 1914 the Werkbund was already working in the field of industrial design, but the war curtailed this activity, and the idea was only taken up again in the mid-1920s by the Bauhaus with the support of the Werkbund, which from 1926 was run by the industrialist Peter Bruckmann.

Unlike German industry its Russian counterpart was hostile to the newly emerging field of design and relied on traditional methods of applied art decoration and engineering skills in the development of objects. Constructivism found itself unable to revitalise industry because it was, in general, suspicious of, and hostile towards artists who wanted to revolutionise methods of production and create new functional, ascetic objects. Factory managers possibly believed that these simple, practical,

undecorative objects would not be popular with the workers, who, facing material deprivation of many kinds, would not want such basic, utilitarian items in their homes, despite their usefulness. It can therefore be seen that the economic forces engendered by NEP acted against constructivist practice because they pandered to the aesthetic tastes of the consumer.

The problem of the urban masses' low cultural appreciation, which made them gravitate towards traditional aesthetics, realistic representation and florid decoration, was matched by the backwardness of the peasantry who liked their own folk art and iconography. Gan underlined the problem of taste having a negative effect on the implementation of constructivist design principles in industry at LEF's first conference in January 1925, and at a further meeting in July of that year. He pointed to the fact that store buyers suit their own tastes, usually traditional, and thus were not inclined to be attracted by constructivist designs. The economic pressures in industry should not be underestimated as contributory factors in Constructivism's decline. The role of NEP as a regenerator of petty-bourgeois attitudes and as a threat to the ideals of the Revolution, which the artists had espoused, is underlined by Jean Michel Palmier:-

"Toutefois un autre facteur décisif dans l'évolution des avant-gardes, plus assurément que l'attitude du parti lui-même avant la mort de Lénine ou les querelles entre les écoles et les artistes: les transformations suscitées par la NEP."<sup>18</sup> Deprived of state financial support, the Constructivists were confronted with

the rejection of their theory and its practice. Factories refused to mass-produce constructivist designs claiming that they were economically unviable, and thus the Constructivists were denied the opportunity to fulfil their social objectives.

Further industrial-economic problems were part of the heritage of the previous decade - output in 1921 was at one-third of pre-war levels. This meant that industry was in no fit state to welcome an art movement based on technological development and advanced industrial techniques and materials. The lack of technology (in some cases even working machinery) and modern industrial processes in Russian factories proved to be antithetical to constructivist designs which were inspired from tectonics.

The main era of Constructivism runs parallel to the duration of the New Economic Policy, 1921-1928. This fostered the re-emergence of a "bourgeois" middle class, with traditional ideas of beauty and art, and encouraged a corresponding revival of easel art and realistic depiction. At the same time it made life more difficult for avant-garde artistic groups, since a great deal of governmental financial support was curtailed. At the same time 'cultural' NEP was considered to be more tolerant of the various artistic and literary groups, and a certain relaxation in censorship was apparent for a time. However, the increase in the private art market meant that artists would have to produce commissioned works to suit their employers if they wished to

survive in material comfort. This created the opportunity for groups such as AKhRR (the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), *Bytie*, (Objective Reality group), Makovets, the Projectionists and NOZh, (*Novoe obshchestvo zhivopistev*, the New Society of Painters) who produced realistic, figurative, representational easel art to flourish. Furthermore young artists were losing faith in experimentalism and becoming attracted to the "official" aesthetic which was then being formed. This was put forward by various critics, mainly from AKhRR,<sup>19</sup> purporting to speak for the Party, and who appeared to have the high ideological ground because they claimed they were acting on behalf of the proletariat and on the basis of popular opinion. AKhRR artists produced large-scale portraits which glorified military leaders and representational works of revolutionary subjects, workers and peasants. Theirs was an accessible style that answered to the educational level of the proletariat, responding to the masses (*massovost'*), whilst retaining revolutionary-agitational, and national characteristics. AKhRR popularity was undeniable, as Brandon Taylor points out:-

"AKhRR was undoubtedly the dominant visual art organisation in Soviet Russia in 1925. Organisationally expansive and inextricably linked through its Party 'cells' to the centres of Soviet influence and power, it was by this stage well provided for materially and financially and seemed popular with a public who were being encouraged - no doubt many were ready - to take a national view of culture and an unprogressive, anti-modern view of style."<sup>20</sup> 'Left' art had no stable political support, unlike



AKhRR, which had the patronage of many prominent military and political leaders.

The political history of the Soviet Union during NEP provides a vital background to the ideological artistic debates that continued throughout the Twenties. Lenin introduced NEP as a temporary measure in an attempt to resolve the dire state of Russia's economy. It was seen by many as a 'retreat' from the righteous course of Communism and provoked some dissension. At this time the Party felt it necessary to eliminate its remaining "enemies" within the government - Socialist Revolutionaries, Anarchists, Mensheviks, - and to ensure support from Party members. The Control Commission was set up to keep a watchful eye on Party members and carry out disciplinary measures and purges within the Party. And at the Tenth Party Conference a Resolution on Party unity and discipline was passed, which denied any member the right to disagree with Party policy. It can therefore be seen that the Party still considered that it was surrounded by hostile forces, and its history of manipulation, suspicion and subversive tactics continued long after the Revolution. After Lenin's death there was a large intake of Party members, swelling the ranks of the Party to 700,000, mainly from the peasantry and urban workers. They were eager to achieve privilege and promotion, and the idea that they could move up through the Party ranks by following the Party line made them eager to receive Party guidelines on all matters. Somewhat lacking in strict Party instructions in relation to art, but aware of their own tastes for simple,

representational images of beauty, and that groups such as AKhRR were patronised by leading Party members, it seems only natural that they would be willing to denigrate "futurist" art.

Party Resolutions in the mid-1920s were not explicit in relation to the kind of artistic depiction it considered appropriate for Communism. The 1924 Resolution "On Questions of Propaganda, the Press and Agitation" showed that the Party was prepared to be involved with art and literature, but was not ready to exercise ultimate control. It also rejected claims by proletarian groups, such as VAPP, for hegemony in artistic affairs, as did the 1925 Resolution "On the Party's Policy in the Field of Imaginative Literature". This Resolution has been received differently by various critics, which can be seen as proof of the Party's refusal (deliberate or otherwise) to follow a clear line on artistic matters. Yet it can be taken as an attempt at reconciliation between warring factions, whilst securing loyalty from all groups: it hinted at support for proletarian culture *and* suggested that all literary currents were permissible.

The ambiguous position of the Party in relationship to the various art groups is evident in the lack of governmental support for the educational and production art projects of the Constructivists, despite the policy of 'Art into Production'. It is possibly because the Party had not yet formulated its policy for the arts that a power vacuum was created, a vacuum which the proletarian critics, such as the *Onlitguardists*, wished to fill

with their own doctrine. They were developing a Marxist system of criticism within the confines of Party doctrine to support their views. They maintained that only that art which is advocated by the Party was Communist and aided the social revolution by advancing the masses' consciousness in the direction designated by the Party. Thus the critics installed themselves in the position of guardians of Party policy on the arts, and many believed that they were protecting the values of the Revolution by casting aspersions on 'leftist' art. The fact that the Party did not spring to the defence of avant-garde art is not surprising since many of its leading members did not appreciate modern art and were concerned about its "western", "capitalistic", "bourgeois" influences. The turn towards the policy of 'Socialism in one country' made the idea that the avant-garde was ideologically unsound even more believable, and tainted constructivist works with the air of 'deviationism'. The harsh criticism directed at the Constructivists may have damaged their reputation, ruining the value of their work and reducing their popularity, whilst advancing traditional aesthetics linked to Realism. The traditional, realistic and figurative artistic preferences of the Party were echoed by the proletariat, and the majority of Russian art was easel based. The trend towards aesthetic, representational art was very strong, and this was not countered by the presentation of a united front by the Constructivists.

By the end of 1922 the original members of the First Working Group of Constructivists had dispersed into different groups,

although the name was still used by Gan for the group of Constructivists he headed. The divisions within the constructivist movement were put on display in 1924 at the 'First Discussional Exhibition of Organisations of Active Revolutionary Art' in Moscow, which was organised for the express purpose of allowing the different groups to creatively define their position. All those exhibiting had differing opinions on what kind of art works could be construed as constructivist. Thus, already aware that the majority of the public, Party and mainstream artists were opposed to their theories, the Constructivists then became prey to internal divisions which weakened the movement and diluted its theories. The fundamental credo of Constructivism was often misconstrued and this has led to confusion over the essential character of constructivist works. One of the first major misunderstandings about Constructivism arose in Europe as Constructivism made its official debut at the Erste Russische Kunstausstellung at the Van Diemen Gallery in Berlin in 1922.

Appropriate material on the background and theory of Constructivism was not available to the European audience to aid their understanding of the works and the extra-artistic meanings with which the works were imbued. This led to the substantial misconstruction of the movement abroad and was compounded by conflicting accounts of Constructivism by Russian "Constructivists" Naum Gabo, Antoine Pevsner and El Lissitzky. El Lissitzky was responsible for the association of Constructivism with the platform of the journal *Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet*,

published in Berlin at the beginning of 1922, even though this was not at all strictly Constructivist. In addition his works were influenced by both Suprematism and Constructivism, and consequently his teaching at the Bauhaus reflected this. Gabo then added to the mounting confusion by using the term to describe his own work, which did not conform to all the principles of Constructivism, and described Constructivists as Productivists in order to differentiate them from himself. All this led to purely aesthetic works being erroneously acknowledged as constructivist. Furthermore, the European art movements of L'Esprit Nouveau and De Stijl were widely associated with Constructivism, as were the European off-shoot groups which claimed they were founded on Constructivist theory. This was partially true because these groups shared certain common principles with the Russian Constructivists: an openness to new technology and materials; an economy of resources; utility; democratisation of their art, no longer producing works purely for the social élite; and a broadly socialist, often Communist, ideology. Thus the clear social and political imperative of Russian Constructivism was diluted by its European practitioners, and strictly speaking ceased to be Constructivism. In Europe Constructivism appears to have been given a more literal meaning:-

"The very name Constructivism suggests a wish to tackle the problems of rebuilding a shattered world, and this is what the early Constructivist vision became increasingly geared to not only in Russia itself but also at the Bauhaus and elsewhere in the German context, where it met up with Corbusier's and other new

ideas from France."<sup>21</sup> Constructivism outside Russia was influenced by art and artists of many nationalities who formed the 'Constructivist International' in 1922.<sup>22</sup> The differing natures of European Constructivism and Russian Constructivism was noted by Gan, who was particularly critical of the European Constructivists because they did not reject art and therefore, he felt, could never be true Constructivists. Thus it appears that Constructivism did have a considerable European resonance, exerting an influence on the Bauhaus and other European artists, but only in a hybrid form. Nevertheless the design approach practised in the Bauhaus, put forward by Grosz, known as 'Die neue Sachlichkeit', embraced some constructivist principles including:- functionalism, utility and the absence of decorative frills, accompanied by a socially engaged attitude in the design process.

NEP was a highly productive period in the arts and it saw the apogée of the constructivist movement. However, the social, economic, political and artistic factors of these few years set contemporary Soviet art down a path from which there was no return or deviation. Perhaps no-one appreciated this at the time, but the events of the Twenties were leading the art world to the doctrine of Socialist Realism, and that art which was born of the Revolution was to meet an early demise.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Typescript in archive of A.M.Rodchenko and V.F.Stepanova,

"Kto my. Manifest gruppy konstruktivistov". Rodchenko Stepanova. Budushchee -  
edinstvennaya nasha isel'... Dresden, Munich,

p.170.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.170.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'laboratory' is derived from the notion that during 1917 to 1921 their artistic work was in an experimental stage - this came to fruition in their advocacy of Constructivism.

<sup>4</sup> "Programma rabochei gruppy konstruktivistov INKhUKa", MS, private archive, Moscow, cited in C.Lodder, Russian Constructivism, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1990, (4th printing), p.94.

<sup>5</sup> Most texts record this as the Third OBMOKHU exhibition of a series held between 1919 and 1923. It is in fact the second as a surviving invitation to the exhibition clearly states:-

"...to the opening of the SECOND SPRING exhibition of OBMOKHU on May 22, 1921." Reprinted in From Surface to Space: Russia 1916-1924, Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne, 1974, p.18.

Rodchenko exhibited at this exhibition although he was not a member of the Society.

<sup>6</sup> OBMOKHU - an abbreviation of *OBshchestvo MOlodykh KHUdozhnikov*, the Society of Young Artists, founded in early 1919; its members included Konstantin Medunetskii, Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, along with nine others.

<sup>7</sup> An explanation about production art and Productivism follows below.

<sup>8</sup> A.Gan, Konstruktivism, Tver, 1922, quoted in "Alexei Gan. Constructivism [Extracts] 1922", J.E.Bowl, Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism 1902-1934, Viking Press, New York, 1976, p.221.

<sup>9</sup> A.B.Nakov, "Taraboukine. Du chevalet à la machine", introduction to Le Dernier Tableau, Champ libre, Paris, 1972, p.28.

<sup>10</sup> C.Lodder, op.cit., p.90, quoted from a report by A.Babichev, "Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury", for presentation at the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences in October 1922.

<sup>11</sup> Punin, cited by Chuzhak in "Pod znakom zhiznestroeniia", p.27, quoted by C.Lodder, Art into Life, The Henry Art Gallery, Rizzoli, Seattle - Minneapolis, 1990, p.100.

<sup>12</sup> V.Tatlin, "Art into Technology", Tatlin, Zhadova, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988, p.310.

<sup>13</sup> *LEF* was the journal of the group LEF - the Left Front of Art - which was headed by V.Mayakovsky and intimately connected with the Constructivists. *LEF* was published from 1923-1925, when the group dissolved, but reunited as the New LEF in 1927 and once more published its journal under this new name. LEF glorified the cult of machinism and technical modernity, believing that mechanisation was the necessary route towards socialism.



<sup>14</sup> The *rektor* was the head of the Institute. The post was held by Ravdel', 1920-23, Favorskii, 1923-26, and Novitskii, 1926-1930.

<sup>15</sup> C.Lodder, Russian Constructivism, op.cit., p.135, from TsGALI, Fond 681, op.2, ed.khr. 65, list 320.

<sup>16</sup> V.E.Tatlin, "Problema sootnosheniia cheloveka i veshchi. Ob'iavim voinu komodom i bufetam", Rabis, no.15, 14 April 1930, p.9, quoted in Zhadova, op.cit., p.268.

<sup>17</sup> J.Willett, The New Sobriety. Art and Politics in the Weimar Period 1917-1933, Thames and Hudson, London, 1978, p.139.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Michel Palmier, "Utopies et Réalités dans les avant-gardes des années 20", Utopies et Réalités en URSS 1917-1934, Agit-Prop, Design, Architecture, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1980, p.15.

<sup>19</sup> AKhRR - the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, founded from the remnants of the Peredvizhniki group in early 1922.

<sup>20</sup> Brandon Taylor, Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks. Volume Two: Authority and Revolution, 1924-1932, Pluto Press, London and Boulder, Colorado, 1992, p.30.

<sup>21</sup> J.Willett, op.cit., p.225.

<sup>22</sup> The Constructivist International included: the Zurich Dada, Tzara and the Arps; Berlin Dada - Mehring; Veshch', El Lissitzky; Ma, the Hungarian Laslo Moholy-Nagy and A.Kemeny; De Stijl (Dutch), the Van Doesburgs and Van Eesteren; Hanover - Schwitters and Max Burchartz; plus Graeff and Richter and some of Van Doesburg's students.

## CONSTRUCTIVIST FASHION DESIGN DURING NEP, 1921-1928.

One of the most obvious external forms which the Revolution affected was the field of clothing. Even had the Constructivists not allied themselves to the cause of the Revolution and attempted to revolutionise fashion design, it is certain that dress would have been affected by the changes in social and political life wrought by the events of October.

Taking the example of the French Revolution we see a similar situation. Class differences were great. The lower classes were poverty-stricken, yet the aristocracy lived in luxury, their sumptuous clothing standing in stark contrast to the rags of the masses. It therefore seems natural that after the Revolution fine clothing and tastes for luxurious fabrics were considered signs of treachery to the ideals of fraternity, liberty, and equality, and simple, modest dress was required, using historical examples: -

"...нравственность и скромность требовались от правителей : образцом должны были служить герои Греции и Рима. "<sup>1</sup> Artists, such as David, involved themselves in dress design for the ordinary man (or woman) at this time,

"Живописец Давид рисует античный костюм, в который мечтает одеть всю Францию. "<sup>2</sup> However it was the people themselves who decisively influenced the changes in clothing. What today we call "street-fashion" actually created the "look" of the true revolutionary : -

". . . классовый костюм санкюлотов : красный колпак, куртка, длинные панталоны и деревянные башмаки. "<sup>3</sup>

This street-fashion effect was also evident after the Russian Revolution. The most noticeable fashion was for military clothing, particularly the leather jacket of the political Commissar, which expressed allegiance to the Party as well as being practical, comfortable and functional. Another common sign of revolutionary spirit in dress was the red kerchief, worn either around the neck (usually by men) or on the head (by women). The idea of expressing revolutionary fervour and political allegiance by means of clothing was taken up by a number of constructivist artists and designers shortly after the Revolution. It was surely a great chance not only to bring art into life, but actually to create a living art of the people, as the clothing came to life on the backs of Soviet citizens.

The basic requirements of a Constructivist fashion<sup>4</sup> design are that it satisfies the three concepts of *faktura*, tectonics and construction. Tectonics, in relation to clothing, implies the use of industrially mass-produced textiles for garments which would then also be mass-produced by the most technological means available in the factory. *Faktura* necessitates a conscious choice of material and its appropriate usage, whilst leaving the working of the material and its intrinsic qualities visible. Therefore the process of sewing a garment should be recognisable in the finished garment - the lines of stitching do not have to be hidden by intricate sewing techniques. The construction concept demands effective and expedient organisation of appropriate materials for a given purpose, avoiding any stylisation and traditional standards of taste. Other factors to be taken into consideration

in the construction of a fashion design are hygiene, comfort, expediency, economy, simplicity, functionality and rationality. These factors consequently rule out the possibility of any empty decoration or detail without a specific function because they complicate the production process unnecessarily and lead to the uneconomic waste of material and labour. The political ideology that was part of Constructivism meant that fashion design had to be geared towards the creation of socialist dress, or at least be appropriate to the new socialist *byt*. This precluded the design of high-fashion, elitist designs, one-offs, and fashionable accessories which would be too expensive for the ordinary worker or peasant. In addition the political awareness of the designs should communicate a sense of collectivism and equality. The social function of constructivist clothing was to improve levels of social behaviour, culture and education. A rationally produced, organised design should in some way contribute to the general organisation of social relationships and the reconstruction of life along socialist lines. They agreed with Von-Mekk who concluded that the new forms of clothing should correspond to,

"... новым формам жизни, где удобство и дешевизна производства сочетались бы с требованиями логики и красоты."<sup>5</sup>

Constructivist clothing should help a person fulfil his (or her) social function and must be subjugated to the demands of the body. Therefore garments should not be restrictive in any way and the body should not be trussed up to meet the demands of fashion, or the accepted standards of beauty, such as the "wasp-waist".

The link between textile and fashion design is made quite explicitly by David Arkin, who states : -

"Постановка вопроса о костюме как об определенном бытовом комплексе включает в себя как составную часть вопрос о ткани, иными словами, оформление текстиля определяется оформлением костюма, а не наоборот."<sup>6</sup> It was felt that the production of mass clothing needed to be reconstructed on the basic assumption that the fashion designs should bridge the gap between the cloth in its original state and the clothing in its finished state. This entails a thorough design process, in which the designer is required to take into account industrial production processes, as well as the specific problems encountered when working with different materials. The constructivist designer, therefore, was ideally suited to this method of creating fashion designs.

In a Workers' State, the needs of the workers should be paramount. With this in mind, several constructivist designers turned their attention to *prozodezhda* (production, or work clothing), to meet the needs of the proletariat. In April 1923 Stepanova declared in the *LEF* article "*Prozodezhda - the clothing of today*" :-

"Fashion, which used to be the psychological reflection of everyday life, of customs and aesthetic taste, is now being replaced by a form of dress designed for use in various kinds of labour, for a particular activity in society. This form of dress can be shown *only during the process of work*. Outside of practical life it does not represent a self-sufficient value or a particular kind of "work of art".<sup>7</sup>



The concept of *prozodezhda* grew out of the Constructivists' involvement in theatrical costume design (for further detail see chapter 5) for Meyerhold's productions, such as The Magnanimous Cuckold, and The Death of Tarelkin. In Popova's report given at INKhUK about her work on the costumes for The Magnanimous Cuckold, she explained that the costumes were designed as prototypes for workers' industrial clothing, thus justifying her work in the context of an exercise in design which could be adapted to the conditions of real life. Practical considerations were paramount, such as comfort and lack of physical restrictions to facilitate ease of movement and functionality, but these were inextricably linked with an analytical approach to the question of costume design, which comprised:-

"...analysing the costume as a plastic object into its constituent elements - its construction, its linear, volumetric and spatial form, its colour, texture, rhythm and movement."<sup>8</sup>

Popova maintained these principles in the design process when she became more closely involved with fashion and textile design in 1923.

Stepanova's designs for theatrical costumes also led her to further involvement with fashion and textile design alongside Popova. Although some criticised them for their work in fields that appeared to fall under the auspices of applied art, Popova and Stepanova believed they could translate constructivist ideology to these areas. They, along with Rodchenko, were supported by their comrades in LEF, who recognised the practical

difficulties of "going into the factories," stating:

"Unfortunately, our industry is still far from being ready to welcome the input of our creative power. For the time being young artist-producers must try their strength wherever they can."<sup>9</sup>

Theorists of LEF, such as Brik, believed that the artist had to know about industrial production in order to understand the technical processes involved, and thus be able to design objects as a production artist-constructor, rather than from an applied art viewpoint. In a *LEF* article he stated,

"Основная мысль производственного искусства о том, что внешний облик вещи определяется экономическим назначением вещи, а не абстрактными, эстетическими соображениями. . . "<sup>10</sup>

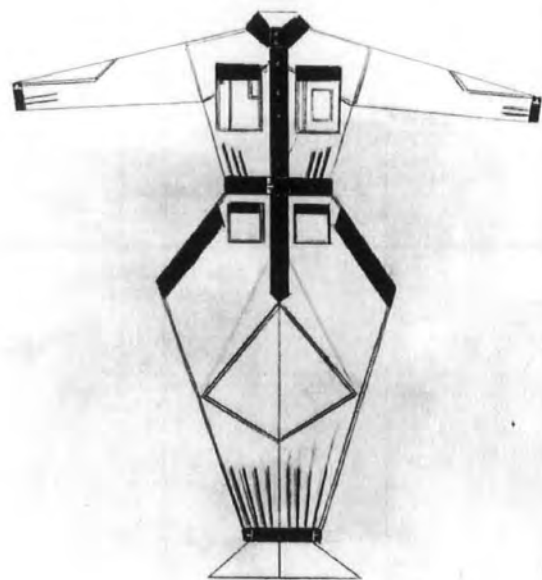
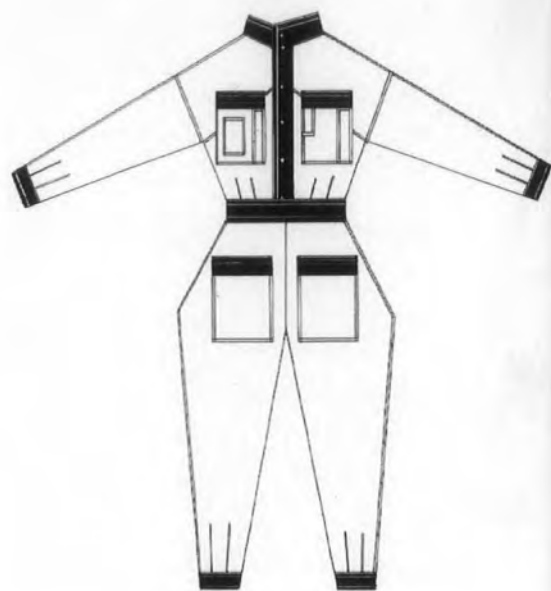
The lack of aestheticism in the design approach does not negate the aesthetic value of the designs the Constructivists created. As hard as it was for the theorists to accept, the clothing designs did have a certain style, elegance and rhythm, and in many ways they could be described as beautiful. However, this "beauty" occurred merely as a by-product of their comprehensive design methodology (this is further discussed in the following chapter). Adaskina notes this paradox, evident in Popova's designs,

"... противоречия между аскетизмом и своеобразной эстетической изысканностью решений, между программным утилитаризмом и игрой художественной фантазии."<sup>11</sup> By meeting the requirements of the Constructivist Programme in relation to fashion design, the garments acquired a particular appearance. The value and quality of the designs can be judged by the relevance they have today. In





**ЧЛЕН ПРОФСОЮЗА**



some cases the designs have not dated, and so it is evident that the garments were not products of a transient fashion, but were created from durable and sound design principles. The designs bear the classic elements of good design: rationality, functionality, expediency and clear construction. The Constructivists did not conceive of their designs in two dimensions, but in three, always visualising their garments in their true environment, on the dynamic body of a worker in Soviet society, taking into consideration the,

"органическую связь конструкции одежды с закономерной пластикой человеческого тела." <sup>12</sup>

The LEF-Constructivists (Popova, Stepanova and Rodchenko) generally used the same design approach in the creation of their models, which were basically of three types: *prozodezhda*, *spetsodezhda* and *sportodezhda*. A feature common to all three was that unnecessary decorative devices and ornamentation were ruled out in favour of comfort and expediency. Stepanova posited the slogan:-

"...удобство и целесообразность костюма для данной производственной функции." <sup>13</sup> Any decorative effect on a garment was to be created only by those seams necessitated by the cut of the pattern to give it its form. The form of the clothing is thus determined by its function and its material realisation.

Stepanova defines *prozodezhda* as:-

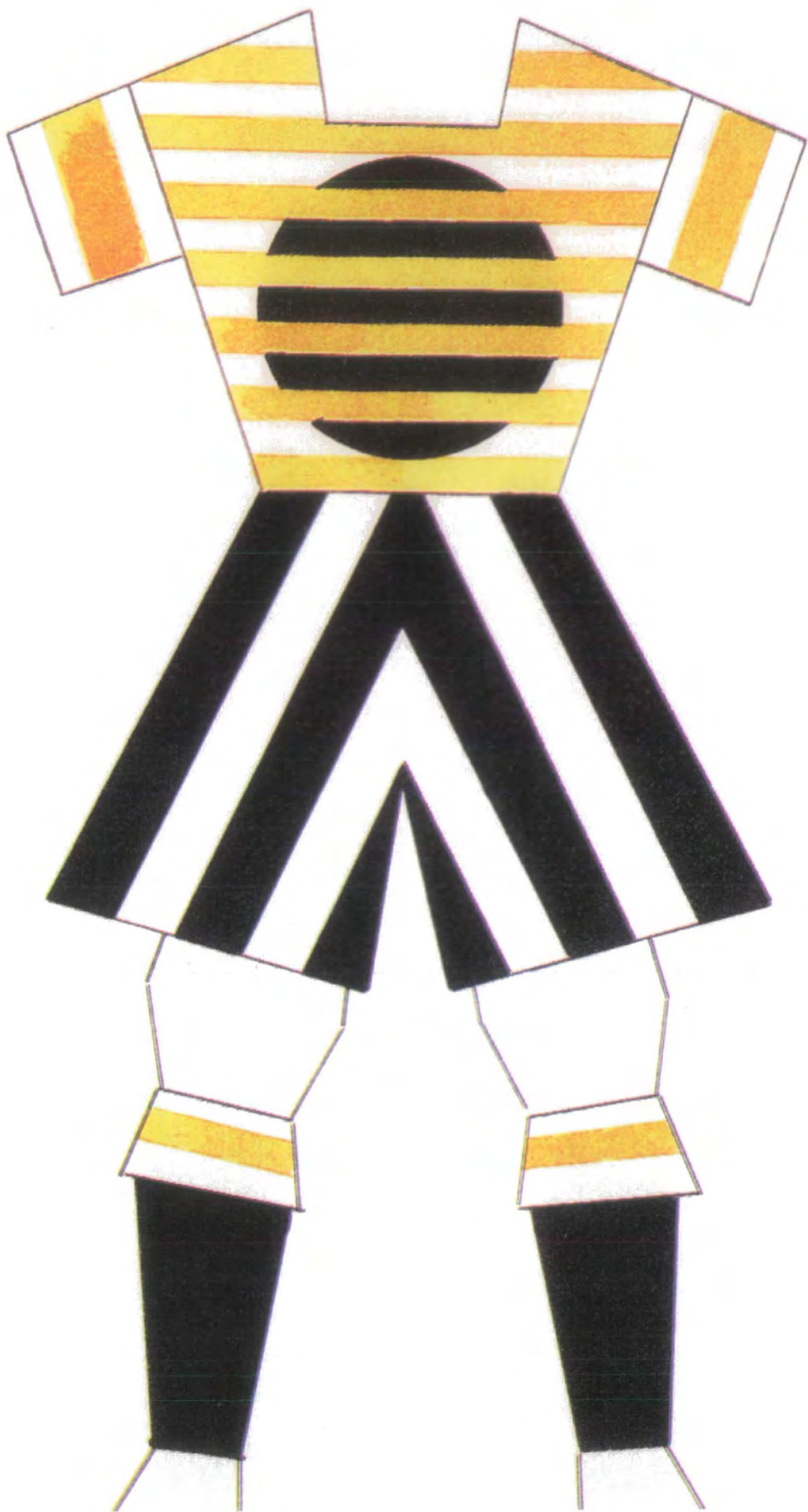
"...рабочий костюм, отличающийся и по профессии и по производству," <sup>14</sup> and places *spetsodezhda* within the general concept



of *prozodezhda*. To make this distinction clearer, an example of *prozodezhda* is Rodchenko's overall (illustration no.3). This is perfectly suited to his work as an artist-constructor, with a number of pockets to carry tools and drawing implements, but it is also appropriate for a number of professions - for engineers, technical workers, printers, etc.. Yet clothing that is suitable for a fireman or a surgeon is peculiar to that profession and must meet specific demands. The fireman's uniform needs to be protective, flame-resistant, sturdy, comfortable, hygienic and non-restrictive. The surgeon's should also be protective, washable, lightweight, hygienic and comfortable, but these two professions could not exchange clothes and fulfil their duties. Thus *spetsodezhda* meets the more precise specifications of a particular profession, but can be categorised as working clothing, that is *prozodezhda*.

The design of *sportodezhda* is approached in the same manner as that of *prozodezhda*, but is differentiated according to the nature of the sport involved. Stepanova acknowledged the role of colour and emblems in these garments, clearly not as decorative devices, but as necessary distinguishing marks:-

"Различить участников по покрою костюма для зрителя, часто бывает невозможно, да и для самого участника - по цвету несравненно быстрее узнать своего партнера."<sup>15</sup> Thus by justifying the use of pattern and colour, Stepanova makes a statement which is borne out today in many competitive sports. For example, football teams must now have two regulation strips, so that if two teams with similar coloured strips meet, one simply changes from

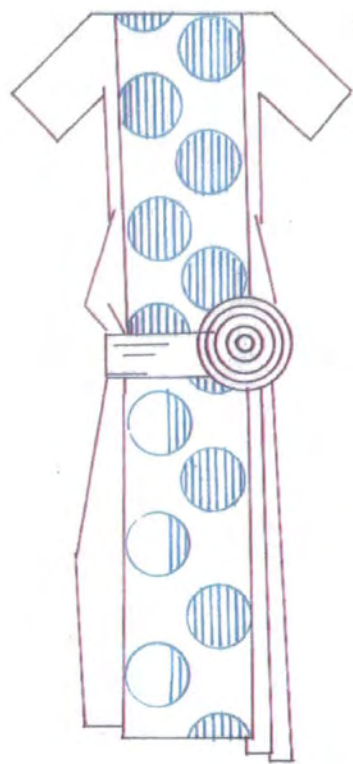


their usual colour to their second strip. However, as Strizhenova points out, strict constructivist ideologists would reject this as ornament:-

"... конкретная разработка спорткостюма привела конструктивистов к противоречию с их теоретической платформой."<sup>16</sup>  
The choice of pattern and colour should be governed by attention to simplicity and the sharpness of colour combinations. In all sports-clothing, the major design considerations were the ease of dressing and wearing a minimum of garments, freedom of movement, simplicity and the elimination of awkward fastenings.

Sports-clothing was an important area of design work in the 1920s, and many designers took an interest in this field. Alexandra Exter and Nadezhda Lamanova produced examples of sports-clothing close in character to that of the Constructivists, based on the principles of expediency, comfort, practicality and a strict attitude towards the form. The attention of the Press was focused on sports-clothing, and part of the album "Искусство в быту" (1925), produced by Lamanova, featured designs for sportswear which were suited to the practicalities of home-sewing techniques.

The idea of sports-clothing played a vital role in the rationalisation of dress because its logical construction, developed to suit its function, was apparent to everyone. An article by T.Khoks of 1924 stressed the relation of sport to everyday life, and the benefits that could be derived from applying aspects of sports-clothing design to everyday fashion. She believed that fashionable clothing deformed and disfigured the



body, was unhygienic, restrictive, uncomfortable and impractical, and as such greatly hindered the development of the new socialist environment:-

"Мы должны развить максимальную производительность, накладные расходы жизненного процесса должно свести до минимума, а мы теряем энергию в лишних движениях, в нелепой пище и одежде."<sup>17</sup> Sports-clothing was advocated as an example of dress appropriate to the new socialist organisation of life, and the everyday routine of a sportsman was lauded as the most rational approach to basic functions. For example, an athlete takes great care to eat the right amount of the right sorts of food, to make sure he has adequate rest and sleep, etc.. Studies undertaken by NOT<sup>18</sup> showed that such a rational approach to life could increase a worker's productivity, and NOT was also studying sportswear for usage in everyday life. Consequently it was recommended that sports-clothing should not be limited to the sporting arena. The idea that sports-clothing could be ideal for everyday wear outside the factory, for recreation and relaxation was first voiced in the early 1920s.

It is within this category of everyday wear, or clothing outside working conditions that some of Popova's dress designs can be placed. Clearly, most of Popova's dress design work is oriented to the female white-collar worker, serving in the various state institutions and offices, and is simple, but business-like and democratic. Yet some retain a hint of flamboyance which goes beyond the strict, utilitarian aims of a *prozodezhda* design. The dress shown in the illustration could be appropriate for



"bourgeois" NEP-women, and therefore demonstrates Popova's alleged deviance from constructivist principles. However it must be pointed out that the dress is still clearly and rationally constructed, appears simple yet stylish, is easy to produce and expedient. As Murina states,

"... аскетизм не противоречит декоративности, пафос утилитаризма не отменяет понятия красоты."<sup>19</sup> If we are to believe Popova's own statements about her desire to clothe the ordinary woman, then the suggestion that she was creating dresses for the middle class has no substance. The dress is perfectly suitable to be worn for festival or holiday day-wear, or celebratory evening-wear, by any woman in post-revolutionary Russia. It may be true that only the more affluent members of Soviet society could have afforded to have it made up in good quality material by an experienced tailor, but the point of the design is to show the ease with which a simple dress can take on a glamorous guise. Furthermore, it can be seen as a practical step, since by designing garments for occasions other than work or sport, Popova was meeting a specific demand. If this space in the market was not filled by constructivist garments, consumers would certainly be choosing from a selection of foreign or pre-revolutionary designs (which is what the majority of people actually wore at the time). The constructivist design methodology must be credited for the creation of such high-quality garments. But in designing such clothing they were accused of pandering to the "bourgeoisie" rather than focusing their work on the needs of the workers. The problem was that their designs were beyond the productive capacity (in terms of economic problems - lack of materials, and labour,

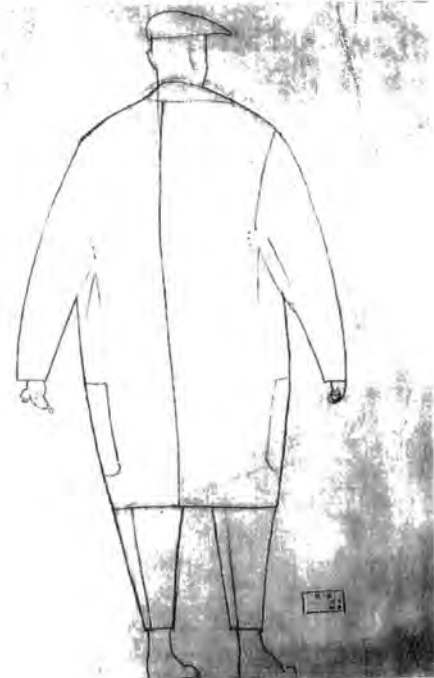
# НОВЫЙ БЫТ



Этот новый тип пальто: сделан с таким расчетом, чтобы «вышла в нем на улицу». Пальто легкое и удобное с ровной вышивкой. Меховый воротник — из лисьи. В другом пальто меховое покрытие с тесьмой 20—30 сантиметров.



Идеал того, что пальто состоит из трех отдельных, по мере необходимости складываемых, частей — то-есть на одну, по желанию, по другую или по трем сторонам. Рукава куртки и брюки также сужены к низу. Железы, кнопки, застежки, комбинационный воротник, манжеты, карманы, прикладываясь к телу, отсутствуют. Пальто и костюм извлечены графически с тесьмой Ленинградского института. На пяти выработанных образцах нормальных вещей толстым указанным на рисунке № 3 мехом, она имеет эластичную тесьму, обеспечивающую при необходимости тесноту. Пальто и костюм извлечены графически с тесьмой Ленинградского института. На пяти выработанных образцах нормальных вещей толстым указанным на рисунке № 3 мехом, она имеет эластичную тесьму, обеспечивающую при необходимости тесноту.



ИДЕТ ИЗЫСКАНИЯ  
ВЫ ПОВСЕДНЕВНОЙ  
ДЕЖДЫ

1-й этаж, комната № 10  
с. 2-й этаж, комната № 10  
2-й этаж, комната № 10  
3-й этаж, комната № 10  
4-й этаж, комната № 10  
5-й этаж, комната № 10  
6-й этаж, комната № 10  
7-й этаж, комната № 10  
8-й этаж, комната № 10  
9-й этаж, комната № 10  
10-й этаж, комната № 10

and technological backwardness) of the sewing factories and were not accepted for production even with compromises over the quality of the fabrics. Constructivist designers aimed to create high-quality garments which would be available to everyone, and the fact that they were not bought by the ordinary woman in the street was not that the dresses were designed exclusively for the *nouveaux riches*, but that they were not mass-produced. Popova's functional, constructive designs derive their style from the constructivist ideology she espoused and its translation to the arena of fashion design:-

"Её модели, строгие, простые и одновременно женственные, в полном смысле слова архитектурны. Они строятся на равновесии вертикальных и горизонтальных членений, своими пропорциями и ритмами выявляющих логику фигуры."<sup>20</sup>

Another example of this type of recreational clothing is Tatlin's "Sports suit", which Tatlin modelled himself for a press article montage which bore the inscription,

"This attire is warm, does not restrict movement, satisfies hygienic requirements, and lasts long."<sup>21</sup> Tatlin began to design everyday clothes in 1923, since they constituted a part of the material environment he was attempting to change through his programme of *material'naia kul'tura*. Although not closely allied to the Moscow LEF group (Tatlin was in Leningrad in the early 1920s), Tatlin's clothing designs are distinctly constructivist in many ways. Tatlin was keen to eradicate the idea of dress as a mark of social status and wanted to free dress from the traditional rules of etiquette. He attempted to create a type of



dress that was economical, functional and suitable for every occasion. It was in this respect that Tatlin differed somewhat from the LEF-Constructivists. Tatlin tried to reconcile aspects of work, leisure and formal attire into a single unit of everyday dress. Yet the means by which he designed these outfits was remarkably similar. Tatlin designed his garments using geometrical elements which enabled him to develop a simple, economical, logical and constructive cutting method. This was obviously suited to mass-production, and in addition he was interested in designing standard patterns specifically for factory production. He carefully considered the choice of textiles for garments and attempted to design using the most widely obtainable and cheapest materials. His desire to provide democratic clothing for the masses is illustrated by a note on his designs for standard models, which states that they are for "150,000,000 people."<sup>22</sup>

Tatlin considered fashion design an important subject in the curriculum at GINKhUK<sup>23</sup>, where he taught in the early 1920s. He appears to have had more success than the Moscow Constructivists in instilling the concepts of Constructivism/Material Culture into his students. The article, "The new way of life and Tatlin's work", by Isakov, praises Tatlin's clothing designs highly and underlines the broader role of Tatlin's work:-

"The work of Tatlin and those young people who gather around him will play a significant role in the struggle against the old way of life, in that cultural struggle bequeathed to us by comrade Lenin."<sup>24</sup>

The cultural struggle was a factor of prime importance to the Constructivists, not only in their design work, but in relation to the viability of their work as a whole. The success or failure of constructivist fashion design in Russia cannot be judged without some reflection on consumer taste, market, economic and industrial conditions.

Due to the extreme deprivation and shortages resulting from years of war, civil war, and war communism, ready-made clothing was in short supply, and tailoring facilities had been curtailed during the excessive nationalisation drive of the early post-revolutionary years. From the start of NEP conditions began to improve, tailoring establishments opened once more, and some industrial production was revived. However, most clothing was still hand sewn at home, from fabrics made in *kustar* workshops rather than by mass-production methods. Since NEP revived social differentiation again, to quite a marked extent, 'bourgeois psychology' entered the economic consumer equation. It can be shown that the lower strata of society bought any sort of material and clothing that was available, due to the deficit of such consumer goods. This in itself eradicated the distinctions of taste and quality which would usually function, and enabled factories to produce goods which would not sell in normal market conditions. The middle-class, on the other hand, could afford to choose good quality material, have their clothes tailor-made, and follow fashion in their dress as their predecessors had done prior to the Revolution. The traditions of dress which were established in pre-revolutionary Russia continued throughout NEP, the most

important of which was the concept of "bourgeois imitation".

Despite the supposed annihilation of the class system, the appeal of 'aristocratic' dress was still very strong. Any luxury which was manifested in the clothing of the rich was copied or striven for by the poor, who attempted to create the illusion of luxury with cheap imitations. The *nouveaux-riches* of 1920s Russia wanted to demonstrate their new material wealth and power base and so courted the traditions of the old aristocracy. The aristocracy had always looked to Paris for its fashions, so Paris chic remained popular with the *nouveaux riches*, who, in addition, pursued the old, traditional, nationally-based luxury items (mainly of *kustar* origin, using folk patterns and ornamentation). The proletariat and peasantry then felt obliged to copy Paris fashions and imitate anything either ostentatiously beautiful or pretending to a higher social strata. It should therefore be no surprise to find that, despite the exhortations in the press and within artistic circles for the people to display their loyalty to the Party and the new socialist life by wearing ascetic, practical clothing, pre-revolutionary styles and the "bourgeois" notion of fashion prevailed.

As well as these problems of consumerism (so-called "vulgar materialism") and harsh economic realities during NEP, the state of the sewing industry also stood in the way of constructivist progress. Quite simply their ideas often could not be carried out due to the low level of technology, lack of the necessary material means and the absence of rational production line processes within the factory. In addition the attitudes of management and the

resistance of the intellectual environment impeded the work of Constructivists in industry. As Brik states:-

"Художник ещё чужой на фабрике. К нему относятся подозрительно. Его не подпускают близко. Ему не верят. Не могут понять, зачем ему сведения чисто промышленного характера."<sup>25</sup>

The Constructivists thus failed in one of their major aims - to bring their art into life. Their designs remained outside of mass-production, and as such lost their agitational (political) and educational (social) importance. This, however, does not detract from their value as innovative examples of artistic design, using principles which were developed in years to come by the modern fashion industry. It can be seen that these principles were developed according to the laws of Constructivism, but the originality of the ideas is questionable. Since the beginning of the century concepts of dress had been changing and ideas of hygiene and comfort had already been current in relation to fashion design. Furthermore the work of Lamanova presages the constructivist design method by a number of years.

The similarities between Lamanova and the Constructivists are quite marked. Lamanova's creative formula:-

"«... для кого создаётся костюм, из чего, для какой цели,»"<sup>26</sup>

is a precise reiteration of constructivist design methodology, but without specific political configuration. Yet Lamanova pledged her full support to the Revolution and was aware of the necessity of creating a new form of clothing as an expression of the new communist way of life. As she explained to the delegates

of the First All-Russian Conference on artistic industry,

"«Искусство должно проникнуть во все области жизненного обихода, развивая художественный вкус и чутье в массах. . . Художники должны в области одежды взять инициативу в свои руки, работая над созданием из простых материалов, простейших, но красивых форм одежды, подходящих к новому укладу трудовой жизни. »"<sup>27</sup> Clearly

Lamanova was interested in the same ideas of democratic, simple dress, which inspired the Constructivists. These common concepts of practicality, simplicity, comfort, economy and functionality were discussed in the press as features of the new socialist dress. The journal *Zhizn' iskusstva* carried an article in 1919 on "Workers' Dress," stating the necessity of imbuing everyday clothing with ideals inspired by the Revolution:-

"Великая русская революция должна оказать свое влияние и на внешний покров человека. Новый костюм должен быть не только удобен и изящен, но он должен также находиться в полной зависимости от современных экономических условий и соответствовать гигиеническим требованиям."<sup>28</sup>

Lamanova expressly oriented her theories to the economic conditions of everyday life, which demanded clothing that was practical, cheap, modest, comfortable to work in, easy to clean, and simple to make. Lamanova believed that, "материал определяет форму,"<sup>29</sup> and she developed the intrinsic qualities of the material as part of the fashion design, just as the Constructivists attempted to remove the separation of textile design from the sewing industry. Lamanova noted her working procedure for creating fashion designs in a document written in 1922:-

"...я всегда стремилась проводить в своих моделях простоту и



логичность, исходя в этих исканиях главным образом от материала. "30

In many instances Lamanova worked her designs around the fabrics she knew to be widely available from industrial production and used simple cutting patterns to facilitate factory production methods. This stemmed from her recognition that only mass-production could meet the needs of Russia's vast population. She propounded this idea at the First All-Russian artistic-industrial exhibition in 1923:-

"... за логически упрощенное построение костюма, дающее возможность массового производства. "31 However despite Lamanova's standing within the industry, the support she was shown by state institutions and her long-standing career achievements, the projects that she worked on for mass-production were never realised. Strizhenova explains this quite simply by citing the state of the sewing industry, noting that conditions were clearly not conducive to the production of such garments:-

"Однако состояние и уровень промышленности не позволяли осуществиться ламановским проектам. "32 In the same way as the Constructivists, Lamanova was forced to accept failure in this aspect of her work, and the designs remained in the narrow realm of laboratory experiments, denied their social significance. Thus there are many points of contact between Lamanova's theories and those of the Constructivists, in relation to fashion design, and this has been noted by numerous critics, as well as Strizhenova, who states,

"Как в теоретической программе, так и в практической деятельности Ламанова во многом сближается с установками конструктивизма, с идеями функциональности и целесообразности.

# СПОРТИВНЫЙ КОСТЮМ



Спортивная юбка-штаны. Этот костюм делается из бумажной или льняной материи (последняя предпочтительнее), как более прочная. Блуза скроена из двух квадратов, немного скошенных в плечах, как это показано на рис. 1. Блуза кроится шире объема бедер и сдвигается на резинке, как это видно на фигуре А. Юбка представляет то же самое, что при упрямлении она сдвигается под коленом и превращается в штаны (фиг. В); для этого каждое полотнище сшивается по черте, показанной пунктиром на рис. 2. В рубчик каждой штанины делается выстрелок. На блузушивается красная полоса со значком данной спортивной команды.

Рис. 1—блуза. Рис. 2—юбка-штаны.

# ДОМАШНЕЕ ПЛАТЬЕ З ГОЛОВНОГО ПЛАТКА



В этом платье за основу взят квадрат головного кашемирного платка, и поэтому весь план его построил на квадрате. Базонная черная материя — такой же кашемир, как и платок, сбегает ее 3, до 4 метров. Зеленые полосы сделаны из той шелковой материи; можно делать их и из шерстяной, длинную ширину кафтана и бедрах надо заколоть в складку своей стороны или опоясать узким черным кушаком (относительно талии).

На рисунке 1—пунктиром обозначена форма нижней юбки, верхнюю часть которой можно делать из более кой материи. Для более худой фигуры рукав можно делать близкительно на локоть, уже и ставить ластовицу зеленого та. Один рукав показан нами в плане, другой — сшитый. Это платье можно делать также из бумажной материи или перенести бумажных головных платков.

Однако в работах художницы всегда преобладает образно-эмоциональное начало. Носителями его были орнамент и цвет. "33

It was particularly in her use of traditional folk art ornamentation and decorative devices that Lamanova diverged from the constraints governing constructivist fashion design. Nevertheless, the sewing work was simplified and the motifs, which were not overworked, were not purely variations on folk themes and patterns, some were modernistic and geometrical. These were viewed by many as Constructivist, and possibly satisfied those critics who had wanted to see "Constructivism covered in a haze of fantasy."<sup>34</sup>

Interest in folk art was reflected in much of Lamanova's work, and she often used styles of clothing popular with, and familiar to the whole population in her designs. The ostensibly straight outline of the clothes of the 1920s coincided with the traditional form of the Russian shirt. An example of this is the long shirt known as the *Tolstovka*, which Lamanova adapted into a design for a jacket, shown in the album "Art into everyday life" of 1925. This album was perhaps an attempt by Lamanova to propagate her work among the wider public which so stubbornly eluded her. It contained a number of designs for everyday and sports clothing, suitable for making at home by traditional sewing methods, notable for their simple, functional cutting patterns. Another favourite style of Lamanova's was the long jacket or *kaftan*, usually worn over a dress or a skirt, which again featured the modern silhouette,- long, straight, simple and practical. Lamanova was attracted by the elementary, uncomplicated nature of

the cut of folk dress, which resulted in very few trimmings and little wastage of material. She studied the peculiarities of Russian peasant costume and, having noted their simplicity and expediency, applied these ideas in designs for new clothing. Taking into account the vast majority of the population and their cultural heritage, Lamanova's path of creativity was perhaps more suited to the reality of everyday life than that of the Constructivists. The sewing industry was steeped in traditionalism and therefore the most progressive route for clothing at this time could well have been a mixture of the old and the new. The old was clearly outmoded, but the new of the Constructivists appeared too innovative. Lamanova's designs are therefore a triumph of practicality based on her theories, which were worked out within the confines of the historical situation and linked to the economic and social bases of the newly evolving society.

Lamanova points to the resource of Russian folk costume in her article of 1924, published in *Krasnaia niva*, "On Contemporary Dress." Admitting that it was part of the old order, dependent on pre-revolutionary traditions, Lamanova nonetheless felt that its' recognised expediency was of prime importance. In another article attributed to Lamanova<sup>35</sup> entitled "Russian Fashion," she gives ideological justification for her use of folk designs:-

"Целесообразность народного костюма, благодаря вековому коллективному творчеству народа, может служить как идеологическим, так и пластическим материалом, вложенным в нашу одежду города."<sup>36</sup>

In the article Lamanova then propounds the idea of folk costume as

a type of *prozodezhda*, noting its adaptation to physical work, its ability to be converted from everyday to holiday wear and from winter to summer wear, and its close links with everyday life.

The article concludes with the point that town clothing could be much improved if it was designed using the same type of ideas that had regulated the design of folk dress for many years. For example Lamanova noted the suitability in the creation of the new socialist dress of the "украинскую плахту, узко охватывающую бедра, и, как контраст с ней, раструбу корсетки."<sup>37</sup> Lamanova drew on contrasting elements in her designs, derived from her knowledge of traditional national costume, in order to create both harmony and dynamism. Many of her designs incorporated loose and tight fitting garments, which she felt could give a disproportionate body a more harmonious appearance, and at the same time create a dynamic impression, through which she hoped to reflect the movement of life - towards Socialism. Thus Lamanova viewed the use of folk costume in fashion designs as both practical and acceptable in the formation of the new socialist dress, based as it was on the conditions of Soviet reality:-

"Новый костюм будет отвечать новой жизни - трудовой, динамической и сознательной."<sup>38</sup>

Although Lamanova's clothes had ethnographical features, they were in many ways similar to European fashions of the 1920s, and the Russian market welcomed Paris fashions during the early years of NEP. However, Lamanova and numerous other critics of the Russian fashion world (including the Constructivists) were keen to dissociate their designs from the fashions of their European

counterparts:-

"Интерес к зарубежной моде, хотя и проявившийся достаточно заметно, совершенно не повлиял на начавшееся тогда формирование принципов нового социалистического костюма."<sup>39</sup>

Although the similarities with European fashions at this time are somewhat coincidental, they should not be overlooked. Lamanova knew precisely what the newest Parisian fashions were and often travelled abroad, both before and after the Revolution. In comparison with modern dresses designed in Paris in the 1920s, Lamanova's designs are distinctly more simple and practical, even though their stylistic direction corresponds to accepted European models. This does not detract from their originality, or their national identity, because it is clear that different problems were addressed in the design process. For example, the French couturiers attempted to hide the construction of the clothes (the "french" seam), gave little thought to the comfort of the wearer (despite the more 'practical' orientation of womens' clothing after the First World War), and used modern decorative devices and luxurious materials. Lamanova's independence is supported by

Strizhenova:-

"Ламанова творила самостоятельно, ориентируясь на условия жизни своей страны, на её традиции."<sup>40</sup> However the often acute similarities should not be completely dismissed. The foreign influences imbibed by Lamanova during her long career could not be eradicated overnight. In any case, the concordance of her designs with modern european fashions of the 1920s must surely have made them even more popular with Russian consumers. As previously

explained, virtually the whole population were intent on pursuing foreign "bourgeois" fashions. The influx of Paris chic, however marginal in Lamanova's work, can only be considered fortunate in the economic climate of the time. At worst, we may believe that Lamanova intentionally compromised her theories and deliberately used ideas and patterns from Parisian designs to popularise her fashion designs for the home market. Lamanova was closely involved with the economic aspects of her work, both in relation to the marketing of her designs and the production of the designs themselves.

Indeed Lamanova's designs show evidence of a compromise of her theories of mass, democratic clothing in the light of economic circumstances. Consumer taste had to be taken into account, as did the consumers themselves. This meant that the middle-class, having a considerable disposable income to spend on luxuries, would have to be catered for in the fashion market. Lamanova's democratic ideals did not prevent her, or the designers working under her in the Workshops of Contemporary Dress and *Atel'e moda*, from working on luxurious garments or *haute couture* designs with great enthusiasm.

*Atel'e moda*, the Atelier of Fashion, was opened in 1923 as a branch of the sewing trust «МОСКВШВЕЙ». It aimed to be an ideological and theoretical centre for the formulation of the new everyday dress, and published its own magazine *Atel'e*<sup>41</sup> to publicise its own work and the problems facing the sewing industry. In *Atel'e* it was pointed out that fashion design was

divided into two main branches:-

- i) Creating designs for everyday clothing intended for mass-production by industry; and
- ii) The preparation of unique clothes for individual orders, *haute couture* and exhibiting purposes.

The State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN) also pursued investigations in these areas, and Lamanova and a number of other designers became members of the Clothing Section of this institution.

The economic conditions of industry effectively curtailed the creation of designs for mass-production, and many designers in *Atel'e moda*, including Lamanova, Exter, Pribylskaia and Mukhina, concentrated their work on items made in *kustar* production from *kustar* materials. Despite this compromise with what the Constructivists would have termed "bourgeois production", Lamanova and other designers still attempted to pursue the application of their *kustar*-based work to industrial production. For example, in the magazine *Atel'e Pribylskaia* contributed an article entitled "Вышивка в настоящем производстве," which indicated the use of embroidery skills to enhance industrially produced fabrics:-

"... вышивка может послужить к частичной обработке ткани. Здесь она может иметь утилитарное значение, повышая фактурную ценность ткани путём превращения её в более художественный материал."<sup>42</sup>

As well as working in these studios and the theatre, Lamanova also worked for exporting organisations such as *Kusteksport*,



which, as the name suggests, was involved in exporting clothing and other items created by *kustar* craftsmen to foreign consumers, and also using these products in exhibitions abroad. The clothes designed within *Kusteksport* did not address the problems of mass-production, and also did not contribute to the solution of the difficulties relating to the creation of the new socialist dress. Instead *Kusteksport* designers worked on designs using traditional handicraft techniques, lace decorations and embroidery with folk ornamentation. The designs created for international exhibitions usually propagandised traditional Russian patterns and decoration based on folk themes, but occasionally utilized modern, contemporary ideas in art and the geometrical style similar to constructivist designs. Lamanova's fashion designs can be divided into *haute couture* and socialist dress, and only in certain aspects of her designs for mass-production did she meet the specific demands of constructivist design.

This apparent paradox is repeated in the fashion designs of Alexandra Exter. During the first years of NEP, Exter continued to work with Lamanova in her Dress Workshops, and joined the group of designers within *Atel'e moda* when it opened in 1923. Exter reflects many of the views and opinions propounded by Lamanova, and was a convinced follower of Lamanova's line of rational clothing and as such designed garments within the confines of the Constructivists' programme for fashion design. In the magazine *Atel'e*, Exter underlines her support for the theory that the choice of a material is the starting point for a fashion design, and that the material determines the form of the clothing. For

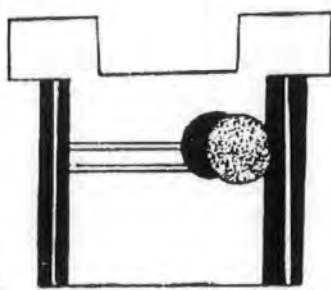
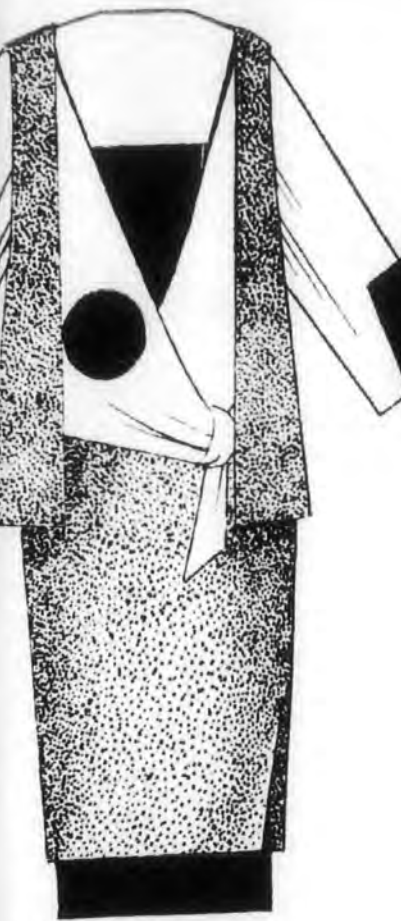
example,

"Более веский материал связан с более спокойной формой (квадрат, треугольник и т. д.) и служит для более медленного движения (ход, бег)." <sup>43</sup> Exter then goes on to explain that the form of the clothing must be appropriate to its function, stating her concept of *prozodezhda*:-

". . . одежда должна быть приспособлена для трудящихся и для того вида работы, которая в ней производится." <sup>44</sup> Therefore clothing should be non-restrictive and designed in full accordance with the demands of everyday life. Exter clearly wanted to create a mode of dress that was intrinsically developed from folk costume. Exter rejected European models, which she had experienced first-hand, because she felt that any foreign influences would be detrimental to the design process since they would involve expressions of societies and cultures ideologically opposed to the Soviet regime:

". . . ни в коем случае не следует руководствоваться образцами западной Европы, основанными на идеологии другого порядка." <sup>45</sup> Exter believed that any work-clothing (*prozodezhda*) should be expedient, economical, hygienic and also have a positive psychological (educational or propagandistic) effect. Using simple geometrical forms and basic colours Exter hoped to create garments which were rational, rhythmical and in harmony with the human body, comfortable and proportionate.

In a further article, "Contemporary Dress," Exter reinforces these opinions, and even subtitles her account, "Simplicity and Practicality in Clothing." Here Exter stresses the economic



advantages of expedient fashion designs, which result in faster production and less expenditure on labour and materials. In the designs illustrated in this article, Exter demonstrates how rationally designed layers of clothing can be adapted to suit different functions, just as Lamanova advocated in her press articles of the time. The simplicity and practicality of the designs creates an impression of style and beauty due to the methodological approach of the designer. Ya. Tugendkhol'd remarked on Exter's creations:-

"«Костюмы Экстер не нарисованы, но сконструированы из различных поверхностей.»"<sup>46</sup> Even the stitching of the garments has been carefully considered in the construction of the whole ensemble:-

"Все представленные схемы просты по своему силуэту и материалу и расположены так, чтобы количество швов было бы минимально."<sup>47</sup> Her logical design approach fulfils all aspects of the Constructivist Programme, and the simple forms could easily be adapted to mass-production even in the early 1920s with the low levels of technology. However, a very important aspect of Exter's fashion design work stands in direct contradiction to these constructivist principles.

Exter's designs produced within *Atel'e moda* form the basis of this contradictory work, which encompassed the so-called "individual" garments, made for private clients and exhibitions. For these designs Exter can be said to have entered the world of fashion, *haute couture*, and to have forgotten the exigencies of everyday reality. She indulged her artistic temperament, using

aspects of her work as an easel artist, just as she had done in her theatrical costume designs. These designs had a more abstract character and certainly had very little to do with *prozodezhda* and the working class. Exter's *haute couture* fashions and her designs for exhibitions do not pretend to mass-production, and can be seen today as the fore-runners of the type of flamboyant designs displayed in the design shows of major fashion houses. Exter used expensive materials, combining different textures and finishes to achieve an exclusive look, such as silk, satin, fur, brocade and leather. Her extravagant use of luxurious materials was matched by her distinct choice of colour combinations: orange and black, raspberry and black, silver-grey and violet. Exter's particular style of designing further incorporated innovative images of specific historical eras of various countries. In this respect Exter differentiated her work from the purely nationally referenced designs by Lamanova, and became the first Russian fashion designer to employ such motifs and styles in her garments. Strizhenova notes this important feature of Exter's designs:-

"Экстер впервые в советском искусстве костюма обратила внимание на исторический костюм разных эпох и разных стран, как на один из источников для проектирования современной одежды."<sup>48</sup> Thus Exter's designs depart at certain points from Lamanova's theories and from strict constructivist ideology. If Exter had stayed in the Soviet Union, (she emigrated to France in 1924), it seems certain that her fashion work would have focused on *haute couture* and ostensibly drifted away from any resemblance to constructivist design practices. Exter's accomplishments as a studio painter and her continued experiments with compositional features such as line

and space could not help but find expression in her work on costume. The individual and experimental nature of her designs made them appropriate for the theatre, where Exter found she could indulge her aesthetic talents. The last costume project Exter completed before her emigration was the design of the costumes for the science-fiction film Aelita, which serve as an examples of a material resolution of her work on the spatial and linear elements of construction. As Jean-Claude Marcadé points out, Exter could not purge her designs of the aestheticism which true Constructivists thought should be eradicated from all artistic work:-

"...Exter subscribed to what might be called a "romantic Constructivism" which never challenges the primacy of the aesthetic component."<sup>49</sup>

The idea of creating clothing suitable for the new socialist environment continued to be a source of much discussion throughout the period of NEP, and aroused significant attention in the press, in government circles and from the public. In 1928 the magazine *Iskusstvo odevat'sia* came into print and served as a discussional medium for all questions relating to the concept of fashion. The lead article of the first edition was by Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was still the head of Narkompros at this time, and thus is evidence of the importance of the debate surrounding the fashion industry. The very title of this article broached a question central to the notion of fashion design in the Soviet Union:

"Своевременно ли подумать рабочему об искусстве одеваться?" Is clothing of any real importance to the average worker and does it

contribute to the socialist expression of everyday life?

Following this article the magazine published replies it had received from its readers. They generally agreed that fashionable dress was important, but that factors of expediency, elegance, simplicity and functionality (so important to the Constructivists), had to be the basis of that fashion. For example, V.Mikhailova, a worker at the Uritsky factory in Leningrad wrote:-

"Я считаю, что одеваться по моде нужно, но чтобы эта мода была и дешева и проста, и в то же время изящна."<sup>50</sup>

In the third issue the Commissar of Health, N.A.Semashko, posited the idea that hygienic, easy to clean, non-restrictive garments, which allow the body to breathe and function normally, should always be the first considerations of a cultured person when choosing their clothing. He further noted that the concept of fashion still hindered the development of such practical clothes, but nevertheless government enterprises were attempting to combat this by producing healthy clothing for everyday life. Semashko hoped,

". . . мы могли бы оздоровить наш быт в этом направлении, развернуть кампанию против нелепой моды, прохикающей к нам до сих пор от обладающей испорченным вкусом буржуазии, и рационализировать это дело."<sup>51</sup>

Judging by the articles in *Iskusstvo odevat'sia*, it is clear that the questions which constructivist fashion designers and Lamanova had devoted their skills to from the beginning of NEP and before, still required practical solution in real life by the end

of the decade. The theoretical, experimental works carried out by the Constructivists and other designers in Lamanova's studios and *Atel'e moda* had not found expression in reality, even by 1928. In respect to this D.Arkin noted in "Искусство вещи," an appraisal of artistic works of 1928, that such innovative designs were only feasible if they were made using *kustar* fabrics and *kustar* production methods, and that a great deal of work would be necessary to transform them into patterns suitable for mass-production. However, commenting on the 1928 exhibition "Кустарная ткань в современном женском костюме," in which Lamanova and Pribylskaia displayed works designed using Lamanova's fashion theories, Arkin praised their application of simple linen cloth in the design of various types of female clothing:-

"... причем рисунок тканей и различные декоративные элементы костюма шли здесь от покроя, от человеческой фигуры, от формы самой одежды, а не наоборот."<sup>52</sup> He further praised their work for its simplicity, cheapness and rationality, but most of all because it demonstrated the path he believed ultimately necessary in the design of clothing: the path from the form of the clothing to the form of the material. Although critical of the *kustar* basis of their work, Arkin was aware of the tremendous difficulties the designers faced due to the lack of acknowledgement from industry:-

"Несмотря на сравнительную техническую несложность осуществления новых типов одежды, сила традиции оказывается здесь настолько действенной, что противостоит и соображениям техники производства, и интересам нового быта, и наконец, эта же самая традиция здесь, как нигде, владеет самой творческой мыслью, связывая по рукам и ногам даже самых «смелых» проектировщиков,



художников, конструкторов."<sup>53</sup> Industry still viewed the artist from the traditional applied art perspective, as a craftsman who would make beautiful, decorative objects, without taking the industrial processing of that object into account, in isolation from its actual construction.

These conservative, traditional attitudes curtailed the visionary programmes of Lamanova and the Constructivists during NEP. In order to find a niche in which they could practice fashion design, artists had to compromise their theoretical programmes to meet the practical, economic and social exigencies of real life. The wane of constructivist fashion design after 1925 bears testimony to the perceived necessity of altering their design methodology in order to continue to create clothing. Quite simply they did not feel able to change the ethos governing their work, and so found themselves in an untenable position. For example Stepanova gradually turned her attention to graphic design, polygraphy and photography, as it became increasingly obvious that constructivist fashion design was never going to be accepted by industry and therefore could never realise its aims.

Yet quite paradoxically the most important aspects of constructivist fashion design were later pursued as the expression of the new socialist dress (see Chapter 6). Neither the Constructivists nor Lamanova were accredited with the rationale for the new socialist clothing, and furthermore, their ideas in relation to the development of fashion design have not been given the recognition they undoubtedly deserve. In their design

approach Lamanova and the Constructivists were almost identical, and therefore merit equal praise. It thus seems fair to acknowledge them both for their contribution to the world of fashion design, adding to a comment made by Strizhenova:-

"Как творческая практика, так и теория моделирования, разработанные ею [Lamanova] [и Конструктивистами] питают по сегодняшний день эту отрасль декоративного искусства."<sup>54</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> V.Fon-Mekk. "Kostium i Revoliutsia", Atel'e, No.1, 1923, Moscow, p.31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid..

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>4</sup> As previously stated, I am using the terms fashion design and costume design synonymously. In no way am I alluding to the concept of fashion in its general sense, meaning a transitory style of a given time. The word fashion is also synonymous with clothing - referring to its relationship with clothes rather than the world of *haute couture*.

<sup>5</sup> В. фон-Мекк, *op.cit.*, p.32.

<sup>6</sup> D.Arkin, Iskusstvo i bytovoi veshchi. Zametki o bytovom iskusstve, under the subsection entitled "Tkan' i odezhda", Moscow-Leningrad, 1932, p.152

<sup>7</sup> Varst(Varvara Stepanova), "Kostium segodniashnego dnia - prozodezhda," LEF, Moscow, 1923, No.2, p.65.

<sup>8</sup> L.Popova, "Kostium kak element material'nogo oformleniia," c1922, ms, private archive, Moscow. Cited in C.Lodder, Russian Constructivism, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1990, p.150.

<sup>9</sup> LEF, No.4, 1923, p.50.

<sup>10</sup> O.M.Brik, "Ot katush k sifisu", LEF, 1924, No.2, p.34.

- <sup>11</sup> N.Adaskina, "Liubov' Popova. Put' stanovleniia khudozhnika-konstruktora," Tekhnicheskaiia estetika, No.11, 1978, p.23.
- <sup>12</sup> E.Murina, "Tkani Liubvi Popovoi," Dekorativnoe iskusstvo, No.8, 1967, p.27.
- <sup>13</sup> Varst, op.cit., p.65.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid..
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.68.
- <sup>16</sup> T.Strizhenova, Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiurnia, Sovetskii khudozhnik, Moscow, 1972, p.95.
- <sup>17</sup> T.Khokh, "Organizatsiia tele", Oktabr' osvodi, Moscow, 1924, No.2, p.61.
- <sup>18</sup> NOT - An acronym for *Nauchnaia Organizatsiia Truda*, a division of the Central Labour Institute headed by Gastev. It carried out studies on "scientific management" and the rationalisation of labour, aiming to increase workers' productivity and to make their lives more efficient.
- <sup>19</sup> E.Murina, op.cit., p.27.
- <sup>20</sup> E.Murina, op.cit., p.27.
- <sup>21</sup> Zhadova, Tatlin, Thames & Hudson, London, 1987, p.143.
- <sup>22</sup> Zhadova, op.cit., p.144. The number refers to a poem by V.Mayakovsky entitled 150,000,000, which is the approximate population of the Soviet Union at this time.
- <sup>23</sup> GINKhUK - the State Institute of Artistic Culture situated in Leningrad, substantially different from INKhUK in Moscow.

- <sup>25</sup> O.M.Brik, *Светлая женщина*, op.cit., p.34.
- <sup>26</sup> T.Strizhenova, op.cit., p.8.
- <sup>27</sup> N.Lamanova, from *Труды и воспоминания о В.И. Степанове*, *Министерство культуры РСФСР, Москва, август, 1920*, p.37-38.  
Quoted in T.Strizhenova, op.cit., p.17.
- <sup>28</sup> From the article "Родченко-Степанов", *Жизнь искусства*, 1919, no.142, p.1. Quoted in T.Strizhenova, ibid., p.22.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.44.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.38. From an original document preserved in *ТсГАЛЛ ф.941, оп.10, д.341, стр.8*.
- <sup>31</sup> T.Strizhenova, ibid., p.46. From a document preserved in *ТсГАЛЛ, ф. 941, оп. 10, д. 341, стр. 8*.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.48.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.50.
- <sup>34</sup> C.Lodder, "Liubov' Popova: A Revolutionary Woman Artist," *Revolutionary Russia*, Vol.3, No.2, Dec.1990, p.172. From the original, V.Stepanova, Notebook, in the Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow.
- <sup>35</sup> Writers such as Strizhenova and Lodder state that the style of writing and the content of the article point to the fact that Lamanova was the author.
- <sup>36</sup> N.Lamanova, (see footnote above - the article is unsigned) "Русские моды" *Красная нива*, No.30, 1923, p.32.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid..

- <sup>38</sup> N.Lamanova, "On Contemporary Dress," Krasnaia niva, 1924, no.27, p.663.
- <sup>39</sup> T.Strizhenova, op.cit., p.29.
- <sup>40</sup> T.Strizhenova, op.cit., p.46.
- <sup>41</sup>This magazine was only published once.
- <sup>42</sup> E.Pribylskaia, "Vysivka v nastoiashchem proizvedstve", Atel'e, 1923, No.1, p.7.
- <sup>43</sup> Alexandra Exter, "V konstruktivnoi odezhde", Atel'e, 1923, No.1, p.4.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.4.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.5.
- <sup>46</sup> Ya.Tugendhol'd, "Aleksandra Ekster kak zhivopisets i khudozhnik: ХУДОЖНИК tseni", Zaria, Berlin, 1922, p.25.
- <sup>47</sup> A.Exter, "Sovremennaiia odezhda", Krasnaia niva, No.21, 1923, p.31.
- <sup>48</sup> T.Strizhenova, op.cit., p.74.
- <sup>49</sup> Jean-Claude Marcadé, "Alexandra Exter or the Search for the Rhythms of Light-Colour," in Russian Women Artists of the Avant-Garde 1910-1930, Exhib.Cat., Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne, 1979, p.126.
- <sup>50</sup> Letter from V.Mikhailova printed in Iskusstvo odevat'sia, No.1, 1928, p.6.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.5.
- <sup>52</sup> D.Arkin, "Iskusstvo zheshchi". Ezhegodnik literatury i iskusstva na 1929 god. Ed. I.Matsa et al., Komakademiya, Moscow, 1929, p.457.

<sup>53</sup> D.Arkin, *Iskustvo prikovnyeshem. Zapiski o bytovom iskusstve*  
Moscow-Leningrad, 1932, p.151.

<sup>54</sup> T.Strizhenova, *op.cit.*, pp.33-34.

## CONSTRUCTIVIST TEXTILE DESIGN DURING NEP, 1921-1928.

The most important work on constructivist textile design was achieved by Liubov' Popova and Varvara Stepanova during their time of employment at the First State Textile Printing Factory in Moscow. However, their designs were not as popular as the propagandistic textile prints known as the *agittekstil'*, which acquired great significance by the late 1920s. *Agittekstil'* designers often used industrial, machinistic themes and also purported to support the Communist regime, claiming that their designs represented the height of Communistic expression. Therefore it can be seen that the *agittekstil'* bore a certain similarity to constructivist textile prints. I shall attempt to clarify the differences between the *agittekstil'* and the constructivist designs, expose the "so-called constructivist" designs, and place them on a separate path - the path towards Socialist Realism.

In order to produce a constructivist textile print an artist must accept the parameters for creative work laid down by the First Working Group of Constructivists in their Programme:- *faktura*, tectonics and construction. To meet the demands of the *faktura* principle, a textile design should be suited to the structure of the material on which it is printed, and, more importantly, the designer should have consciously made this choice before embarking on the creation of the design. In addition, the usage of that material is of prime importance to the designer in order to make the design suitable to its future environment and to



ensure its appropriate usage in everyday life. These design specifications should not detract from the rational construction of the design and the intrinsic qualities of the material and its handling should remain visible. The tectonics principle requires that modern textiles are chosen for designs which are produced using the latest industrial techniques. Constructivist construction necessitates the creation of an anti-aesthetic, utilitarian design, devoid of standardised concepts of taste. Thus the Constructivists were drawn to the mathematical language of euclidean geometry, on which they founded their designs. It was ideally suited to their self-proclaimed role as artist-constructors, emphasising their work as engineers and the scientific nature of their designs. Thus the use of geometrical elements in textile prints was necessary to constructivist designs due to their lack of aesthetic, symbolic associations and their suitability for a rationally organised printing process.

Despite the fact that the textile industry appeared to be almost ideally suited to reorganisation along constructivist lines, and that the design process for the creation of a textile print could be adapted to encompass the three major criteria of Constructivism, there was some opposition within the constructivist movement itself to its own artists working in this field. This was because textile design was considered the domain of applied artists, and the work of commercial craftsmen was, in essence, the negation of Constructivism. Advocates of applied art ignored all three of Constructivism's focal tenets and denied the social and political ramifications of the work produced by applied

artists. Applied artists were isolated from the production process, something the constructivist designer-creator could not tolerate. Those Constructivists who were opposed to work in what were traditionally recognized as applied art fields, appear to have believed that whatever designs were produced would be corrupted in some way, and diverge from the constraints of Constructivism. The Constructivists were not simply decorators - they opposed the mere embellishment of an object to make it more aesthetically pleasing to the eye, or to suit the tastes of the consumer. As Osip Brik pointed out,

"...the outward appearance of an object is determined by its economic purpose and not by abstract aesthetic considerations."<sup>1</sup> Constructivist design requirements placed the actual aesthetic appearance of an object at the bottom of their list of priorities. The point is that by strictly adhering to the principles of Constructivism, following a logical, rational process of design, the resulting object is aesthetically pleasing. Generally constructivist designs are clearly superior to other similar designs and usually can be considered timeless, classical even, and retain their value in other cultures, at other historical periods. This is why constructivist textiles would not look out of place today. Szymon Bojko remarks on the contemporary nature of the constructivist textile prints :

"These fabrics are part of modern culture in as much as they have retained their visual values down to this day."<sup>2</sup>

Constructivism was distinctly opposed to aestheticism, in the sense of the cult of beautifying objects to suit traditional, pre-

revolutionary tastes, and any superfluous decoration was anathema to the Constructivists. Therefore they were almost duty bound to denounce "art", and attempt to replace "aestheticism" by standards of practicality and utilitarianism. The identification of 'aesthetic' as being synonymous with 'decorative' is a distinction that is tenuous to say the least, and one which it is doubtful that all the Constructivists actually made. The 'aesthetic' simply can not be removed from any artistic or designerly practice - even in theory, and it would be a slight on the ability of the Constructivists to maintain that they truly believed that only they were able to design "non-aesthetic" objects. The denunciation of "art" was perhaps more significant as a ploy to attempt to enable artists and also those not involved in the art world to reassess the nature of art and its position in a socialist society. However, the position of the constructivist movement was that their design methodology negated the concept of aestheticism, which was associated with lavish, unnecessary decorative effects. Yet the result of their logical approach to the design process, was, probably embarrassingly for them, the creation of a textile print (or a garment design, or a useful object produced in any of the numerous fields in which Constructivism was applied) which was aesthetically pleasing, possibly beautiful, even stylish. Those Constructivists who opposed any work in applied art fields saw the production of these designs as evidence of the corruption of the pure ideals of Constructivism because they were aware of the aestheticism inherent in the objects. These Constructivists wanted to continue more formal artistic research, and perhaps considered that in

theory their ideal - removing aestheticism from art - was possible. Therefore, when faced with the results of the application of their own design methodology, and recognising that it was not possible in practice, they accused constructivist production artists of working outside the strict credo they espoused. Thus the exact nature of Constructivism became a bone of contention - which artists were true Constructivists? This conspired to weaken the movement as splinter groups formed and reformed according to the precise definition each attached to the notion of the 'true Constructivist'. This was exacerbated by the fact that constructivist objects appeared to be in a particular style, which, on a superficial level could be copied quite easily. Therefore artists who did not ally themselves to the Constructivist Programme and had not acquired the theoretical knowledge necessary to produce truly constructivist objects, brought further confusion to the problem of defining what actually was constructivist design. The artists who merely jumped onto the band-wagon of Constructivism, possibly believing it would enjoy popular and Party support, were (to use Tatlin's phrase) merely "Constructivists in inverted commas".

However, neither the work of the Constructivists nor that of the 'Constructivists in inverted commas' found favour with the vast majority of their new public. E.Eikhengolts described the dress of people in a Workers' Club as looking like,

"...мещан, живущих в канареечно-гераневом мирочке личного благополучия."<sup>3</sup> This was considered entirely inappropriate for the workers of the new socialist state. General critical opinion



maintained that a new form of dress was necessary to exemplify the changes made in everyday life, and express the new revolutionary reality. Textile prints could be seen as,

"... своеобразную трибуну для пропаганды нового быта, нового стиля жизни, новых визуальных форм."<sup>4</sup> It was hoped that a break could be shown between pre- and post-revolutionary designs, and that new attitudes could be developed in the proletariat which would serve as an indication of their acceptance of the Bolshevik regime and its social and political restructuring of the country. In order to achieve this end, the Constructivists attempted to use textile prints as an instrument of education and propaganda. As Elena Murina notes:

"They did not pander to anyone's tastes (this may have been a weakness as well as a strength); they shaped those tastes."<sup>5</sup>

Traditional prints were usually floral or vegetal and therefore the opposite of these representational, depictive patterns were considered by the Constructivists to be the most appropriate for the new socialist state. Thus the Constructivists used geometrical designs to achieve a revolution in the everyday environment. The designs most popular with the NEP-bourgeoisie were pre-revolutionary, floral, traditional prints, which were brightly, even garishly coloured. These *nouveaux-riches* of the Revolution were not artistically educated, and thus when they tried to pursue the styles of the old aristocracy, (believing that this would show their good taste) they made poor aesthetic judgements about their clothing (in choice of style, pattern and colour). They were opposed to any sort of artistic innovation and

could not even be expected to appreciate it, never mind form the consumer base for experimental constructivist designs. Their inability to appreciate good designs, combined with a taste for gaudy colours and expensive fabrics serves to underline the differences between what popular tastes were and what the Constructivists felt they should be. This problem haunted constructivist designers, and continually hampered their progress. Indeed, one might well say that they were creating fabrics for an idealised image of the new socialist man and woman without taking into account the realities of the situation. A typical scene in a Petrograd nightclub in 1922, as described by Nikolai Forreger, clearly exemplifies the stylistic deficiencies which abounded during NEP:-

"Velvety, silky costumes with spangles, rose-coloured, peachy....azure slippers and stockings the colour of frogs."<sup>6</sup>

Both the NEP-bourgeoisie and the proletariat lacked the cultural education necessary to evaluate innovative textile designs, and the State also rebuffed the Constructivists. Constructivist designs could have been acknowledged as appropriate dress for the committed Communist, but the government did not lend them its support, and did not interfere with those factories which continued to produce pre-revolutionary designs. Thus it missed a valuable opportunity to enlist talented artists in the programme of re-educating the people by making concrete examples of clothing suitable for men and women engaged in the building of socialism more readily available. Instead the workers and NEP-men alike continued to dress in pre-revolutionary or foreign fashions.

The Constructivists had to contend with opposition at shop-floor and management level in the industry itself. The textile industry was not, in general, fond of innovation or change of any kind, and was one of the most static, staid, old-fashioned and traditional of all consumer-oriented industries. Certain patterns had been handed down from father to son, artisan to artisan, for many generations. Other patterns were simply copies of European designs from sample albums, usually bought at some considerable expense direct from Paris. These designs obviously had no relevance to life in Soviet Russia, yet they continued to be produced. The management agents in charge of design choice did not want to risk a loss in profits, and so clung to traditional patterns. The task facing the Constructivists was certainly not an easy one, and their success or failure must be judged in the light of the tremendous problems that awaited them in the textile industry.

The condition of the textile industry in 1921 was quite appalling. Factory machinery and production processes were often archaic, especially when compared to technical industrial textile plants abroad, and there was a severe shortage of skilled labour and raw materials. Despite all this, however, after the decision within INKhUK in November 1921 to adopt a Productivist platform, several artists attempted to transform their theoretical convictions into practical reality, and began to work in industrial enterprises. Yakob Tugendkhol'd noted this new chapter in artistic endeavour:

"« Художник, раньше писавший только картины в золотых рамах,



понял, что его задача - войти в производство, пойти на фабрику, внести в её изделия вместо рутинного штампа новый творческий дух, и тем самым способствовать повышению вкусов широких масс, способствовать проникновению искусства в самую жизнь...».<sup>7</sup>

Following their Productivist convictions, Stepanova and Popova took up the general invitation, issued in *Pravda* by the director of the First State Textile Printing Factory, Aleksandr Arkhangel'skii, to any artists wishing to bring their expertise to the workplace. Popova and Stepanova joined the artistic collective within the factory at some point in late 1923.<sup>8</sup>

E.Murina has noted the constructivist social impulse behind the desire to design textile prints:-

"«... в создании тканей она [Попова] увидела возможность полнее осуществить связь искусства с общественным бытом.»"<sup>9</sup>

Constructivist designers wanted to produce textile prints which expressed the new, socialist way of life. Natalia Troepol'skaia points out the need for this new style, and the consequent adoption of functionality, constructiveness and utilitarianism in the design process : -

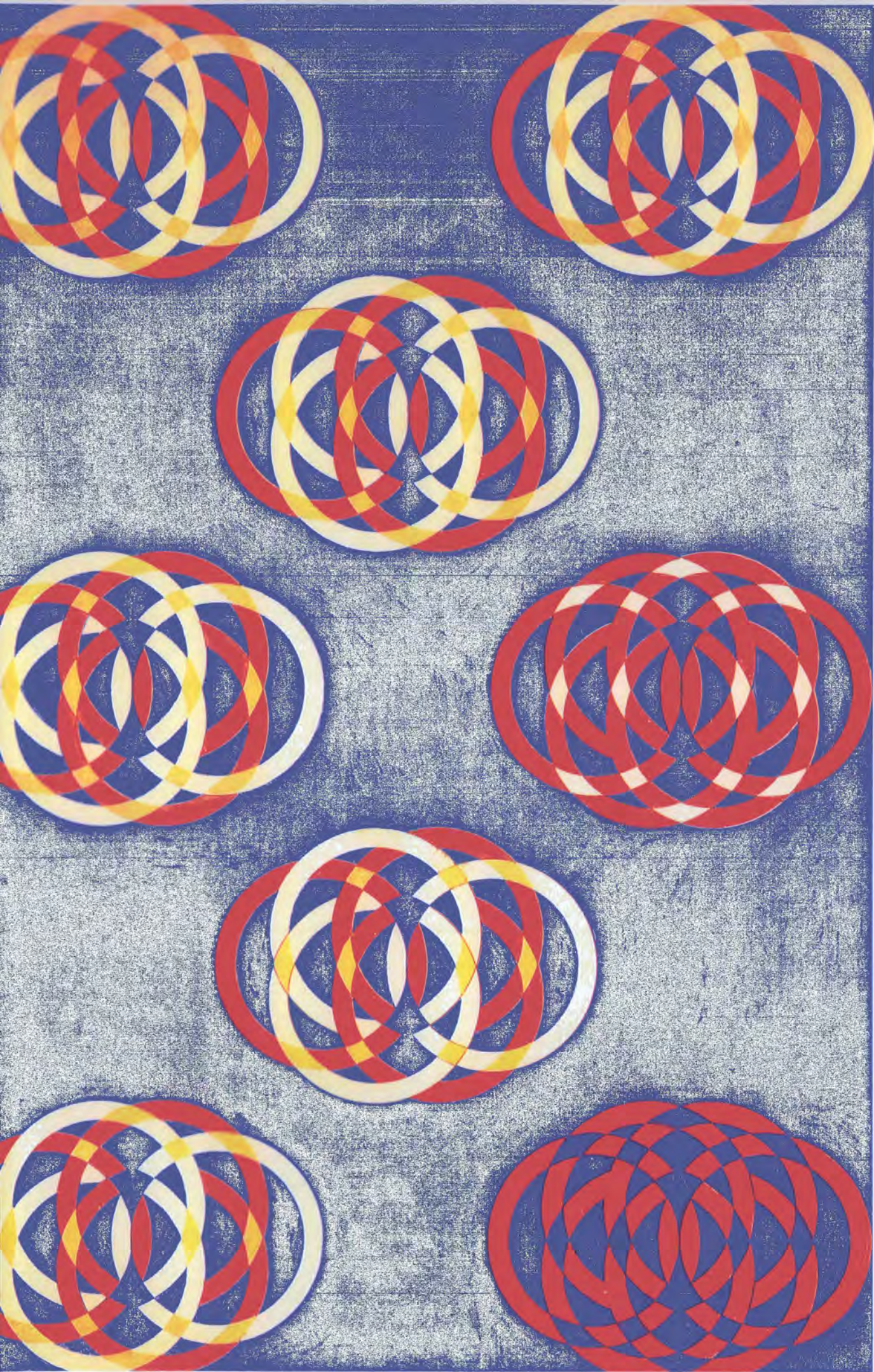
"« Первой стране социализма нужно социалистическое искусство, считали они, принципиально не традиционное. Новое содержание требует новой, небывальной формы, не подсказанной природой или уже опробованной веками, а созданной рациональным умом человека-титана. Пристрастие к словам «функциональность», «конструктивность», «утилитарность» выражает саму суть, плоть искусства эпохи Октября.»"<sup>10</sup>

The concept of industrially mass-produced designs is important in the context of socialist production because it implies that the textiles are intended for everyone - 'to each according to their needs'. Therefore it was necessary to consider the specific implications of industrial processing when creating a design. Murina acknowledges Popova's textile designs in this context as a mark of her anti-applied art stance : -

"Художник-производственник не «прикладывал» имеющийся опыт, а стремился решить ткань, исходя из взаимодействия процесса производства и чисто художественных задач."<sup>11</sup> Popova's and Stepanova's intention to create their designs within the context of industrial production is clearly documented in their own notes on the subject, as is their commitment to the productivist ethos : -

"«Новое индустриальное производство, в котором должно принять участие художественное творчество, будет коренным образом отличаться от прежнего эстетического подхода к вещи тем, что главное внимание будет направлено не на украшение вещи художественными приемами (прикладничество), а на введение художественного момента организации вещи в принцип создания самой утилитарной вещи.»"<sup>12</sup> However, unfortunately for constructivist designers, practical application of their design theories in the reality of an industrial factory was plagued with problems.

The difficulties Popova and Stepanova encountered at the First State Textile Printing Factory were documented by Stepanova in her report on their progress at the factory to INKhUK on January 5th 1924, "Concerning the position and tasks of the



Artist-Constructivist in the textile printing industry in connection with work at the textile printing factory." She pointed out how they were battling "against naturalistic design in favour of the geometricization of form,"<sup>13</sup> and therefore produced designs based on the manipulation of one or more geometric forms, usually in one or two colours only. In a private notebook Stepanova remarked upon the critical and aggressive attitudes expressed by the artistic committee at the factory when first faced with their designs. Some members of this collective gradually became more receptive to their innovative ideas and a number of Stepanova's and Popova's designs were actually mass-produced. The quantity of material which was printed with their designs unfortunately bore no relation whatsoever to the number of textile patterns they created. In fact the number of constructivist designs which reached the production stage appears to have been relatively small, although some sources point to the success of these prints. For example E.Murina notes the particular achievements of Popova's designs : -

"Попова за короткий срок издала десятки рисунков, многие из которых пошли в массовое производство."<sup>14</sup> However most sources are agreed that the quantity of constructivist designs that were given a mass-production printing run was very limited indeed. From all the evidence available it appears that whenever a constructivist design was produced, buyers quickly snapped it up. Yet modern constructivist prints remained, if we are to believe Roginskaia, at only 2% of all textile production:

"Рисунки конструктивистов были в сущности *первой советской модой*. Но модные рисунки, как известно, составляют не более 2%

всей продукции." <sup>15</sup> Obviously factors other than market forces were under consideration when the artistic collective within the factory made its decisions on designs production. Furthermore the critic D.Aranovich, in an article of 1928, points out that some designs should not be considered as the true constructivist inspired patterns of Popova or Stepanova due to the extensive reworking of the designs to suit the production processes at the factory by colourists and technicians : "Popova's designs, and especially Stepanova's, came out of Constructivist "machinism"...in the planar and highly abstract textile drawings...and thus required thorough reworking by the factory's art-production team.... Moreover, this "reworking" was so basic that the colours of the artist's sketches were changed completely, and only in relatively rare instances was the design itself retained in full."<sup>16</sup>

Stepanova's report to INKhUK also included details of what she believed Constructivists needed to do in order to move the textile industry towards a more modern, constructivist design approach : -

- " 1. To fight against handicraft in the work of the artist. To strive towards organically fusing the artist with [actual] production. To eliminate the old approach to the consumer.
2. To establish links with fashion journals, with fashion ateliers and tailors.
3. To raise consumer taste. To bring the consumer into the active fight for rational cloth and clothing."<sup>17</sup>

Attempting to put these ideas into practice Stepanova and

Popova put forward a memo to the factory management : -

"1. To participate in the work of the production organs, to work closely with or to direct the artistic side of things, with the right to vote on production plans and models, design acquisition and recruiting colleagues for artistic work.

2. To participate in the chemistry laboratory as observers of the colouration process...

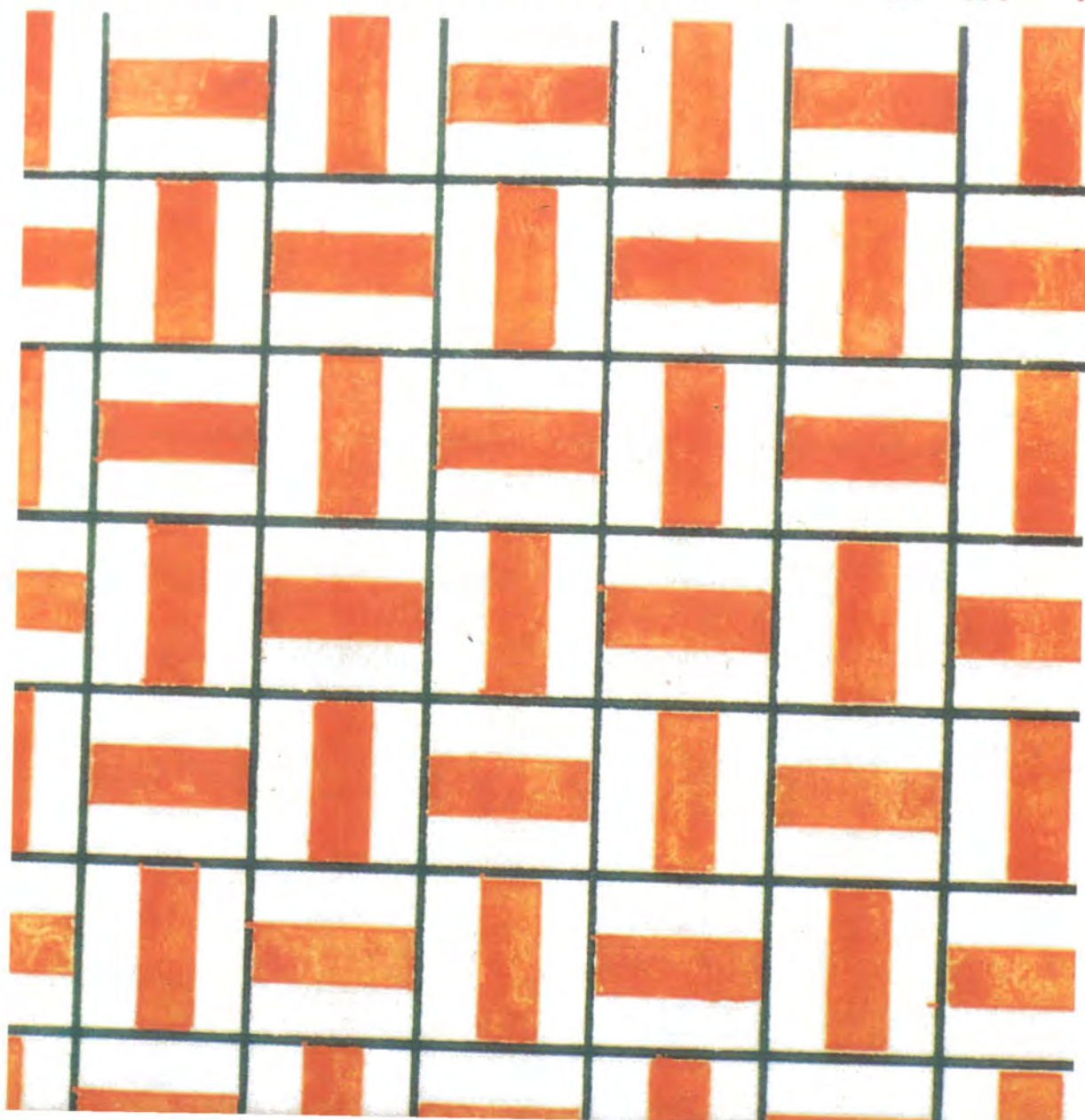
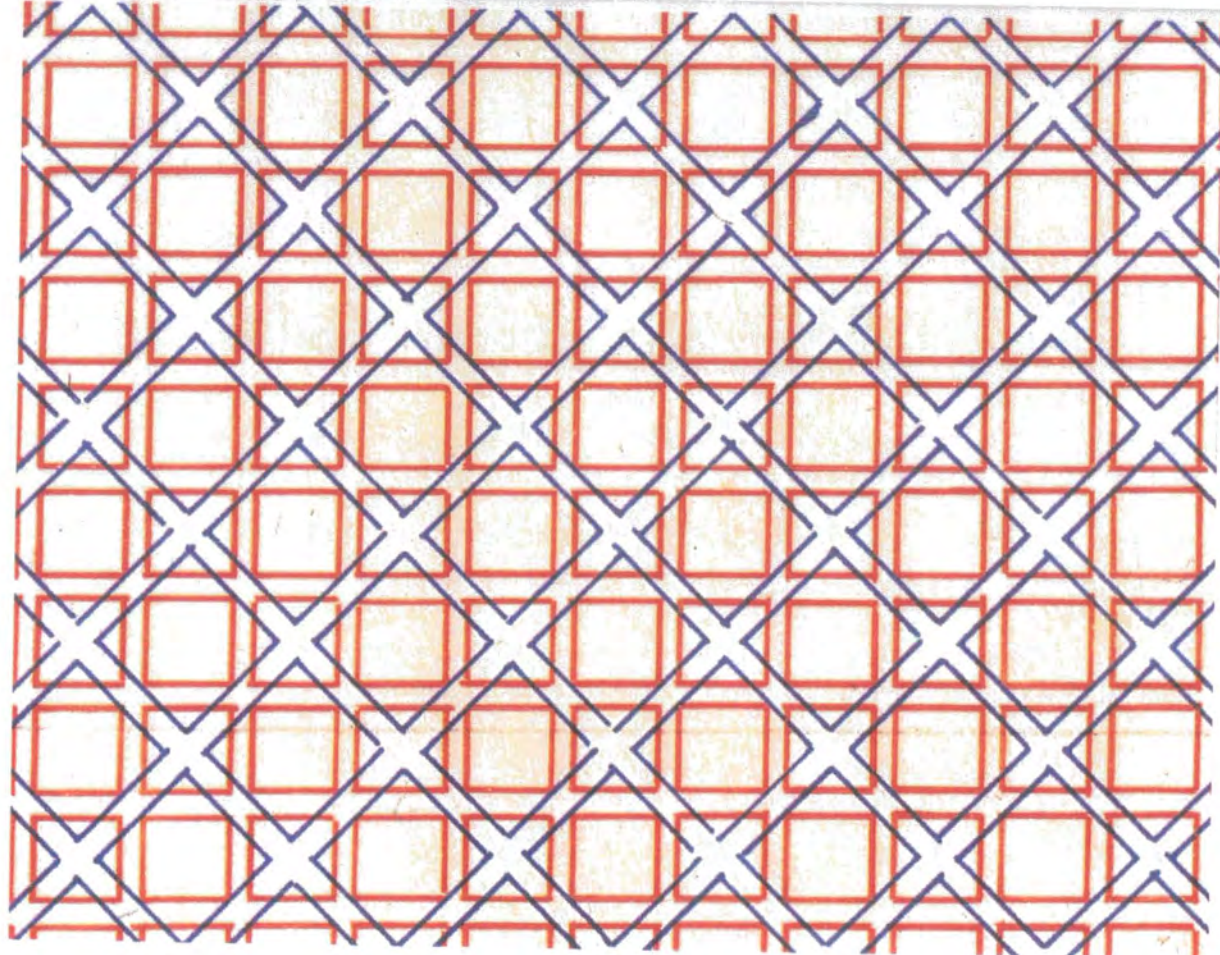
3. To produce designs for block printed fabrics, at our request or suggestion.

4. To establish contact with the sewing workshops, fashion ateliers and journals.

5. To undertake agitational work for the factory through the press and magazine advertisements. At the same time we may also contribute designs for store windows."<sup>18</sup>

The points from both these documents, which fall within the parameters of the basic concepts of Constructivism, clearly show the relationship of Constructivism to the textile industry, and demonstrate the principles of *faktura*, tectonics and construction. However there is some dispute over the thorough application of these constructivist measures in practice. Christina Lodder points out that there is no evidence to suggest that either Stepanova or Popova considered the nature of the material or its subsequent usage in their designs, and agrees with Fedorov-Davydov, who, writing in 1931, stated that their work was essentially that of applied artists : -

"...the works...did not extend beyond the stage of applied art, because despite their abstract qualities, they did not progress beyond the simple design of the surface of the textile."<sup>19</sup>



Yet an in-depth assessment of the design process and the working drawings for the prints gives strong grounds for the refutation of this argument. For example Popova's fabric prints are not composed of a background and a pattern simply laid on the surface, but are designed with the synthesis of two-dimensional (the fabric) and three-dimensional (the human frame) spatial concepts in mind. Murina's article supports the view that Popova was certainly not an applied artist : -

"Для неё ткань была таким же пространственным явлением, как и изобразительная поверхность картины, которую надо обогатить, организовать и решить при помощи определенных геометрических элементов."<sup>20</sup>

Fedorov-Davydov's criticism also does not tie in with the fact that the constructivist designers often created a fashion design at the same time as a textile pattern. In the examples of clothing designs by Popova which have survived, almost all of them have their own particular textile pattern. This further proves the point that the Constructivists were not merely making pretty patterns on the fabric, but in fact were creating living designs from the essence of the fabric. It has been noted that Popova's extant fashion designs,

"...show very clearly both her plans for the future fabric and the image she gave her textile designs. Apart from demonstrating the purely decorative qualities of the textile, which can be seen in the designs themselves, the clothing sketches bared their constructive qualities, their originality, individualised them, and thereby hinted at their human image."<sup>21</sup>



Certainly Popova's textile designs were not simply products of creative inspiration, but are clearly constructed with the future use of the material in mind, attempting to produce a pattern suited to its function in real life. This was also true of Stepanova's designs, as N. Troepol'skaia points out : -

" Всё функционально, то есть соответствует своему назначению. "22

Stepanova's and Popova's factory memo indicates their constructivist approach to the design problem. They wanted access to technology and production techniques to improve their knowledge and thus increase the efficient and utilisation potential of their designs. Their desire to develop contact with the sewing workshop must serve as further evidence to their commitment to a constructivist approach to textile design. They believed that they were not mere decorators, but artist-constructors, part of the process of creating clothing for the new socialist state, within the economic limitations of Communism: available to everyone - proletarian and peasant alike; cheap to produce using the materials available; and, unlike the capitalist fashion houses of Europe, not geared towards making high profits on one-off *haute couture* garments.

One criticism that has been levelled at the Constructivists is that their designs were only suited to the urban environment - the home of technology and the machine, from which many of their patterns are derived. This may appear to be a valid point, particularly if one were to bear in mind certain futuristic,

technological innovations put forward by the Constructivists, most notably their architectural projects. However the popularity of constructivist fabric prints amongst the peasantry casts serious doubt on the relevance of this criticism of constructivist textile design. The popularity of constructivist patterns with the peasantry and the proletariat was well documented at the time.

Ya.Tugendkhol'd wrote of Popova : -

"«Л. С. Попова говорила, что ни один художественный успех не доставил ей такого глубокого удовлетворения, как вид крестьянки и работницы, покупавших кусок её материи. И действительно, минувшей весной вся Москва носила ткани по рисункам Поповой, не зная

этого...»<sup>23</sup> Tugendkhol'd believed that the popularity of constructivist prints lay in their ability to express contemporary life. He equated the sharp, linear, geometrical elements of the designs and their flowing rhythms with the dynamic essence of everyday life and the cutting edge of socialism. He felt that the prints encapsulated revolutionary zeal, and were like the pulse of the new way of life. N.Adaskina also uses this imagery in a description of Popova's textile designs : -

"Особая популярность её тканей объясняется тем, что она сумела заставить широкую публику услышать, ощутить этот пульс."<sup>24</sup>

The success of constructivist prints has also been noted by N.Troepol'skaia, who states that during the People's Congress of 1923 all the available constructivist prints were bought up by provincial<sup>25</sup> delegates:-

"...во время « Съезда народов » в Москве все было раскуплено. Представители Татарии и Узбекистана заказывали вагоны мануфактуры."<sup>26</sup>

Popova delighted in the fact that the peasantry snapped up her prints "hot off the presses", and may well have considered aspects of peasant textile work and even the tastes of the Tula peasant woman when creating her designs. The editorship of *LEF* noted Popova's desire to combine all the requisite constructivist elements of a design with an additional hint of popular colouration : -

"Дни и ночи просиживала она над рисунками ситцев, стараясь в едином творческом акте сочетать требования экономии, законы внешнего оформления и тайственный вкус тульской крестьянки."<sup>27</sup>

Her previous work in textiles, and her involvement with the Verbovka seamstresses may have inclined Popova towards creating prints suitable for the peasantry (as well as the proletariat). Some of her designs appear to have been derived from the idea of handloomed fabrics, creating patterns by the interweaving of coloured threads, which gives them a certain resemblance to traditional fabric prints. Yet they were still within constructivist guidelines: - i) based on euclidean geometry, often structured around the straight line; ii) revealing the construction of the pattern and using the intrinsic qualities of the material; iii) using the technology and conditions of the production processes of the factory (the method of over-laying several simple compositional layers was ideal for factory printing techniques).

Stepanova also appears to have taken the construction of the fabric into consideration when creating a textile print, even down to its weaving, in order to approach the design process "from



within," rather than using surface methods of patterning :-

"The artist's attention should be focused on the processing of the fabric, on developing new kinds of fabric, and on dyeing it...Just like every other aspect of production, the pattern will be standardised and will eventually be expressed in the processing of the fabrics structure."<sup>28</sup> Stepanova's and Popova's interest in the different aspects of producing a textile print, from the artistic and constructive design approach, through the scientific aspects relating to chemical dyeing to the resulting end product when sewn into a useful object, is evident. This, combined with Stepanova's training as a designer, make it difficult to believe that their geometrical, rhythmical designs were unsuitable for the factory's production processes. Therefore it must be assumed that their designs were rejected as unsuitable for mass-production not because they were too complex for the technological processes of the factory, but rather because the committee in charge of design choice for mass-production was antagonistic to the constructivist innovations. The layering of a new style of ornamentation, made from coloured paper, on top of a coloured background was quite unprecedented in the Russian textile industry, and was therefore bound to provoke opposition. It was possibly the use of geometrical elements, so alien to an industry traditionally attached to flowers and representation that led the factory committee to reject most of their designs. The appropriateness of geometrical designs to industrial production can hardly be disputed, and Murina supports the idea that the factory machinery was well suited to these strict, linear forms,

**"Которые органично ложились на технологические особенности**

ткани, состоящей из переплетений горизонтальных и вертикальных нитей. "<sup>29</sup> However, the factory collective insisted that most of their simple, elementary designs were indeed too complex for industrial colouring techniques and printing processes. Alexander Lavrentiev indicates that Stepanova produced approximately one hundred and fifty designs, of which only two dozen were accepted for mass-production. This figure is quite anomalous, especially when considering the positive aspects of Stepanova's design work - the distinct geometrical patterns, the sharp, clear colours and the unusual creation of images, which were all regulated to the demands of mass production : -

"Ткани художников-конструктивистов удовлетворяли всем требованиям - красоте, целесообразности, доброты, технологичности в производственном исполнении. "<sup>30</sup> Stepanova's attachment to technology in the creation of textile prints is further shown in an article written after much of her practical activity in the field had ceased, in 1929 : -

"The principal task of the textile artist now is to coordinate work on fabric design with the design of the garment, to refuse to design fabrics in the abstract for an unknown purpose, to eliminate all handcraft working methods, to introduce mechanical devices with the aim of geometricizing working methods and, most important (and at the moment what is really lacking), to infiltrate the life of the consumer and find out what happens to the fabric after it is shipped from the factory."<sup>31</sup> Stepanova was constantly attempting to pursue her constructivist convictions by applying the ideology of Constructivism to the industrial production of textile prints, as Adaskina points out : -

"Подчинение рисунка технологии, выявление « правды » материала - это ещё одно проявление эстетики конструктивизма, действительное лишь в системе конструктивистских представлений."<sup>32</sup>

However, in the face of overwhelming odds, traditional values, rigid tastes, lack of support from artists of all movements, even their own, it is not surprising that constructivist designers and constructivist textile prints gained extremely limited recognition. There was some support from the magazine *LEF*, notably an article by Osip Brik in 1924, in which, as a supporter of all "real" artistic work, namely production art, he compared textile designs to works of art : -

"Ситец такой же продукт художественной культуры, как картина, - и нет оснований проводить между ними какую-то разделительную черту.

Мало того. - Укрепляется убеждение, что картина умирает, что она неразрывно связана с формами капиталистического строя, с его культурной идеологией, что в центр творческого внимания становится теперь ситец, - что ситец и работа на ситец являются вершинами художественного труда."<sup>33</sup> The closure of *LEF* in 1925 marked the decline in constructivist textile prints, and from this point onwards the "thematic" pattern (which will be detailed later) became the focus of attention in the world of textiles.

Important work on textile design was also done by Nadezhda Lamanova, Alexandra Exter and Vera Mukhina, working within the Moscow fashion house *Atel'e moda*, founded by Lamanova in 1923.

Their design specifications for the creation of a textile print fall quite close to the constructivist design approach in some respects. Lamanova in particular maintained a strict design formula, as previously noted:-

"«. . для кого создаётся костюм, из чего, для какой цели. »"<sup>34</sup>

This matches the Constructivists' concern to use appropriate material for the end product. Stepanova noted in a document entitled "Задачи художника в текстильном производстве,"<sup>35</sup> that the print on a fabric and the intrinsic properties of the material itself are closely connected to the design of the clothing made from it, and Lamanova echoed this belief in her work. Strizhenova underlines this attitude of Lamanova: -

"В свою очередь, на развите костюмных форм большое внимание оказывает структура и рисунок текстиля, который создаётся и существует не сам по себе, а как своего рода «полуфабрикат», предназначенный для жизни в костюме, на человеке."<sup>36</sup> Despite the similarities between Lamanova's work and Constructivist design theories in the field of fashion design it is the area of textile design in which pure Constructivism and Lamanova's design theories diverge.

In the main, this divergance can be traced back to Lamanova's applied art approach to textile design, developed by her training as a couturier, and her traditionalism. Lamanova was 59 at the beginning of NEP, and it was difficult for her to remove all the vestiges of the past from her work. Lamanova's textile designs make use of handicraft techniques, such as embroidery and lace-making, fabrics made under *kustar* production conditions, and



also show the use of extraneous decoration, embellishment and edging details, which stand in contradiction to the constructivist ethos. Lamanova further alienated the Constructivists by her interest in peasant motifs and folk ornamentation. However, she was ultimately concerned with the clothing of the masses in much the same way as the Constructivists, and used these decorative techniques in the design of everyday fashions.

Lamanova had a practical nature, and recognised the value of *kustar* production, which had significantly increased from the beginning of NEP, as opposed to the poor quality, low quantity of cloth that was industrially produced. This shows her ability to readily adapt to the realities of the time, unlike the Constructivists, whose main priority was their strict code of practice, which may well have proved to be their great weakness as well as the source of their quality designs. Lamanova clearly attempted to adapt her designs to the market conditions. Folk patterns were widely popular in the city and the countryside as well, since the population was still dominated by the peasantry and their traditions at that time. Lamanova's attention to contemporary life and her acknowledgement of the lack of material and clothing is evident in her designs - some show how to create a winter coat from a blanket or coarse army cloth, others demonstrate how household items can be put to further use as parts of garments. Lamanova was also aware of the preferences of the ordinary person for folk-art inspired designs and so created designs with their own national face. She realised that most people would be using traditional hand-sewing methods to produce



their clothing and so adapted her designs to this, keeping any ornamentation simple and easy to produce. In addition she made clever use of household items as decorative devices in order to make the clothing look more beautiful. A famous example of this is a dress, the central part of which is an embroidered tea-towel, normally found in a woman's trousseau, which has been decorated with peasant ornamentation.

Thus it can be seen that Lamanova's work has the essence of Constructivism's social tenets - it brings art into life, it is an art for the people, a mass art. Lamanova and the other non-constructivist designers in *Atel'e moda* can be said to have been working in the spirit of Constructivism in a sense - creating designs for the masses based on simplicity, practicality, and utilitarianism - but their applied art approach denies them the name Constructivist. A description of Mukhina's embroideries shown at the 1925 Paris Exhibition of Applied Arts aptly displays this paradox : -

**"Выполнены они были в модном тогда конструктивистском духе, представляя собой сложно заплетенные в динамическую композицию геометрические орнаменты ярких активных цветов. "37**

The general confusion over the term "constructivist" and what actually denoted a constructivist design, extended to the textile industry. The term came to be used to describe any geometrical or abstract pattern, particularly if the design was reminiscent of machinery or industrialisation. In addition it was applied to prints which incorporated motifs symbolising the Party or the

State, and as such can be shown to be a further misinterpretation of Constructivism's political stance. Textile artists used topics such as industrialisation, factories, aeroplanes, sports and communist symbols in the creation of designs, known as *agittekstil'*, which served as propaganda instruments. These patterns, unlike constructivist designs, are rather a style of artistic representation, and a large number of textiles with thematic designs depict figurative themes. Examples of such designs were displayed in the 1928 exhibition "Бытовой советский текстиль," and their shortcomings focused critical attention on the idea of a new Soviet textile pattern (discussed in the final section on textiles). The majority of textiles at the exhibition had one type of symbolic design, usually figurative, which was repeated in a conventional geometric structure based on modular scanning. This simply replaced floral patterns with more serious themes, many of which could be considered quite unsuitable for everyday wear. For example, a peasant would perhaps be unwilling to dress every day in a shirt with a tractor printed on it, and in any case it could be condemned as inappropriate for a peasant population who, for the most part had never even seen a tractor. These designs are often labelled constructivist because of the machine aesthetic they appear to promote. However they are quite clearly merely decorative effects and are not constructed within the parameters of the rigorous constructivist ideology. The propagandist designs did have the acceptance of the state at this stage because of their distinct worker/peasant orientation and the accessibility of the figurative patterns - a far cry from the abstract geometrical prints of the so-called bourgeois

*Lef-Constructivists*. *Agittekstil'* mirrors the move towards representation and realism in other branches of the arts in the late 1920s, as Bowlt states,

"This move toward a more narrative or thematic textile and clothing design paralleled the general orientation of Soviet culture in the late 1920s and 1930s to traditional, accessible styles."<sup>38</sup> This style was actually encouraging the industry to remain static and to develop the time-honoured skills of artistic depiction in a manner which was true to life, realistic.

*Agittekstil'* represents the next step towards the designs produced during the reign of Socialist Realism, since its designers actively encouraged the influx of politics into this branch of the arts. In the end this was to prove their downfall, but during the late 1920s it enabled them to achieve a position of domination within the industry. It is quite paradoxical that *agittekstil'* prints have been considered constructivist by some critics since *agittekstil'* is anathema to the constructivist idea of what a textile print is and how it should be designed. Within only a couple of years of their first forays into industry the constructivist designers were meeting with ever-growing intolerance to their designs, while the work of *agittekstil'* designers was rapidly gaining ascendancy in the textile world.

The 1925 Paris *Exhibition Internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* was the apogee of pure constructivist designs, which enjoyed great success at the exhibition. Constructivist textile artists such as Popova, Stepanova and Rodchenko were well represented, and the clarity, rhythm and

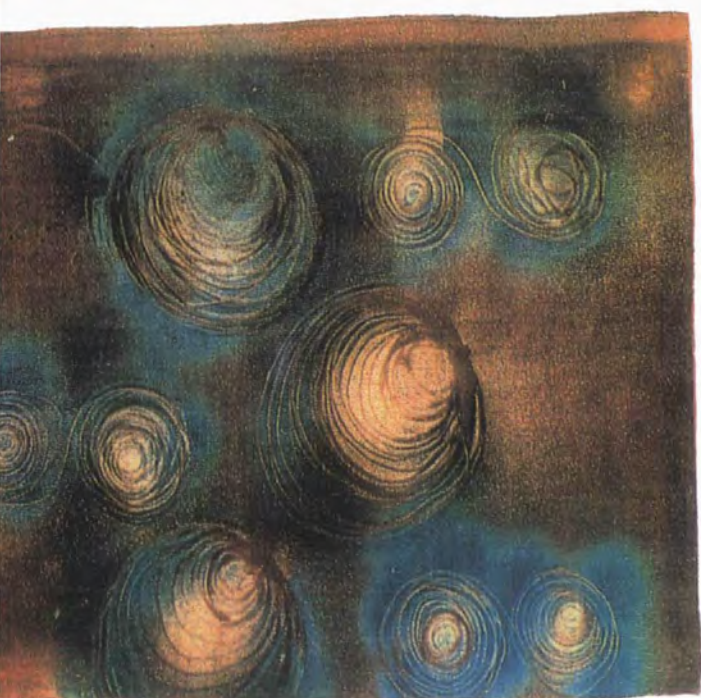
simplicity of their designs provoked widespread admiration and discussion of their work. The energy and dynamism of the designs were seen as an expression of the optimism of the new Soviet state, and also a sign of its industrialisation and urbanisation.

Many critics felt that the constructivist textiles were the product of a certain time and place - early 1920s Russia - and as such were unrepeatable. Murina supports this view : -

"Отсюда функциональность, утилитарная целесообразность определяют не только подход к проблемам синтеза ( ткань и человеческое тело, ткань и человеческое окружение), но выражаются и стилистически, и методически. Вот почему изделия конструктивистов, . . . , нельзя повторить - изменились требования производства, вкусы, проблематика искусства. "<sup>39</sup>

However the Party ideologists in Russia did not greet constructivist designs with the same enthusiasm as European critics and constructivist projects were ostensibly condemned as "bourgeois", incomprehensible fantasies, isolated from everyday life and removed from reality. Therefore despite their successes abroad, constructivist textile artists were placed on the fringe of the movement to renovate Soviet textiles, and had to watch other designers spearhead this campaign.

One such man was Sergei Burylin (1876-1942), whose textiles had attracted attention at the International Paris Exhibition. He can be considered the innovator behind the thematic *agittekstil'*, which used simple Soviet imagery to educate and raise the political consciousness of the people. His fabric designs



incorporated minute forms of ears of wheat, representing the peasant basis of Russia's population, alongside Soviet emblems, such as the hammer and sickle and the five-pointed Red Army star, in regular spatial prints. These representative images, clearly allegorical and political, were considered more appropriate than the obscure geometrical prints of the Constructivists. From 1925 onwards the thematic style using the new language of Soviet symbolism was to move on apace, and the constructivist textile designs were left well behind.

Another source of innovation in the 1920s was the work of Liudmilla Mayakovskaia (sister to Vladimir Mayakovsky), which was also shown at the Paris Exhibition in 1925. Mayakovskaia had been working in the textile industry for some time before the Revolution at the Red Rose Silk Combine and at the Trekhgornaia Textile Works in Moscow, where she became head of the aerographic workshop. She is accredited with perfecting the "aerograph" technique, which uses a special type of airbrush to spray the paint over the surface of the material. The patterns she created are predominantly geometrical, but these are closer to Suprematism and Cubism than to Constructivism. The designs appear to have more to do with easel art or high fashion rather than mass-produced, everyday clothing. Her favoured choice of material, velvet, was indicative of this and most of the designs were one-off experiments, suited to the display environment of an exhibition, but not as the basis of the new socialist textile print.





Examples of other artists' work in textile design are few, but it is known that many artists did enter this field, among them Rodchenko and Tatlin. Rodchenko's work in textile design is quite similar to that of his wife, Stepanova. They both constructed their designs with the aid of compass and ruler, using a strictly geometrical format because they were opposed to the fine art approach to textile design - attempting to recreate natural forms in a representational, depictive style. Thus they further distanced themselves from the "handicraft", applied art method of design by using the tools of an engineer, creating fabrics,

"« . . . сделаны циркулем и линейкой, как шутили сами авторы их. »"<sup>40</sup> Certain designs created in this way show some disregard for the future use of the fabric, where they had specified the type of cloth as one particularly suitable for shirts, blouses or dresses. If the future cut and pattern of the fashion design did not take into account the print on the fabric, the resulting garment could look quite poorly constructed. For example the pattern of the fabric could "collide" at seams, notably at the shoulder and arm seam, or down the front of the garment, and a dislocation of the pattern may occur, and consequently a disruption of the rhythm of the design. Some of Rodchenko's clothing designs show an interest in textiles in their pure form, without any decoration or print. This is true of his famous design for a worker's overall, which makes use of durable, coarse cotton material for the main body, with pocket tops, cuffs and other areas which receive a great deal of wear and tear, reinforced with leather. Rodchenko's main concern here is clearly with the correct choice of fabrics - the ones most suited to the

use and function of the garment.

Tatlin's work in textiles is mainly in this vein. As ever, true to his principles of "material culture," he worked with the intrinsic properties of the fabric when creating a design.

Tatlin's *kul'tura materiala* emphasises the necessity of creating an object from a suitable material, based on the very essence of that material. For example Tatlin designed a coat specifically for Russia's climatic conditions, but also taking economic considerations into account. An ordinary worker could not afford two or three different coats according to the seasons, so Tatlin created a coat with two removable linings: a flanellette one for autumn and spring, and a sheepskin one for winter. The coat could be further used during the summer without the linings. The outer fabric of the garment was of a soft, waterproof material, thus appropriate for rainy weather in any season. Tatlin felt that it was important to use cheap fabrics which were widely available for use in factory mass-production - he had no interest in luxurious fabrics or the seasonal fashions of the world of *haute couture*. This formed part of his interpretation of *material'naia kul'tura* as a phenomenon which creates what we call today classic designs - those which endure changes in fashion and styles because they are not dependent on it. Another feature of this coat is the lack of any decoration or unnecessary trimmings. It successfully meets the requirements of practicability, rationality, and simplicity; it shows economic use of material; it is adapted to its environment and everyday life; it can be easily mass-produced, and it is not elitist in any way. The design is quite simply a living

example of Constructivism - utilitarianism perfected.

Why then did industry fail to recognise the achievements of constructivist designers in the field of textiles? Why was every worker not fitted out with a Tatlin jacket? It is difficult to give precise, logical reasons, but a combination of factors appears to have dissipated the force of the constructivist design approach in this area.

First and foremost, the revolutionising zeal of the Constructivists may have actually worked against them. Their innovations, not only in the actual prints, using abstract, modern motifs, often epitomising the advance of technology, and their approach to the creation of the design itself and the attempt to link textile and fashion design as a continuous whole, were met with hostility from a particularly conventional, old-fashioned industry. Added to this was their desire to work alongside technicians involved in the process of creating the print, the colourists and factory engineers, who all had been taught the traditional applied art approach to textile production. The whole programme advanced by the Constructivists must have come as a great shock to the entire industry. The idea of fine artists, which is how the workforce viewed the constructivist designers, entering the factory was quite new, and aroused much resentment from many quarters. Some felt that by entering the domain of the engineer, the artist lost his right to be an artist, and instead became a second or even third rate technical worker, without the skill or knowledge to survive in his adopted profession. The

Constructivists may have aroused resentment from their co-workers in the design collectives at the factory, because the Constructivists preached a doctrine which totally opposed the very nature of applied art and the creation of an aesthetically pleasing, popular print - something which virtually all the factory designers had been creating throughout their lives, often following the traditions of their fathers before them. Thus the intrusion of evidently "bourgeois" artists into the domain of the worker could have been considered at worst a hostile invasion by designers who were not adequately trained in the intricacies of textile production, and who were certainly not well-qualified enough to cast aside decades of work in favour of their unpopular innovations. Even the most progressive designer in the factory would perhaps have found the attitudes of the Constructivists, at best, quite patronising.

It appears that even the artistic management design collective at the First State Textile Printing Factory, in which Popova and Stepanova were *invited* to work, did not expect or want them to succeed. A reluctance to move forward is apparent within the industry. The management may well have felt acutely nervous of supporting Constructivism at a time when the press was beginning to show its hostility towards abstract, avant-garde innovations. The political implications of this, just becoming manifest in 1923-1924, were glaringly evident by the late 1920s. The odds were stacked against the Constructivists from the start. The group itself, moreover, was at odds over the suitability of the constructivist approach in a decorative branch of art, and the

movement underwent several internal rifts and divisions in a very short space of time. Add to this the death of Popova, and the fact that Stepanova was distracted from the rigours of revolutionising the art world by the birth of her daughter, and it is quite understandable why the constructivist advance into textile design ground to a halt only a couple of years after its first bold steps into the industry. The textile industry was not ready for the upheavals in their working methods demanded by the Constructivists. The government did not reciprocate the support shown to it by the Constructivists' Programme. Public taste remained conservative and, during NEP, old-fashioned, traditional patterns flourished alongside garish, flamboyant prints and anything that was considered foreign or the latest Paris chic.

\* \* \*

Stepanova perhaps realised, in 1925, that the factory was not quite ready for the constraints of the constructivist design approach, and that it might be wiser to work towards advances in industrial textile production. To that end she became a professor in the textiles department of VKhUTEMAS, where she hoped to instill the values of Constructivism into the designers of the future. Stepanova wrote a prospectus for a Course on Artistic Composition for the Textile Faculty, which included projects involving various aspects of textile design and production : -

"1. Composition of designs of an instructional character for all varieties of the textile industry with the aim of learning the principles of composition and its relationship with colour.

2. Designing patterns for the textile industry for use in the production of a finished article. [For example gloves, towels, headscarves, socks, sports jerseys, shawls, curtains, etc..]

3. Creating production designs for the textile industry.

4. Clothing and dress design.

5. Design of insignia, banners, embroidered decorations on a costume, individual parts of clothing, shop windows.

6. Research work studying the development and establishment of contemporary style."<sup>41</sup>

Stepanova specified certain exercises which utilise the constructivist design process in their approach. For example under project three a fabric design for a fashion garment intended for mass-production had to be created using a heavyweight material. Factors to take into consideration were : -

i) the pattern - whether it was suitable for the fabric and the future use of the garment in everyday life;

ii) the texture of the fabric and its treatment;

iii) the combination of the fabric with other materials.

Thus the principles of *faktura*, and tectonics are explicitly met, and whilst the construction of the design is not alluded to here, constructivist methods of construction are thoroughly worked through under section one of the prospectus. The section on clothing and dress design stresses the study of *prozodezhda*, *spetsodezhda*, *sportodezhda*, uniforms, everyday wear and theatrical costumes. However, despite their constructivist training, students at VKhUTEMAS veered towards the *agittekstil'*, using Soviet emblems, symbols of industrialisation, and modern

technology, and some even utilised peasant, floral prints in their designs, rather than the strict geometrical constructive patterns that Stepanova herself advocated. Stepanova's failure to inspire her students with constructivist methodology is not surprising. The main staff and student body was not inclined towards Constructivism and the Textile Faculty was particularly traditional and staid, much like the industry itself.

Both the *agittekstil'* and the constructivist designers claimed to support the Party, the new socialist state and the proletariat. Let us examine these claims closely to elucidate exactly how they each proposed to offer their support by means of a textile print.

The Constructivists hoped to achieve a positive educational or psychological effect through the fulfilment of the everyday function of the textiles. The textile print, they believed, had a great resonance in everyday life. To make the fabric into clothing or other household items was not an end in itself. Rather they thought that textile patterns should underline the role and the purpose of a given garment, or help in the formulation of social behaviour, which in turn could affect a person's habits and manners and act on his belief system through a series of associations. For example, a rationally produced pattern, with mechanical or technological connotations, spaced in a regular pattern at organised intervals could create an idea of organisation in one's everyday environment, or possibly enhance the idea that a worker is one cog in a smoothly running machine,



working towards the rationalisation of everyday life.

The supporters of the *agittekstil'* could argue that they share these aims. By reproducing realistic images of industrialisation and collectivisation, they were attempting to encourage workers and peasants to support the regime, to improve their lives and to educate them. However, the use of realism in these fabrics could cause certain confusion. What exactly is it in these thematic textiles that makes them Soviet or supportive of the Communist government? Is a tractor peculiarly Soviet? No, it is not, and furthermore, at the time the United States was the major producer of tractors, a country with which the Party did not want to associate too closely. The same is true of industrial themes, aeroplanes and factory motifs. Does the representation of factory chimneys encourage a worker to meet his piece-rate quota or arrive at work on time? These so-called Communist textiles could well have been suitable for any industrialised nation. The use of Soviet symbolism can also be seen as inappropriate when used in a purely decorative, applied art sense, without knowledge of its future use. For example, a large print depicting scenes of workers holding banners to the glory of the Revolution can soon lose its emotional and educational impact when it is folded in half and worn as a headscarf. Or designs with portraits of Lenin, popular with VKhUTEMAS students, can lead to inappropriate use if the fabric is made up into handkerchieves. It could hardly be deemed ideologically suitable to sneeze on Lenin! David Arkin noted how willing the textile industry was to produce these prints, even though they were prone to two common and quite

evident design flaws :-

- i) a lack of consideration of the future use of the material; and
- ii) weak, primitive and monotonous repetition in the interpretation of the same emblems and allegories of Soviet ornamentation, which reduced the print to the level of cheap applied art.

Thus it can be seen that even on ideological ground the *agittekstil'* designers lacked the creativity and the foresight of the Constructivists. The constructivist attempt to influence the environment through designs did not rely on any symbolic language but directly engaged the question of the use and the function of the fabric. The basic misunderstanding of the problem of creating a new socialist textile continued throughout the 1920s, despite attempts by the Constructivists to combat it. Fabric designs of all types were still produced without due regard as to their future usage, and they were still created from a static point of view. That is to say thematic *agittekstil'* prints were designed in a manner similar to easel art, in a two-dimensional plane. The prints were considered out of the context of everyday life and their future environment, without thought to the human form they would take, but instead as a flat, picture-like image. The constructivist designs have a certain rhythm and tend to flow smoothly, due to their taking into account the form and function of the fabric's future use, and synthesizing the two-dimensional element of the cloth with the three-dimensional nature of the future garment. Murina notes Popova's consideration of these spatial concepts : -

"Попова думает о синтезе ткани с фигурой человека... речь идёт о связи плоскости (кусок ткани) с объёмом (человеческая фигура). Обогащение плоскости пространственным содержанием - единственный путь к решению этой задачи."<sup>42</sup> Thus from the qualitative point of view as well as the social and political, it appears unfortunate that constructivist methodology was rejected and that the *agittekstil'* became the order of the day.

From the very beginning of their work in textiles, constructivist artist-constructors appear to have been fighting a losing battle to revitalise the industry. Perhaps what now seems to be only meagre success in the realm of mass-produced textiles was in fact a triumph in the eyes of Popova and Stepanova, due to the colossal problems they had to overcome, and we must credit their enthusiasm, perseverance and sheer effort. The reputation of the industry as one which was disinclined to change and rooted in traditionalism, certainly seems to have been well deserved. In a country which had undergone massive upheavals, the strife of world war followed by brutal civil war, it is understandable that the majority of the population did want to cling on to some vestiges of the past, namely the beautiful floral prints and the traditional colouration and patterns of folk textiles. Even if those of the peasantry who actually came into contact with constructivist fabrics did in fact find them pleasing, it is impossible to gauge whether they understood the process of the creation of that fabric or received any cultural benefits from it. In all truth the design work of the Constructivists and their strict methodology must have been alien to the average worker or

peasant. Their rigour in this aspect suggested a sense of elitism that provoked hostility from virtually all quarters. If the proletariat did not understand it, then of what use was it to the Party? By the end of NEP art was being drawn towards a single path - a path which was leading to the promulgation of Socialist Realism. However the course which textile design was to follow was by no means a fluid, smooth progression, and neither did it exactly parallel the course of the fine arts and literature. All the same the Party would soon be exerting its almighty control over the work of textile designers, whether they were supporters of the *agittekstil'*, Constructivists, or even run of the mill, traditional applied artists.

## NOTES

- 1 O.M.Brik, "From Pictures to Textile Prints," LEF, No.2, 1924, Moscow, p.27.
- 2 Szymon Bojko, "Those Women", in Russian Women Artists of the Avant-Garde 1910-1930. Exhib. Cat., Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne, 1979, p.25.
- 3 Elena Eikhengolts, "Problema massovoi odezhdi", IZOFRONT. Klassovaia bor'ba na fronte prostrastvennykh iskusstv. Sbornik statei ob'edineniia "Oktiabr'." Ed. P.Novitsky et al., Moscow and Leningrad, 1931, p.60.
- 4 N.Adaskina, "Liubov' Popova. Put' stanovleniia khudozhnika-konstruktora". Tekhnicheskaia estetika, No.11, Moscow, 1978, p.22.
- 5 E.Murina, "Tkani Liubvi Popovoi". Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR, Moscow, 1967, No.8, p.27.
- 6 "Nepovskie prelesti Pitera", Ermitazh, no.11, 1922, p.5.
- 7 Ya. Tugendkhol'd. Khudozhestvennaia promyshlennost' SSSR. Rukopis'. Arhiv D.P.Shterenberga. Quoted in E.Murina, "Tkani Liubvi Popovoi", op.cit., p.24.
- 8 There is some discrepancy between sources over the exact date of their involvement within the factory. Some authors such as Natalia Troepol'skaia and T.Strizhenova date the Constructivists' first work in the textile industry to as early as 1921. However it must be assumed that Popova and Stepanova began work after the summer of 1923 when the invitation was issued in Pravda, and not before this date.
- 9 E.Murina, op.cit., p.24.

- <sup>10</sup> N.Troepol'skaia, "Konstruktor Varst", Rabotnitsa, No.11, 1987, p.37.
- <sup>11</sup> E.Murina, op.cit., p.27.
- <sup>12</sup> Arkhiv L.Popovoi. Chasnoe sobitnie. Moskva. Quoted in N.Adaskina, "Liubov' Popova. Put'stano lenia khudozhnika-konstruktora", op.cit., p.23.
- <sup>13</sup> C.Lodder, "Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s," Art into Life, The Henry Art Gallery, Seattle-Minneapolis, Rizzoli, 1990, p.105.
- <sup>14</sup> E.Murina, op.cit., p.24.
- <sup>15</sup> F.Roginskaya, Sovetskii tekstil', Moscow, 1930, p.26.
- <sup>16</sup> D.Aranovich, "Iskusstvo v tkani", Iskusstvo odevat'sia Leningrad, No.1, 1928, p.11.
- <sup>17</sup> V.Stepanova, "O položenii i zadachakh khudozhnika-konstruktivista v shtsenabivnoi promyshlennosti v sviazi s rabotami na shtsenabivnoi fabrike", in C.Lodder, "Liubov' Popova : a Revolutionary Woman Artist", Revolutionary Russia, Vol.3, No.2, Dec.1990, p.174.
- <sup>18</sup> A.Lavrentiev, Varvara Stepanova. A Constructivist Life, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988, p.81.
- <sup>19</sup> A.Fedorov-Davydov, "Iskusstvo tekstilia," IZOFRONT, op.cit., p.72.
- <sup>20</sup> E.Murina, op.cit., p.27.
- <sup>21</sup> D.V.Sarabianov and N.L.Adaskina, Popova, Thames and Hudson, London, 1990, p.303.
- <sup>22</sup> N.Troepol'skaia, op.cit., p.39.

- <sup>23</sup> Ya.Tugendkhol'd, "Po vystavkam", Izvestia VTsEL, 1925, No.26(235), 1.Fournalia. Quoted in D.V.Sarab'ianov and N.L.Adaskina L.S.Pogova 1889-1924, ARS Publishing Ltd., Moscow, 1990, p.133.
- <sup>24</sup> N.Adaskina, op.cit., p.22.
- <sup>25</sup> Party members from Eastern states were likely to be attracted by abstract, non-representational patterns because their traditional fabrics feature geometrical designs.
- <sup>26</sup> N.Troepol'skaia, op.cit., p.39
- <sup>27</sup> LEF editorial, LEF, 1924, No.2, p.4.
- <sup>28</sup> A.Lavrentiev, op.cit., p.82.
- <sup>29</sup> E.Murina, op.cit., p.27.
- <sup>30</sup> N.Troepol'skaia, op.cit., p.39.
- <sup>31</sup> V.Stepanova, "From clothing to pattern and fabric", Vechernaia Moskva, 1929, quoted in A.Lavrentiev, Varvara Stepanova - A Constructivist Life, op.cit., p.80.
- <sup>32</sup> N.Adaskina, op. cit., p.23.
- <sup>33</sup> O.M.Brik, "Of kartini k sitters" LEF, No.2, 1924, Moscow, p.27.
- <sup>34</sup> T.Strizhenova, Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiuma, Sovetskii khudozhnik, Moscow, 1972, p.8.
- <sup>35</sup> Cited in Redchenko. Stepanova. Budushchee - edinstvennaia nasha tsel'... edited by P.Noever, Prestel', Munich, 1991, pp.190-193.
- <sup>36</sup> T.Strizhenova, op.cit., p.8.
- <sup>37</sup> T.Strizhenova, op.cit., p.62.

<sup>38</sup> I.Yasinskaya, Soviet Textile design of the Revolutionary Period, Thames & Hudson, London, 1983. Introduction by J.E.Bowl, p.6.

<sup>39</sup> E.Murina, op.cit., p.27.

<sup>40</sup> T.Strizhenova, op.cit., p.98.

<sup>41</sup> Abbreviated from the full prospectus presented in D.Elliott, Art into Production, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988, pp.88-90.

<sup>42</sup> E.Murina, op.cit., p.27.



**ПРОЗ ОДЕЖ**



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АПОПОВА

## CONSTRUCTIVIST THEATRICAL DESIGN DURING NEP, 1921-1928.

Popova's set and costume designs for Meyerhold's production of F.Crommelynck's The Magnanimous Cuckold, earned it acknowledgement as the production which inaugurated *Theatrical Constructivism*. The work of Meyerhold in the theatre has special significance for Constructivism, because without him it may never have found its full expression as a theatrical medium. Meyerhold was drawn to Constructivism in autumn 1921, after a difficult few months. In February Meyerhold had resigned his post as Head of the Theatrical Department of Narkompros. By mid-1921 Meyerhold's Theatre RSFSR No.1 was in danger of closure and on the 6th September 1921 it was closed down, and Meyerhold was bereft of a place to work. The NEP meant that profit was once more the order of the day in the theatre and some theatres were allowed to revert to private ownership and were then required to yield their investors a realistic profit. Many theatres were deprived of state finances and two aspects of post-revolutionary theatre soon ceased: free performances and mass pageants, which required considerable expense. Yet Braun notes that during NEP:-

"...the incursions of private ownership into the legitimate theatre were relatively few; it was in the areas of cinema and light entertainment that the effects were most marked."<sup>1</sup>

Before monetary worries troubled Meyerhold's theatre, it had considerable success with the second revised version of Mayakovsky's Mystery-Bouffe, which premiered on the 1st May 1921.

Mayakovsky rewrote the play to make it relevant to the course of events after 1917. The "Unclean" were clad in blue overalls, and similar garments were consequently used by Constructivist designers (Popova and Stepanova), and called *prozodezhda*. This production saw the rejection of the proscenium, front curtain and flown scenery, which was to become standard practice in future constructivist theatrical works. Thus it is clear that Meyerhold was already concerned with functionality, utilitarianism and did not want any superfluous and unnecessary items on the stage. Also his concern to diminish the division between the auditorium and the stage, the audience and the actors is evident - for example, a broad ramp sloped down to the first row of seats, in the final act the action spilled into the boxes adjacent to the stage, and at the conclusion the audience was invited to mingle with the actors on stage. Meyerhold was interested in the idea of breaking down the imaginary barrier between audience and stage precisely because he did not want to create a separate illusionistic world which is usually achieved by dividing these elements with theatrical devices. Meyerhold's desire to reveal the theatre down to its bare bones (even stripping theatre walls down to show the brickwork), with no theatrical devices to create illusion is emphasised in the design and setting of this production. Meyerhold's directorial style at this point can be said to be biased more to the Commedia dell'arte than Constructivism, but it stands as a stepping stone on the path towards Theatrical Constructivism, as a more stylised popular theatre with a degree of audience participation:

"The theatre was bursting at the seams unable to accommodate the kind of popular spectacle which he [Meyerhold] was striving to achieve, and it was now that the questions arose whose answers he was shortly to seek in Constructivism."<sup>2</sup>

Meyerhold was closely associated with Mayakovsky throughout the 1920s, and consequently was interested in LEF and, in turn, Constructivism. There are many points of contact between LEF theories and constructivist theatrical practice. However some conflicts arise when applying LEF theories to the theatre. LEF theorists viewed any artistic invention as being in direct opposition to their beliefs, and consequently even avant-garde theatre was subject to their criticism, because events which took place on stage were *ipso facto* illusory and the characters imaginary. LEF wanted to pursue the creation of aesthetic forms which could be infused into everyday life and which would then quickly change that life for the better. LEF theorists eventually recognised the possibility of using the theatre as an arena for displaying an ideal Communist existence, although some had initially inveighed against the theatre. For example, Boris Arvatov stated in 1922:-

"Abandon the stages, the ramps and the spectacles. Go into life, train and retrain. Learn not aesthetic methods, but the methods of life itself, of social construction. Be engineers, be the assembly workers of everyday life. The working class wants real, scientifically organised forms, not illusions. It needs the construction of life, not its imitation."<sup>3</sup> Yet it came to be

accepted that through an artistic medium, the theatre, ordinary people could be made aware of a new way of life (socialist), and that the workers could adapt ideas shown on the stage to improve their own lives. Thus a lack of superfluous items on the stage could encourage the spectator not to treasure useless ornaments or be materialistic, and instead to see the value of simple, functional objects which could make his life easier. LEF members believed that art should be used to make all human activities more intelligent, rational, precise and economical. Similarly, Constructivists rejected any art without some sort of practical application in everyday life:-

"We, the Constructivists, renounce art because it is not useful. Art by its very nature is passive, it only reflects reality. Constructivism is active, it not only reflects reality but takes action itself."<sup>4</sup> Thus the Constructivists who worked in the theatre did not want to create the illusion of reality, as was the avowed intention of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre. They wanted actively to reflect real life in the theatre and therefore take active participation in its formation, by altering the conceptions and traditional ideas of ordinary people. This is matched by LEF theorist Arvatov's hope that the theatre would be turned into:-

"...a factory turning out people qualified for life," and that "the results achieved in the theatrical laboratory" could be "transferred into life, recreating our real, everyday social life."<sup>5</sup> This meant that a utilitarian and social function was found for the theatre and thereby justified the decision of LEF

members and Constructivists to work in the sphere of the theatre.

The educational role of theatrical productions was important to these artists, and they saw the opportunity to teach their new audience how to conduct themselves and how to control their bodies. This last idea was taken up by Meyerhold in his system of "Biomechanics".

It was assumed that the ideas behind Biomechanics were linked with LEF and the Constructivists because of their emphasis on technology and efficiency. However, Meyerhold acknowledged major debts in constructing his theory only to F.W.Taylor, his Russian follower Alexei Gastev<sup>6</sup>, William James, an "objective psychologist", the Russians Bekhterev and Pavlov, and Jacques-Dalcroze's system of eurhythmics.<sup>7</sup> Biomechanics was the culmination of years of experimentation by Meyerhold, and naturally there are many and varied influences of other directors and theatrical styles on his work.

Meyerhold envisaged Biomechanics as the, "theatrical equivalent of an industrial time-and-motion study,"<sup>8</sup> and thus compared it to experiments into the scientific organisation of labour by F.W.Taylor. Yet Braun contends that this comparison was superficial and exaggerated by Meyerhold in order to show that:

"his system was devised in response to the demands of the new mechanised age."<sup>9</sup> Meyerhold said in a lecture, "The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics", given at the Little Hall of the Moscow Conservatoire, that an actor must:-

"...utilise his time *as economically as possible*."<sup>10</sup>

Meyerhold treats the actor as a worker and further on in the lecture he applauds the efficiency of a skilled worker at work, and suggests that the actor too must achieve this propensity to work at maximum output with minimum means:

"The spectacle of a man working efficiently affords positive pleasure. This applies equally to the work of an actor of the future."<sup>11</sup>

It has also been suggested that Meyerhold gave his system a more industrial outlook so as to cast a shadow over the systems of Stanislavsky and Tairov, and to make them appear unscientific and anachronistic. This may have been, in addition, another dig at the traditional Imperial theatres, which he actively protested against (proclaiming "Theatrical October") during his time in the Theatrical Section of Narkompros.

Meyerhold's lecture was also reported in *Teatral'naia Moskva*, and there is a section in which Meyerhold acknowledges his indebtedness to Jacques-Dalcroze and his system of music and rhythm. He went on to stress the importance of various forms of sport and gymnastics through which, he believed, the new man would be created, "capable of any form of labour". The mechanisation of the human body was vital to Biomechanics: the body was perceived as a machine, and man had to control that machine. Biomechanics developed the actor's ability consciously to direct his body and voice, provided as acute sense of rhythm and stressed at all times

an awareness of the acting partner. As I.Sokolov stated:-

"...on stage the actor must become an automaton, a mechanism, a machine."<sup>12</sup>

In autumn 1921 Meyerhold had become the Director of the newly formed State Higher Theatrical Workshops (GVyTM)<sup>13</sup> in Moscow and he used this opportunity to develop his system of Biomechanics, which was basically a series of practical exercises for actors.

According to biomechanical theory every movement had to be realistic, lifelike and deliberate, reduced to the essentials and responsive to the movement of the partner. Rhythm, dynamism and purity of line were important and every movement acquired sculptural form and significance. Athletic ability, balance and gymnastic feats were stressed in biomechanical training because Meyerhold felt that through exercises which developed these skills, the actor's abilities and capabilities to express a particular role would improve. Biomechanics became accepted as a thoroughly viable system of theatrical training which Meyerhold used to school his actors for subsequent productions.

The first production cast exclusively from the students of Meyerhold's Workshop who had been trained in Biomechanics was The Magnanimous Cuckold. This was put on at the Actor's Theatre (previously known as Theatre RSFSR No.1 or the Zohn Theatre), after Meyerhold and his students had taken it back and reopened it in February 1922. As a complement to this new acting method, Meyerhold wanted an innovative designer to create an appropriate



set on which the actors could display biomechanical exercises and also the costumes which would enhance these movements.

After visiting the "5 × 5 = 25" exhibition, where Popova's works had greatly impressed him, Meyerhold had the idea of staging a Constructivist theatrical production. Meyerhold invited Popova to join the teaching staff of the Theatre Workshop as professor of a course in three-dimensional stage design, and to design the set for The Magnanimous Cuckold. Initially Meyerhold had given the project to the Constructivists K. Medunetskii and the Stenberg brothers, but they had not progressed well with it. As professor of the stage design course, Popova delegated the construction of the maquette to a student - V. Liutse. However, the maquette was totally unsatisfactory to Popova and she decided to change the design, making many alterations.

Popova considered herself a Constructivist-Productivist, and as such she had to reconcile the principles of these groups to work in the theatre. She aimed to renounce the artistic and the aesthetic in favour of a strictly utilitarian, construction, and use only a minimal number of simple props. In a lecture on the design process for The Magnanimous Cuckold at INKhUK on the 27th April 1922, Popova stated that,

"... перенесение задач театрального оформления «из плана эстетического в план производственный.»<sup>14</sup>

Meyerhold may have been attracted to the ideas of

Constructivism due to their ascetic and therefore economical nature. Constructivism demanded a bare stage and only essential props, and this would naturally cost a lot less than, for example, a World of Art style production. Symons notes that:-

"The starkness of the original scenic constructivism was, as much as anything, a financial solution."<sup>15</sup> Yet the mutual attraction between Constructivism and Meyerhold can also be seen to be caused by the "anti-art" stance of Constructivism and Meyerhold's rejection of traditional realism and aesthetics in the theatre. Braun notes,

"...this industrial anti-art, which recognised practicability as its sole criterion and condemned all that was merely depictive or decorative, seemed to Meyerhold a natural ally in his repudiation of naturalism and aestheticism."<sup>16</sup>

In producing the set for The Magnanimous Cuckold Popova disposed of the unnecessary, leaving only what the play required for practical performance. Her construction was created from stylized doors, stairs, windows and landings, which could be freely erected in any space. However, the conditions of the stage demand that one side must face the audience, and this was one aspect which forced Popova away from a pure resolution of the design problem. In her lecture at INKhUK she stated her reasons for compromising her constructivist principles to some degree:-

"а) мне было трудно сразу отрешиться от застарелых эстетических навыков и критериев и

б) мешало то условие эстетического порядка, что действие

носило фасовый, зрительный характер и лишало возможности рассматривать действие лишь как протекающий рабочий процесс, что в значительной степени придало всему эстетический характер зрительного действия. "17

This frontal effect was also criticised by prominent constructivist critic Nikolai Tarabukin, who wrote:-

"Lyubov' Popova's work reflects the tradition of painting, albeit non-figurative painting. One is struck by the deliberate frontal emphasis of the Cuckold construction. The wheels of the windmill, the white letters on a black background, the combination of red with yellow and black - they are all decorative elements derived from painting."18

The construction itself was made up of two wooden machines linked together by a bridge, platforms, catwalks, two staircases descending to floor level on the left and right, three rotating wheels of varying sizes, an object that resembled windmill sails and an inclined plank acting as a chute down which actors descended to floor level. It sat on a denuded stage, with no curtains or backdrops, in a theatre which had also been stripped bare. The dynamic nature of the construction was stressed by Popova, and the wheels revolved at varying speeds as a kinetic accompaniment to the actors, changing speed to match the intensity of the dramatic actions. The machine-like nature of the set has been noted by many critics, but opinion varies as to its efficacy as a utilitarian machine. Braun states that,

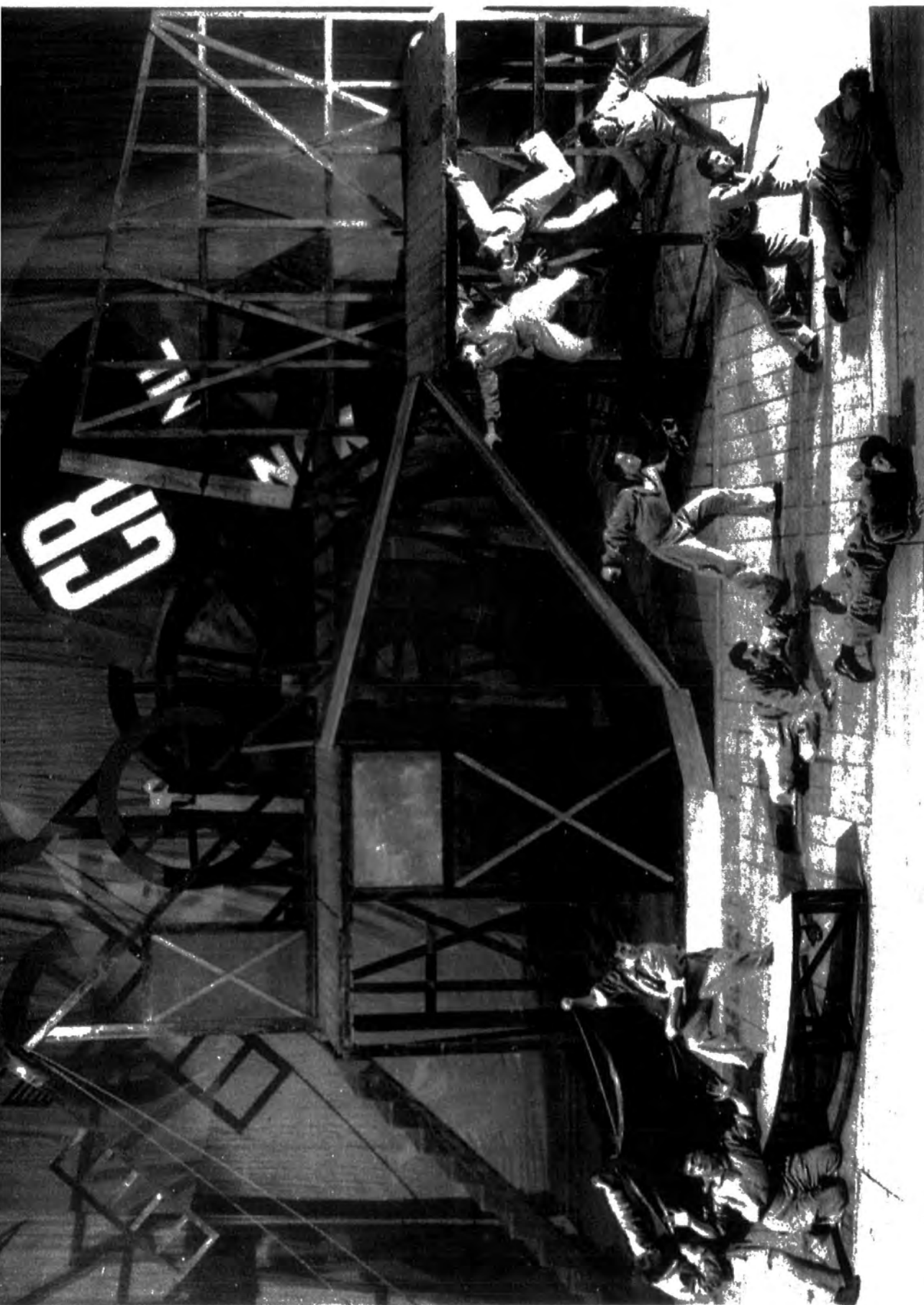
"...only in isolated moments of the complete ensemble did it work simply as a functional machine."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore Tarabukin points out:-

"Its lightness and elegance are entirely in keeping with the style of Crommelynck's farce, but as a utilitarian construction it does not stand close scrutiny of all its components. One needs only to mention the door on the second level and the difficulty the actors have in making exits onto the landing behind it."<sup>20</sup>

Thus it can be seen that the Constructivists, who almost made a cult of functional machines, may have considered that Popova had neglected her duties as a true constructivist designer. Yet most critics agree that the construction served the actor in his exposition of Biomechanics. Symons calls it "a machine for actors",<sup>21</sup> Rudnitsky a "keyboard for performers"<sup>22</sup> and Braun states that, "it proved the ideal platform for a display of biomechanical agility".<sup>23</sup> A.A.Bartoshevich explains:-

"Появилась конструкция - установка, позволяющая актеру максимально выявить себя, вытекающая из его жеста и лишенная всего для актерского жеста бесполезно."<sup>24</sup>

At the time Meyerhold acknowledged Popova's work as most successful, but she did face considerable criticism from her constructivist colleagues at INKhUK who summoned her to a comradesly tribunal. They felt that she had betrayed her Constructivist-Productivist principles and entered the realm of illusion and aestheticism by participating in "theatrical deception".<sup>25</sup> The most noticeable element of representation in



the set was the object closely resembling windmill sails, and this overtly emphasised the real setting of the play - a windmill. The problem with evoking associations with a windmill is that both Meyerhold and the pure Constructivists wanted the stage to portray nothing, to be non-representational, anti-naturalistic, and to utterly reject the illusory. Popova's set, with its moving wheels and windmill sails did not do this and instead created a mechanised, dynamic image of an old-fashioned windmill. Yet E.Rakitina strongly defends Popova's design, noting its properties as a real object:-

"Система лестниц, площадок, колес и крыльев в «Рогоносце» сама была реальной вещью, сделанной из реального материала, существующей в реальном пространстве. Она именно вещь, а не иллюзия, изображение."<sup>26</sup> Rakitina and Nancy Van Norman Baer<sup>27</sup> both argue that Popova's construction was indeed functional, utilitarian, stripped of theatrical illusion and reduced to its most essential form, and therefore entirely in accordance with constructivist ideology.

On the other hand Braun argues that all dramatic action and designs for the theatre must be considered illusory because they do not take place in real life and they are not for immediate use in the reality of everyday existence. He states:-

"In the theatre, whose whole allure depends on the associative power of the imagination, every venture by the Constructivists led to an unavoidable compromise of their utilitarian dogma and each time demonstrated the inherent



contradiction in the term 'theatrical Constructivism'.<sup>28</sup> However, the pairing of these words is acceptable in the sense that the ideas of Constructivism can be presented in a theatrical setting entirely successfully. Braun, perhaps, was pointing to the fact that the mainstay of Constructivism was to bring art into the life of the ordinary worker, and its exposition in the theatre is not bringing it directly into real life.

Yet one must take into consideration the fact that Popova was breaking new ground, had many design problems to solve and would naturally not create a perfect set at the first attempt. Bearing this in mind, one must consider Popova's props and set a great success. Popova's strict realism was translated in the construction by using real materials, as Rakitina notes:-

"Художник, используя подлинные материалы, стремится к организации конкретного пространства."<sup>29</sup> Meyerhold was also satisfied that Popova had created a design solution in the spirit of Constructivism, and also noted in an article in *Novyi Zritel'*,

"With this production we hoped to lay the basis for a new form of theatrical presentation with no need for illusionistic settings or complicated props, making do with the simplest objects which came to hand and transforming a spectacle performed by specialists into an improvised performance which could be put on by workers in their leisure time."<sup>30</sup> This shows Popova's success in another aspect of Constructivism - its educational role. The simple props and the lack of ornamentation and decorativeness on the stage created a setting which was intended as a positive example



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of a living environment, and it was hoped that workers would apply the notions of simplicity, functionality, and practicality to their own lives. How successful this was in reality is difficult to gauge, but its influence seems to have been quite limited and the tide of popular opinion in the Twenties was certainly not in favour of the Constructivists.

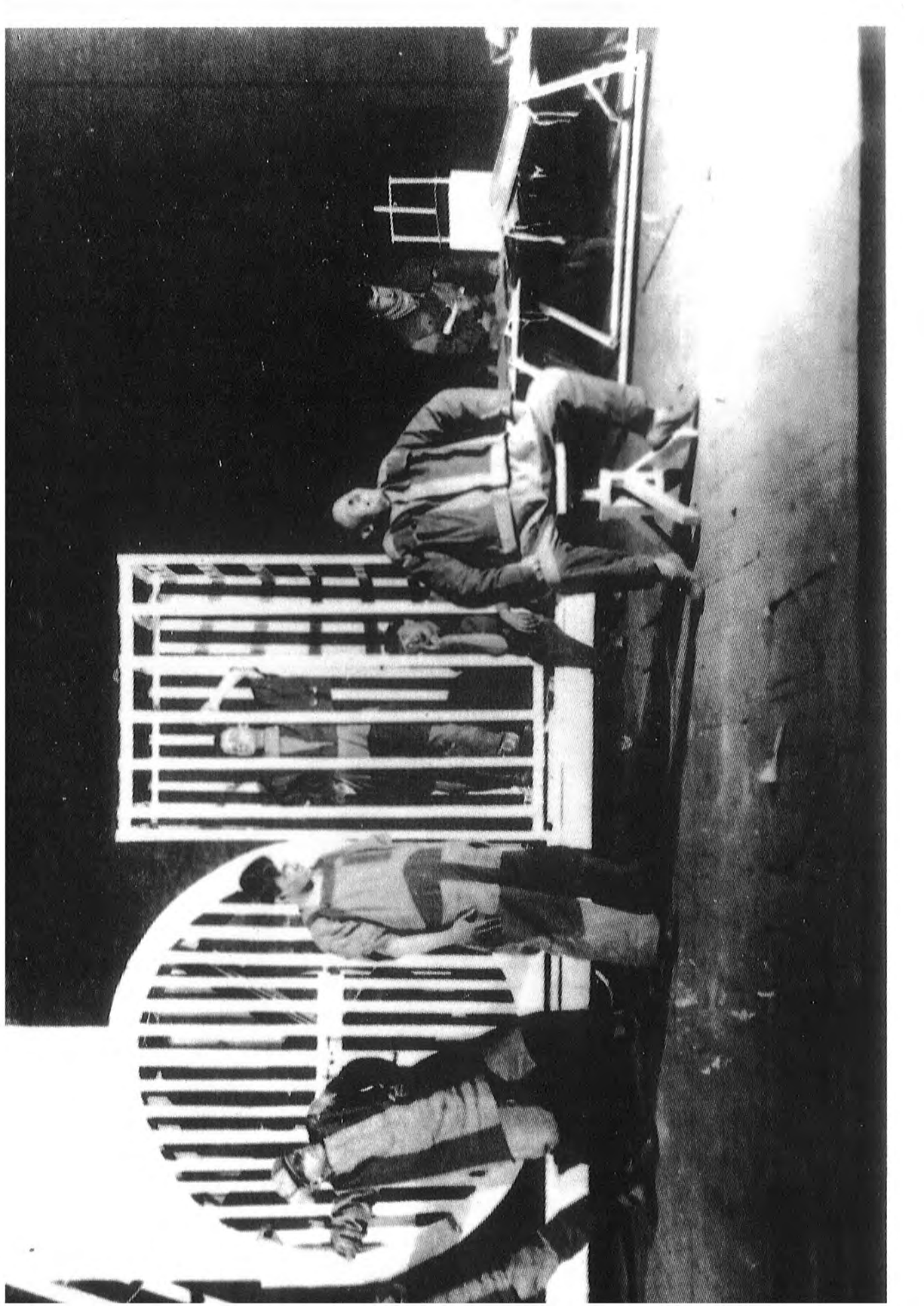
The actor's costumes were produced along strictly constructivist lines, with ease of movement, simplicity, clarity, and practicality as the main priorities. Popova's intention was to create a working suit for actors, ideally suited to the tasks an actor had to perform on stage. She developed the idea of *prozodezhda*, which, although not an original design concept of the Constructivists, was an innovation in the theatre.

Popova designed a basic, loosely-cut blue overall for the actors, while the actresses wore baggy v-neck blouses and calf-length full skirts. Characters were differentiated by, for example, a pair of red pom-poms around the neck of a shirt, or a pair of button-through boots, and other characters were given distinguishing props such as a riding crop or a cane and a monacle. The costumes allowed full freedom of movement which was necessary to the actors in the execution of biomechanical actions onstage. In addition the comfort factor was of great importance - not only for the duration of the production, but for the protracted rehearsals.



The biomechanical actions performed on the stage demanded physical fitness and athletic ability from the actors, and therefore, for the sake of personal hygiene and comfort, their clothing must not restrict the natural functions of the body (perspiration), and allow the skin to 'breathe'. Thus the choice of fabric was most important to the success of the costume designs, and was, for Popova, part and parcel of her design methodology (Constructivism). For these costumes Popova chose a durable, hard-wearing cloth made of natural fibres (cotton) similar to canvas/denim. It is perhaps merely coincidental that Popova chose the same indigo/dark blue colour associated with denim material used for workaday wear in America. The costumes featured a simple cut-out pattern and were easily constructed, with little wastage of material. They were free of all unnecessary ornamentation, and each design feature suited its purpose, such as easy fastenings and large pockets. It was possible that the actors could continue to use their costumes for future rehearsals of plays, even if they were unsuitable for the next production.

Another advantage of the costumes was that they were quickly and easily put on, and this, combined with the lack of heavy stage make-up of the actors and the fact that they did not wear wigs, meant that an actor could be ready for a performance within minutes rather than hours. This was part of Meyerhold's theory of Biomechanics which demanded that the actor has to use his time as economically and profitably as possible, and not,



"...fritter away 1½-2 hours in making up and putting on one's costume. The actor of the future will work without make-up and wear an overall, that is, a costume designed to serve as everyday clothing yet equally suited to the movements and concepts which the actor realises on the stage."<sup>31</sup>

Popova's costume designs were widely praised for their clear construction, simplicity and practicality. Thus, the costumes, combined with the functional set created a major success for the first public performance of 'Theatrical Constructivism'.

A.A.Bartoshevich felt that this was the only production which was fully designed in the constructivist mould:-

"«Рогоносец» поставленный на строго утилитарных станках, совершенно лишенных каких-либо упрощательских тенденций, с актерами, одетыми в «прозодежду», оказался единственным строго-конструктивным спектаклем."<sup>32</sup>

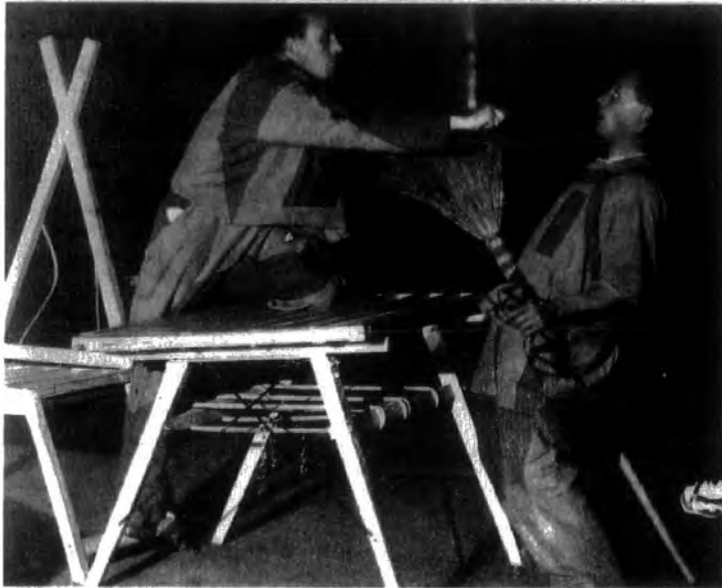
Meyerhold chose Stepanova to design the set and costumes for his next production, Tarelkin's Death. Stepanova did not follow Popova's lead in designing a 'machine for acting', instead she created several special objects, each with a particular function: so-called 'acting instruments'.<sup>33</sup> According to Alexei Gvozdyev:-

"...the single machine of Cuckold was separated into a series of individual installations, theatrical devices capable of becoming supporting points for the unusual playing of the actors."<sup>34</sup> There was a wooden structure of a skeletal nature which combined a barred cage and a mincing machine for action taking

place in a police station. There were tables and chairs which were specially designed to perform tricks. For example, one chair would collapse if anyone sat on it and then bounce back up again when the person stood up, another chair would give out a pistol shot when an actor attempted to sit down, and the table gave way under the slightest pressure and then sprang back up onto its legs again. All the furniture and props were painted white and the central aspect of the set design was the performing furniture. However, these devices and contraptions were caricatures of the real thing and therefore not wholly non-representational, and an example of this is the wooden latticed cage which represented a police cell. Symons notes that:-

"Meyerhold's constructivist sets never were completely nonrepresentational...Projects of this nature were offered by such people as Tatlin and Ekster but rarely were they realised in actual production."<sup>35</sup> Often constructivist sets had to be compromised in order to be accommodated in the actual theatre, and this obviously had a negative effect on constructivist design principles. Stepanova's set design did not receive criticism from Constructivists to the same extent as Popova's had done. One main fault was seen to be painting the furniture, because the Constructivists were in favour of exposing the real material, and in contradiction to this Stepanova had decorated the objects. The 'acting instruments' have also been blamed for the production's lack of success by some, notably Braun, who states that they,

"functioned so capriciously that the young performers soon lost all confidence in them."<sup>36</sup> Yet Stepanova asserted that her





'acting instruments' were successful:

"In The Death of Tarelkin I managed finally to show spatial objects in their utilitarian context and where I wanted to supply real objects - a table, a chair, armchairs, screens, etc. As a totality, they integrated the material environment wherein the live human material was meant to act."<sup>37</sup>

Stepanova's costume designs were in the spirit of *prozodezhda*, but appear to show more similarities with her designs for *sportodezhda*. The idea of creating an actor's working suit was still the main aim, thus the design requirements remained the same. It was perhaps Stepanova's different resolution to the problem of differentiating characters for the benefit of the audience that led her to designs reminiscent of her sports clothing. In order to clearly identify the different characters, Stepanova used a series of simple, bold, geometrical patterns on the material, such as stripes and chevrons. Mikhail Kolesnikov in his essay, "The Russian Avant-Garde and the Theatre of the Artist", points out that each costume, although identical in design, had a distinctive linear pattern which Stepanova had particularly designed so that,

"the lines and dots varied rhythmically as the actors positioned themselves in groups."<sup>38</sup> However the patterns did not inspire total critical acclaim, and Braun scorns the designs as:

"...a series of drab, baggy costumes decorated with stripes, patches, and chevrons which looked like nothing so much as convicts' uniforms."<sup>39</sup> The notion of decoration in the designs is

evident, but, necessary for identification purposes, and therefore not superfluous ornamentation. Thus the costumes fall within the constructivist guidelines which refute the use of any form of decoration that does not fulfill a practical function.

Unfortunately, the costumes were never shown to their full effect due to the fact that the stage lighting was the glare of military searchlights, which occasionally fluctuated in power, leaving the stage in semi-darkness or blazing light.

Stepanova followed the same design methodology as Popova:- she chose the material according to its future use; created a simple cut-out pattern which would reduce waste off-cuts of fabric; and prioritised the ease of movement and comfort of the actor. Expediency and economy were important aspects of the designs, and here again are some similarities with Stepanova's sports clothing which she designed at this time. The material is a light crisp cotton fabric, which is entirely appropriate for the hygienic requirements of sports clothing, as well as the gymnastic feats of Biomechanics. The simple geometric construction of the costumes incorporates a lightness of form and demonstrates Stepanova's desire to move away from decorativeness towards strictly functional and practical clothing. Despite her aim to create costumes which would underline each separate movement of the actors' limbs, Stepanova's designs were criticised for lacking a definite line and shape in comparison with Popova's designs for The Magnanimous Cuckold, which were exceptionally utilitarian, functional and clear-cut in their appearance. Braun states that,

"...the shapeless costumes tended to camouflage rather than enhance their [the actor's] movements."<sup>40</sup> Stepanova herself was aware that constructivist theatrical costume design was rife with problems - even in theory - and appears to have concentrated on a practical resolution to the immediate design specifications: expediency, cost, functionality, rationality, hygiene and comfort. Perhaps wishing to spare herself a theoretical grilling from her constructivist comrades, Stepanova denied that she had produced these costumes as a constructivist designer - showing that she was fully aware of the inherent latent contradictions and paradoxes involved in the transference of constructivist design principles to the field of theatrical design.

" -Прозодежду или спецодежду для актера я не могла сделать, как конструктивист, потому что у актера нет, нет раз и навсегда установленных функций и закономерных движений, ибо он работает как интерпретатор сюжета пьесы."<sup>41</sup> Negative critical response at the time was prevalent, as perhaps quite unfairly, the production was viewed as a rehash of The Magnanimous Cuckold, with the actors giving the same presentational performance, but with a different plot and characters.

For The Earth in Turmoil<sup>42</sup> (*Zemlya Dybom*), Meyerhold turned once again to Popova to design the set and costumes. The play, by Martinet, was adapted by Tretiakov to emphasise its political message. The agitational application of Theatrical Constructivism in this production was used to its fullest effect, whereas its political orientation may not have been fully exposed in the

previous productions due to their non-political nature. As Christine Hamon points out in her essay on the play:-

"Meyerhold pense ainsi disposer d'un texte contemporain dont le contenu agitational sera accentué par l'adaptation et qui lui permettra de concilier la forme constructiviste du spectacle et le caractère politique du sujet, ce qui n'était pas le cas de ses précédents spectacles: ni Le Cocu Magnifique de Crommelynck, tout à fait dépourvu de perspectives politiques, ni la Mort de Tarelkine de Soukhovo-Kobyline, pièce satirique du XIXe siècle, n'avaient permis de dégager clairement l'orientation idéologique du constructivisme théâtral."<sup>43</sup>

Meyerhold conceived The Earth in Turmoil as a montage of short scenes in the spirit of a mass spectacle, similar to the unstaged production The Struggle and the Victory of the Soviets. It was very important to Meyerhold that this production should not be criticised for aesthetic effects and details, as had his two earlier productions of Theatrical Constructivism. For example, in The Magnanimous Cuckold, although Popova had designed an abstract machine for acting on, there were certain inconsistencies in the design, such as the intrusion of figurative elements: doors and windmill sails. In Tarelkin's Death Stepanova had created 'acting instruments', which according to Hamon:

"...resemblaient moins à des prototypes de formes parfaites qu' à des objets-gags dont le caractère décoratif était souligné par l'utilisation uniforme d'un caillebotis de bois peint. Le constructivisme théâtral semblait s'enliser dans l'esthétisme dès

ses premières réalisations. Avec La Terre cabrée, Meyerhold s'efforça de revenir à une conception plus stricte du productivisme, appliqué à la scène."<sup>44</sup> Also Aksyonov noted the following in an article in *Zrelishcha* in 1923:-

"Так называемый сценический конструктивизм... в данное время почти выродился в декоративный приём, правда нового стиля... Проект Поповой порывает с такой трактовкой конструктивизма. Задача художника - выбор и объединение реально существующих предметов по принципу монтажа."<sup>45</sup>

To refute all possibility of being accused of designing a set in a decorative, aesthetic style, Popova chose only real objects for props, and only those which were required by the dramatic events. She was well aware of the political 'agit-prop' nature of the play and attempted in her set design to convey the real-life action with an agitational message. N.Gilyarovskaia states this about Popova's set design:-

"Работа художника в выборе и соединении вещественных элементов спектакля в целях наиболее агитационного воздействия."<sup>46</sup>

In order to show the public directly how their lives could be in an industrialised socialist country, Popova used the latest authentic, technical objects on the stage. There were cars, lorries, motorbikes with side cars, (which had only just been brought into production at the time) telephones, typewriters, bicycles, machine guns, a threshing machine (a symbol of a future mechanised agriculture), a field kitchen and an aeroplane. In the

theatre the aeroplane was rendered as a model fixed to the flies. There was also a screen onto which revolutionary slogans and brief explanations of scenes were displayed which lent the production a further note of documentality. The actors virtuously manipulated all these machines, offering a model of new harmonious relationships between man and industry in the future socialist society to the audience. One object on the stage which formed the basic background setting was a reconstruction of a real machine. Popova had hoped that a gantry crane could be installed on the stage, but it was too large and heavy, so a reduced, stylized model in wood was made which did not function. According to Hamon this caused an infraction of a rule of scenic constructivism:-

"la règle du rejet des artifices scéniques du théâtre-représentation."<sup>47</sup> However, the use of real objects in theatrical productions was not an original idea. Indeed it came surprisingly close to Stanislavsky's portrayal of real life in the Moscow Art Theatre - something that Meyerhold may have preferred to overlook.

For the costumes Popova rejected the *prozodezhda* overalls of previous constructivist productions in favour of exact reproductions of military uniforms for the anonymous soldiers, while their leaders were clothed in leather jackets. The nurses uniform was standard white dresses with a red cross on the front, and the kitchen workers also wore traditional clothing. Basically the costumes were appropriate to the real apparel of the characters. Symons notes:-

"The realism of props and costumes marks a departure from

Meyerhold's four previous productions. It marks the first modification of his previously unabated drive towards increasingly abstract and nonrepresentational staging."<sup>48</sup>

Although The Earth in Turmoil was successful and had wide popular appeal, for his next few productions Meyerhold turned away from 'Theatrical Constructivism'. He may have felt that he could not take the concept any further, particularly since the death of Popova in early 1924. Hamon states that the problems facing Meyerhold at this point quite succinctly:-

"...il était difficilement concevable de pousser plus loin l'expérience de manipulation d'objets authentiques, dernière ressource du constructivisme après l'abandon de l'abstraction. Dès lors, théâtre et vie tendaient-ils à fusionner, comme le souhaitaient les productivistes? Ou n'est-ce pas l'objet industriel qui était à son tour récupéré comme accessoire de théâtre, tant la force d'illusion de la scène est puissante? Dilemme insoluble qui fit bientôt abandonner à Meyerhold le projet constructiviste pour en investir les acquis dans des spectacles qui marquaient une évolution vers le réalisme satirique."<sup>49</sup> Nakov views that Meyerhold turned away from Theatrical Constructivism so that he could pursue other avenues in his productions:-

"Le stade «matérialiste» du constructivisme théâtral est dépassé pour atteindre le niveau conceptuel le plus audacieux."<sup>50</sup>

'Theatrical Constructivism' as a style of stage decor was used widely in the 1920s. Braun notes that by the mid-1920s,

"...many theatres throughout the Soviet Union were exploiting it as the latest fashionable decorative style often with little regard for the play's content."<sup>51</sup> However some Constructivists such as Vesnin in The Man Who Was Thursday, Shestakov in Lake Lyul and Yakulov in Giroflé-Girofla and other productions used Constructivism in its strict sense for theatrical decor.

Directors other than Meyerhold used constructivist elements in their productions, but particularly Tairov is notable for several plays at the *Kamerny Theatre* using designers such as Exter in the early 1920s.

Exter was able to express her conception of Theatrical Constructivism in her work with Tairov, and chose not to work with Meyerhold. Her third memorable set for Tairov, (after Famira Kifared and Salomé) was for Romeo and Juliet, produced in 1921. The stage was organised vertically with a series of platforms connected by bridges and staircases. Pieces of aluminium and mirrors were ingeniously placed on the stage to augment the luminous, dynamic nature of the set. Exter's previous experimental work in Cubo-futurism (c.1913-1914) provided her with mechanical, futuristic ideas which she masterfully expressed in the sculptural, plastic set of Romeo and Juliet. Exter designed the costumes for the play, highlighting their colours and sculptural forms. The materials for the costumes were brightly coloured and they were decorated with pieces of metal, wood and aluminium cut out in regular geometric shapes such as circles and triangles. Thus the costumes, reflecting the lighting, along with





the angular movements of the actors, heightened the dynamic, luminescent potential of the production, which was also expressed in the set.

Exter's last design project using scenic constructivism was in 1923 when Y. Protozanov invited Exter to design the costumes and constructions for his science-fiction film Aelita, produced in 1924. Exter used mechanical forms in the costumes, such as plexiglass helmets, metallic dresses, sometimes incorporating springs set at right angles, as in the costume for Aelita's servant (see illustration). Evident from the illustration is the transparency of the costume, its dynamic form, and the Constructivist principle of revealing the construction of a garment is thus fulfilled. These costumes were some of the first to be made up in Lamanova's workshop, which was only set up at the beginning of 1924.

Lamanova herself was quite active as a theatrical costume designer during this period, even though her main efforts were devoted to developing mass-produced clothing. In 1921 she began work at the Vakhtangov Theatre, and created costumes for many plays, such as Turandot, Zoika's Flat and Envy, and also worked at the Griboedov Studio costume design workshop. Lamanova's work was mainly the construction of garments according to designs by other artists, for example she made the ball-gowns to Nivinsky's drawings for Turandot, and made the costumes for The Marriage of Figaro to Golovin's sketches at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1926.

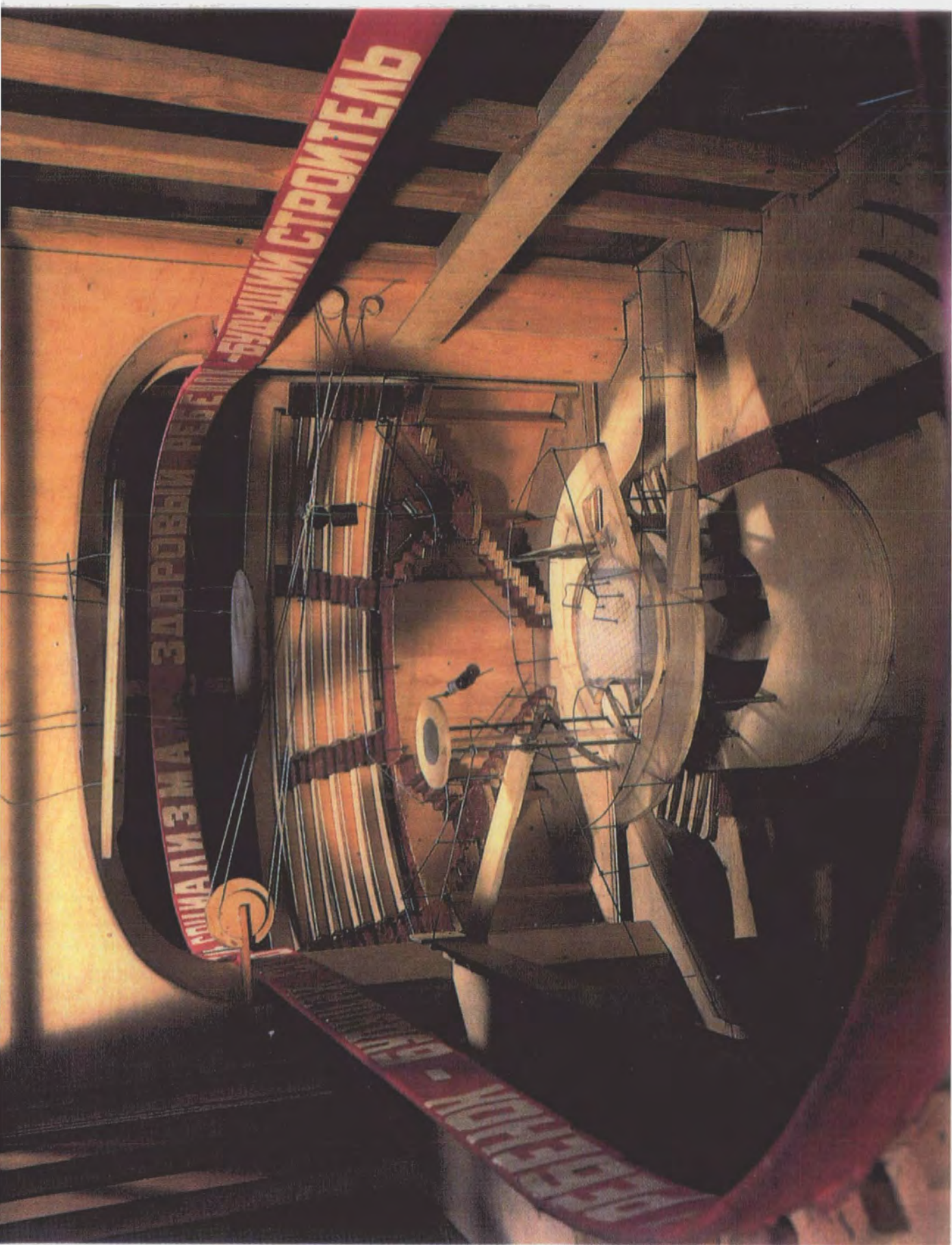
For Aelita Exter designed an important part of the set - a construction with an elliptical element, which Nakov calls a,

"sorte de pyramide constructiviste, animée par un mouvement en spirale."<sup>52</sup> It is reminiscent of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, and was designed along constructivist lines.

Shortly after her work on Aelita, Exter emigrated to Paris, where she began to teach the techniques of set design using Theatrical Constructivism at the Academy of Modern Art, directed by Ferdinand Léger.

Tairov continued to develop the notion of Theatrical Constructivism in the mid- and late-1920s using the Stenberg brothers, who designed nearly all of his productions in the second half of the decade. Theatrical Constructivism at the *Kamerny* Theatre was given a more decorative slant - the use of colour was more evident, but qualities of functionality and utility were still paramount. The Stenbergs' constructivist sets used a few striking details in a rigid framework of clear sculptural form with its functions and structure revealed, in accordance with constructivist principles.

There are many instances where Constructivism was used in theatrical productions in the 1920s, both in Russia and abroad. Most notable among these were Foregger's Machine Dances of 1922-1923 at the Foregger Workshop, known as *Mastfor*, and Diaghilev's La Chatte, designed by Gabo and Pevsner, performed in Paris in 1927. In Machine Dances principles of standardisation,



repetition and overlapping were applied to the actor's movements, thus emulating mechanisation in the spirit of Constructivism, and also the lack of decoration and economy of expressive means adhered to constructivist theatrical practice. The set design for La Chatte included a system of transparent forms and boxes made of celluloid, mica and wire in which light was reflected, and the costumes were of transparent material, which together created a futuristic atmosphere. Here Gabo and Pevsner were revealing the construction of their designs and using modern materials which were both ideas involved in Theatrical Constructivism, although perhaps closer to that of Exter and Yakulov rather than Popova.

Theatrical Constructivism faced increasing criticism as the decade drew on, but despite this Meyerhold felt it appropriate to use a constructivist set for the production of I Want a Child by Tretiakov. Meyerhold wanted the play to be staged as an illustrated discussion in which the audience would be able to interrupt. Therefore El Lissitsky designed a setting which embraced the whole interior of the theatre, obliterating the division between stage and audience. Unfortunately the production did not find the approval of the authorities and the censor refused to allow the play to be staged. Thus possibly the best example of scenic constructivism remained at the planning stage:-

"...a production was lost which, to judge from the surviving model and plans, would have exemplified the spatial and functional concepts of Constructivism to a degree which the theatrical work of Popova, Stepanova and Shestakov never did."<sup>53</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> E.Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, p.184

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.162.

<sup>3</sup> B.Arvatov, "Ot rezhissioru teatra k montazhu byta", (From Theatre Directing to the Montage of Existence) Ermitazh, 1922, No.11:3. Quoted in J.E.Bowl, "The Construction of Caprice", Theatre in Revolution, Nancy Van Norman Baer, p.80.

<sup>4</sup> From an article in Chitatel' i pisatel', 1 Feb 1928, quoted in K.Rudnitsky, Russian and Soviet Theatre 1905-1932, p.90

<sup>5</sup> From Iskusstvo trudyashchimsia, vyp.1, Moscow, 1921, p.8, quoted in Rudnitsky, op.cit., p.90.

<sup>6</sup> Alexei Kapitonovich Gastev (1882-1941) was a Proletarian poet of some repute, famous for his glorification of the mechanisation of life and his involvement with time and motion studies undertaken by the Central Labour Institute, of which he was the Director.

<sup>7</sup> See E.Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, Eyre Methuen, London, 1979, p.165.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>9</sup> E.Braun, Meyerhold on Theatre, p.183.

<sup>10</sup> From Meyerhold's lecture, "The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics", given at the Little Hall of the Moscow Cosnservatoire on 12 June 1922, reported in Ermitazh, Moscow, 1922, No.6, pp.10-11. Quoted in Braun, *ibid.*, p.198.

<sup>11</sup> Braun, *ibid.*, p.198.

- <sup>12</sup> I.Sokolov, "The Industrialisation of Gesture", (article) quoted in Rudnitsky, op.cit., p.93.
- <sup>13</sup> GVyTM - *Gosudarstvennye vysshie teatral'nye masterskie*. These were incorporated into the State Institute of Theatrical Art (GITIs) in 1922, but soon after broke away to form the Meyerhold Workshop.
- <sup>14</sup> E.Rakitina, "Liubov' Popova . Iskusstvo i manifesti", Khudozhnik, tsena, ekran, Moscow, 1975, p.153.
- <sup>15</sup> Symons, Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque, p.77.
- <sup>16</sup> Braun, Meyerhold on Theatre, op.cit., p.184.
- <sup>17</sup> E.Rakitina, op.cit., p:154.
- <sup>18</sup> N.Tarabukin, "Zritelnoe oformlenie v GOSTIME", (unpublished), quoted in Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, p.172.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.172.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.172.
- <sup>21</sup> Symons, op.cit., p.83.
- <sup>22</sup> Rudnitsky, op.cit., p.92.
- <sup>23</sup> Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, op.cit., p.172.
- <sup>24</sup> A.A.Bartoshevich, "Teatral'noe deistvo i khudozhenik", Teatral'no-dekoratsionnoe iskusstvo v SSSR, 1917-1927, Eds. E.F.Gollerbakh, A.Ya.Golovin, and L.I.Zheverzhev, p.107.
- <sup>25</sup> Rudnitsky, op.cit., p.92.
- <sup>26</sup> E.Rakitina, op.cit., p.163.

<sup>27</sup> In Nancy Van Norman Baer, "Design and Movement in the Theatre of the Russian Avant-Garde", Theatre in Revolution, op.cit., pp35-59.

<sup>28</sup> Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, op.cit., p.181.

<sup>29</sup> E.Rakitina, op.cit., p.163.

<sup>30</sup> Meyerhold, "Kak byl....", op.cit., quoted in Braun, op.cit., p.204.

<sup>31</sup> Meyerhold, "The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics", op.cit., Braun, op.cit., pp.198-199.

<sup>32</sup> A.A.Bartoshevich, op.cit., p.107.

<sup>33</sup> Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, op.cit., p.178.

<sup>34</sup> A.Gvozdyev, Teatra imeni Vsevolod Meyerhold 1920-1926, Leningrad, 1926, p.33, quoted in Symons, op.cit., p.91.

<sup>35</sup> Symons, op.cit., p.91. Unfortunately Symons does not indicate the designs by Tatlin and Exter to which he refers, and neither does he note which sets he considered truly Constructivist.

<sup>36</sup> Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, p.178

<sup>37</sup> From a conversation with A.Gan shortly after the premiere of Tarelkin's Death, "Beseda s V.F.Stepanovoi", Zrelishcha, 1922, no.16:11. Quoted from J.E.Bowl, "The Construction of Caprice", Theatre in Revolution, op.cit., p.78.

<sup>38</sup> M.Kolesnikov, "The Russian Avant-Garde and the Theatre of the Artist", Theatre in Revolution, op.cit., p.93.

<sup>39</sup> Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, op.cit., p.178.

<sup>40</sup> Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, op.cit., p.178.



<sup>41</sup> From a conversation with V.F.Stepanova, first published in Zrelishcha, no.16, 1922, pp.11-12, quoted in Рубинштейн, Степанова. Будущее театрального искусства, Prestel', Munich, 1991, p.205.

<sup>42</sup> This production was to mark the Fifth Anniversary celebrations for the founding of the Red Army.

<sup>43</sup> C.Hamon, "«La Terre Cabrée» de Martinet", Les Voies de la Création Théâtrale, p.50.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp.51-52.

<sup>45</sup> I.Aksyonov, "Постановка "Ночи" в Театре имени М. Горького", Zrelishcha, No.1, 1923, pp.8-9.

<sup>46</sup> N.Gilyarovskaia, Театрально-декорационное искусство за 2 лет. Kazan', 1923, p.25.

<sup>47</sup> C.Hamon, op.cit., p.55.

<sup>48</sup> Symons, op.cit., p.96.

<sup>49</sup> Hamon, op.cit., p.60.

<sup>50</sup> A.B.Nakov, Alexandra Exter, Exhib.Cat., Galerie Jean Chauvelin, Paris, 1972, p.26.

<sup>51</sup> Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, op.cit., p.181.

<sup>52</sup> A.B.Nakov, op.cit., p.29.

<sup>53</sup> Braun, The Theatre of Meyerhold, op.cit., p.225.

**THE END OF THE ROAD FOR CONSTRUCTIVISM.  
THE INFLUENCE OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST MOVEMENT,  
ON FASHION,TEXTILE AND THEATRICAL DESIGN,  
IN ITS DECLINING YEARS, 1928-1934.**

Socio-cultural and political background of the period

The end of NEP, the beginning of the policy of "Socialism in one country" and the initiation of the economic Five Year Plans, made 1928 a very important year for the Soviet Union. It saw the inauguration of the idea of "cultural revolution" as "class war"<sup>1</sup>- a concept developed in an atmosphere of political intrigue, capitalistic encirclement and so-called "bourgeois" wrecking and sabotage. The "cultural revolution" campaign was based on the notion of the proletariat as the ruling class, which supposed that all other population groups had to be subordinated to it, and that the influence and prestige of the "bourgeois" intelligentsia should be radically diminished. Despite the fact that Lenin had previously attempted to avoid confrontation with these "bourgeois specialists", from early 1928 (the Shakhty Trial) until June 1931 (when Stalin made a statement of reconciliation towards the old technical intelligentsia, which was intended to quell the intensity of the "class warfare") professional workers who lacked the necessary proletarian credentials faced harassment and difficulties of all kinds, most commonly they were forced out of employment. In their place a new breed of Soviet technical specialists were advanced from the ranks of the workforce. It was

felt that the intelligentsia lacked real allegiance to the new regime, and that by advancing proletarian workers the Party (the vanguard of the proletariat) ensured the support of their natural allies, who would owe their new improved material position to the Party.

Hard-line Communists and most young Communists felt that the rejection of NEP signified a renewal of the class struggle and the future annihilation of the old intelligentsia and the middle-class. Latent dissatisfaction with NEP from below made the policy transition quite smooth and added impetus to the ideas involved with "cultural revolution". Although it was initiated from above, (by means of the Shakhty Trial of March 1928) to eliminate all potential opposition to Communist rule and create a new Soviet intelligentsia, it had many repercussions amongst grass-roots organisations and its consequences developed a life of their own. In the arts the major groups promoting realistic, "proletarian" art as the only style suitable for Communism exerted great pressure on all artists to support their position. These organisations were "fanning the class war" in culture,<sup>2</sup> (in contravention of the 1925 Resolution) and had the support of prominent Communists, such as Krinitskii, head of the Agitprop Department of the Central Committee. Artistic groups developed their understanding of Party policy in the arts through statements and speeches made by various leading members of the Party, and most coloured their interpretation of this information to favour their particular standpoint. Within all spheres of the arts the

pressure to support what was believed to be the Party line was intense. It is important to note that at this stage the Party had not issued strict guidelines as to the content and style of socialist art and was not, as yet, explicitly demanding loyalty from artists. The "correct" political line was being pursued from below by militant Communist groups, and as Sheila Fitzpatrick points out, the "cultural revolution" developed a momentum of its own:

"This was the period in which the social and generational tensions of NEP came to a climax in an onslaught (*which the leadership only partly controlled*) [my emphasis] on privilege and established authority."<sup>3</sup> For example, the lack of Party control over the consequences of "cultural revolution" in the textile industry resulted in the destruction of thousands of designs which were considered to be insufficiently "proletarian", and the hegemony of the *agittekstil'*, even after Stalin had attempted to declare a peace on the class war front. (For further detail see the textiles section in this chapter.)

Young, politically active artists brought a renewed surge of revolutionary idealism to various branches of the arts and insistently promoted their views of Communist art. The conflict between "proletarian" and "bourgeois" art was based on real social tensions between the materially poor urban workers and peasants and the rich technical specialists, professional white-collar workers and the NEP entrepreneurs. Naturally such anomalies should not exist in a Communist state and the eradication of all

material and class divisions was seen by many Communists as extremely desirable. The Young Communist groups, especially the Komsomol, were particularly fervent in their attacks on anything outside the "proletarian" fold. Likewise, the new generation of artists, in the main a product of the new post-revolutionary artistic education system, graduates of VKhUTEMAS (now called VKhUTEIN<sup>4</sup>) and other revamped institutions, was extremely active in the class struggle. Their youthful lives had been deeply affected by the Revolution, and their spirits and minds were true to the political ideals that had inspired the first generation of post-revolutionary artists to pledge their allegiance to the new Soviet state and to go to work for Soviet power. True believers of Marxist ideology, the new generation of artists had matured in an age of violent upheavals, "revolutionary morality" and political intrigue. For them, devotion to the Party and the proletariat was of paramount importance, as was the realistic depiction of socialist endeavour in their works. However, there were many divergences of opinion in relation to the style and content of politically correct "proletarian" art due to a lack of precise rules laid down by Party decree. Using the class war terminology so prevalent at the time, this was nothing less than "lack of vigilance", a very grave offence. It created a vacuum in which the numerous art groups fought amongst themselves for the right to dominate artistic affairs. Each organisation vied with the others, proclaiming that only their association was the true bearer of the Party's policy in the arts. Each demanded proletarian hegemony, by which they meant the hegemony of their

own particular faction. Political intrigue and in-fighting were the bread-and-butter of cultural life in the late Twenties, and the artistic organisations reflected this in their own inter-relationships and power struggles. The common ground of all these groups was the rigorous application of their own understanding of Communist ideology in the arts. The main organisations agitated for this through the journals that each published: *Za proletarskoe iskusstvo* - publication of the Russian Association of Proletarian Artists, RAPKh; *Brigada Khudozhnikov* - organ of the Federation of Associations of Soviet Artists, FOSKh; *Iskusstvo v massy* - journal of the Association of Artists of the Revolution, AKhR.

The power of these "proletarian" organisations is undeniable, and they often operated outside the control of the Party itself, although they claimed to be its servants. In relation to literature and the insubordination of the group RAPP, Fitzpatrick notes:

"Between 1928 and 1932, the RAPP leaders exercised a repressive and cliquish dictatorship over literary publication and criticism. This dictatorship, supposedly in the name of the proletarian Party, was in fact not under effective Central Committee control."<sup>5</sup> Precisely such behaviour, effectively diminishing the Party's power and vying for a dictatorship in the arts, had sealed Proletkul't's fate in the early 1920s. Again faced with demands for artistic hegemony by a single group, the Party acted decisively to eliminate its potential rivals and put

an end to the chaotic, bitter inter-group wrangling by its Decree of 1932, "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organisations", published in Pravda on the 23rd of April. The Decree asserted the dominance of the Party alone over artistic affairs, and within a few months had caused the dissolution of all the artistic organisations in favour of a single "union" of artists and a separate one for writers. The practicalities of the Decree, its administrative measures, etc., were to be overseen by newly appointed organisational committees, such as the Organising Committee of the Union of Soviet Artists. It is commonly believed that the Decree ushered in the doctrine of "Socialist Realism", and strict censorial vigilance by Party appointees. However, the notion of Socialist Realism had not even been voiced at this stage. It was first used in discussion much later that year, and even at that point had not had its meaning precisely clarified - more importantly the Party had not yet claimed it as its own style.<sup>6</sup> However from 1932 onwards, it appears that all artists understood that the Party's overt intrusion into the management of artistic affairs could not help but exert its influence over their work. In order to make a living in a Communist state, to receive commissions from government institutions and organisations, they must adopt an artistic style and develop the appropriate content for Party approval. This "deal" was ratified by the inauguration of the Unions in 1934, when the possession of a membership card came to ensure a supply of materials, commissions, relatively stable employment, various privileges and economic well-being. With the formal establishment of Union bodies came the theory of

Socialist Realism as the only form and content acceptable by the Party for the proletariat.

The political, socio-cultural and economic circumstances of the years 1928-1934 had a profound effect on the orientation of artists and the arts in general. First we will turn our attention to textile design, for, as T.Strizhenova remarked, this field was vital in the artists' battles for the creation of socialist designs:-

"Дискуссия о путях развития советского декоративного искусства развернулась на страницах газет, журналов и книг, она проходила в художественных мастерских и на самых предприятиях. Но, пожалуй, нигде она не носила такого острого и необычайно резкого характера, как в текстиле."<sup>7</sup>



## TEXTILE DESIGN, 1928-1934.

Judging from the evidence available, it is highly unlikely that constructivist textile designs were still being produced to any great extent in 1928. However, Constructivism is relevant to this period both in its contribution to the style of machinistic, non-representational prints and in its influence on the education of the new generation of textile designers, graduates of VKhUTEIN. Indeed, the iconoclastic, intransigent language of numerous Constructivists, proclaiming the death of art and the new Gods of industry and technology, may well have affected the ideological stance of the young designers more than any other aspect of the constructivist training practices they received in the Textile Faculty at VKhUTEIN.

The exhibition *Bytovoï sovetskii tekstil'* was held at VKhUTEIN from October 1928 to February 1929, timed specifically to coincide with the inauguration of the First Five Year Plan. The Plan specified great increases in textile production in order to rectify the severe shortages of fabric and also to take into consideration the new major market force - the collectivised peasantry. Gosplan<sup>8</sup> believed that due to Collectivisation, the peasant would be transformed from an individual, private householder, who usually did most of his sewing at home, into an agricultural worker, and as such more like the urban worker in his habits - buying standard, ready-to-wear clothing 75% of the time.<sup>9</sup> The exhibition was intended to provide the starting marker on

which future improvements in the quality and quantity of mass-produced printed textiles could be judged. It was initiated by the organisation of professional textile designers known as the Society of Textile Artists, and aimed to show a broad spectrum of design work. Numerous artists exhibited, displaying designs in various styles, and these included L.Mayakovskaia, E.Pribylskaia, V.Stepanova, O.Griun, an artist of the Trekhgornaia factory and also a teacher at VKhUTEIN, and V.Maslov, an artist working at the Ivanovo factory. Mayakovskaia and Stepanova displayed their non-representational, geometrical works, and even at this later date Stepanova's prints still retained their constructivist inspiration. It can therefore be assumed that her commitment to the ideals of Constructivism had not wavered, and the desire which she had previously expressed to renovate the industrial production of textiles remained steadfast. However despite Stepanova's attempts to introduce certain innovations into industrial textile design methodology through her practical involvement in factory artistic collectives and in the Textile Faculty at VKhUTEIN, virtually no changes were evident in the general character of mass-produced textiles or in the manner in which they were designed. This meant that more than ten years after the Revolution, the creation of the new Soviet textile print still remained the order of the day:-

"...борьба за обновление текстильного рисунка, за выработку нового современного языка возобновилась, выдвигаясь как главный лозунг дня."<sup>10</sup>

The persistent lack of a new socialist style of textile print was acknowledged widely within the industry, and the next generation of designers, who had received their artistic education at VKhUTEIN, felt that it was their responsibility to provide the solution to this design problem. The VKhUTEIN students, such as N.Poluketova, M.Nazarevskaia and T.Raitser, had their own small section at the exhibition entitled «Специфические узоры новых исканий», in response to the desire to create the new type of Soviet design. They were extremely aware of the political and ideological ramifications of textile design, and were actively involved in the artistic group OMAKhR, the Young People's Section of the Association of Artists of the Revolution. This group was a direct descendant of AKhR, whose artist members developed popular and proletarian themes in their paintings, but, as the name suggests, betrayed a divergance in beliefs and aims according to generation. The older artists were conservative, traditional Realists, following in the footsteps of the Peredvizhniki. The young generation of artists were fiercely ideological, loyal to the Party and the proletariat, and felt that their forebears were not fully committed to the new socialist, proletarian art, which, they believed, was the only appropriate art form in post-revolutionary Soviet Russia. Shortly to graduate and become full members of AKhR, their differences of opinion did not bode well for their integration into a cohesive, single group. Indeed the young designers soon tested their strength within AKhR, and, since they were adept at political in-fighting, (which was a habitual facet of inter-group squabbles during the late Twenties) they

gained the upper hand in their parent organisation.

The VKhUTEIN textile designers created their own division within OMAKhR, which supported the general line of a proletarian art adapted to the constraints of textile production. Therefore the designs displayed at the *Bytvoi sovetskii tekstil'* exhibition were examples of the thematic *agittekstil'*. These were based on their concept of promoting a proletarian art, an easily accessible, understandable, realistic art, which could depict the themes most relevant to the workers in their struggle for Socialism. In contrast to the Constructivists who pursued abstraction because of its classlessness the OMAKhR designers felt that a specifically proletarian art was necessary in the political climate of the time, to strengthen the "dictatorship of the proletariat" amid an atmosphere of "bourgeois wrecking" and "specialist baiting". As N.Poluketova wrote:-

"Текстильный рисунок всегда был орудием классовой агитации и классового господства."<sup>11</sup> Their intention was to make the textile print a powerful weapon of agitation and propaganda in the service of the Party. Therefore the themes used by these young designers reflected their desire to raise the political consciousness of the workers, and they chose such topics as industrialisation, Collectivisation, technology, aviation, electrification and symbols of Soviet power. They attempted to eradicate any notion of "bourgeois" content in their own designs, and castigated the Constructivists for their use of abstract, geometrical patterns because, they asserted, these had been inspired by artistic



developments (such as Cubism and Futurism) in capitalistic countries (France and Italy respectively), and as such should be rejected.

At the time of the exhibition thirty-five VKhUTEIN designers became members of AKhR and began to campaign through this organisation for the exclusive adoption of the *agittekstil'* by the textile industry. They conceived of the *agittekstil'* as a printed material similar to a poster or a painting. By establishing the connection with fine art and graphic design, the AKhR designers felt that they could therefore depict on textiles any subject that was suitable for artistic representation. This included the use of portraits of Party leaders, depictions of members of Komsomol and Pioneer organisations, Red Army soldiers and also ordinary workers and peasants. The figurative, representational aspect of these designs caused considerable opposition from the older generation of textile craftsmen, who were used to working with traditional patterns and motifs, as well as the first post-revolutionary generation of innovative designers, such as Stepanova (the youth of AKhR grouped them together simply as the "older" generation). Nevertheless, the fervour of the AKhR designers and their ability to manipulate skillfully their policy agenda so that its aims appeared to represent the Party line, enabled them to beat down their opponents and carry through their intention to produce politically conscious, figurative thematic prints, and to eradicate all other designs with what they classed as dubious political content.

On the initiative of the VKhUTEIN textile designers, a special Artistic Council was set up alongside an Operative-Artistic office within the All-Russian Textile Syndicate (VTS) in 1930. The members of these administrative bodies were almost entirely taken from the ranks of AKhR, and they adopted the role of censor, allowing only what they considered to be ideologically sound prints to go into production. They viewed their aims as:-

"«... изъятие классово чуждых, вредных и нейтральных рисунков и замену их новыми, социально действенными, классово направленными, агитирующими за нашу социалистическую стройку.»"<sup>12</sup>

In only four months the Operative-Artistic office had decided that of the 18,775 patterns it had reviewed, over 5,000 had to be destroyed. During the period of its activity over 24,000 prints were "removed" from the archives of the textile industry, and metallic printing rollers even had their embossed floral patterns ground down, so that such ideologically impure prints could never again be used. The main criticism voiced against these patterns was their floral basis - the AKhR view considered floral designs to be feudal in origin and therefore inappropriate to the new Soviet way of life.

These artistic purges naturally engendered great indignation among the factory designers and provoked their hostility to the figurative *agittekstil'*. They saw their own skillful, beautiful, aesthetically pleasing patterns being destroyed, whilst what they considered to be designs of low aesthetic quality, which in any

case were unsuitable for clothing, were being produced in their place. The Artistic Council did not vet the designs according to artistic merit or suitability for textile and clothing production, and this enabled patterns which were quite inappropriate for clothing to be produced on light fabrics, satin, voile, and chintz. Accomplished designers were aware of the vital connection from the pattern as they created it in two dimensions, to its future three-dimensional form, as well as to the means by which it would be produced,

"Наиболее одаренные мастера современную тему в текстильном рисунке всегда решали в соответствии со спецификой ткани и технологической стороной производства. Именно поэтому в лучших работах тех лет нет упрощенного, лобового решения задачи."<sup>13</sup> Thus although some of these patterns could appear quite tasteful on decorative fabrics for household or institutional use (furniture covers, curtains, etc.), they were distinctly unsuitable for dresses or other items of clothing, as D.Arkin points out:-

". . . текстильный рисунок ни в какой мере не согласовывается с формами обработки ткани в процессе пошивки."<sup>14</sup> Further critical comment came from Elena Eikhengol'ts, who explicitly cited AKhR as the harbinger of this erroneous approach: designing everyday textiles without due consideration of the way the material is produced and the future form of clothing for which it is intended. She believed it to be "methodologically incorrect" to use clothing materials for agitational ends, since it resulted in turning people into "walking posters".<sup>15</sup> The dynamic nature of the fabric's future form was disregarded and the thematic print was



instead generally conceived in terms of graphic art. This was inappropriate not only because of the three-dimensional aspect of clothing, as opposed to two-dimensional posters, but because the content and concepts of graphic and decorative art are not freely interchangeable:

"В платье такие [тематические] рисунки выглядели нелепо и смешно, не говоря уже о том, что использование изобразительных элементов на тканях для платья создавало трудности при раскрое."<sup>16</sup>

For example, a propaganda poster may relate to a particular aspect of Party policy, which may be subject to alteration (as many policies in those years were) or relegation in terms of its importance on the Party agenda. If this poster had been translated into a textile print it would only have a very short "shelf-life" and appear out-dated, even politically embarrassing, after a few months. Furthermore, a poster usually depicts a scene or a person on a large scale, so that it can be easily discerned from a distance, and expansive patterns are obviously unsuitable for garments such as blouses, skirts and dresses, due to their nature of construction:-

"The full-scale thematic design presupposes, as a rule, the human figure...*Such full-scale thematic design for clothing and dress fabric should be rejected.*"<sup>17</sup> Even if a clothing design was created to show the poster-print to its fullest effect, possibly as an inset panel on the front of a dress, the pattern would still become distorted immediately upon use. Nevertheless, exploiting their power-base within AKhR, the young designers continued to promote their concept of a proletarian, thematic *agittekstil'*,

despite growing opposition from industry and consumers alike.

The textile designers working in industry at this time were aware of the problems involved in the production of such *agittekstil'* fabrics, but found themselves in a precarious political position. AKhR appeared to have the support of the Party, and purported to produce the only true proletarian textile patterns. Therefore, to voice any opinions opposing those of AKhR seemed to imply a questioning of the Party line, which was tantamount to "oppositionism" or "deviationism". Especially at a time when technical and professional workers were prone to suspicion, (after the Shakhty Trial of 1928) the factory designers were in an unenviable position. They had been at the mercy of the administrative institutions of the textile industry (which were under the control of AKhR supporters) for some time, due to the proposition entailing the establishment of a central design studio under the aegis of the VTS. This would effectively close all the design studios within the industry and create a single studio with a unified artistic leadership, leaving only one or two designers in each factory to regulate the design according to the specifics of the particular factory's industrial production techniques. Thus, understandably aggrieved by the Artistic Council's attacks on their designs and their employment, the factory designers became reluctant to produce patterns only to have them rejected by the screening processes of the Artistic Council. This censorship decisively curtailed the industrial production of fabric, and by 1931 had contributed to a persistent shortage of material.



This situation swelled the growing surge of critical opinion against the thematic, figurative *agittekstil'*, which was further bolstered by consumer dissatisfaction with the printed material which was available. As Fedorov-Davydov pointed out:-

"It would be difficult to convince a healthy-minded person to agree to be the constant wearer of political caricatures and become the living weapon of agit-prop."<sup>18</sup> Consumer taste was still very much for floral patterns in the traditional mould, both in the city and the countryside. Some fabric prints show clear evidence of the distance of the designers' concepts from that of real life. For example, there is a print designed by Nazarevskaia (of AKhR), which depicts Red Army soldiers helping peasants to pick cotton in the fields. During an era of grain requisitioning, the mass deportation of kulaks and forced Collectivisation, this pattern may have appeared to the peasantry a cruel reflection of the differences between the propaganda of the Party and the harsh realities of their existence.

The multiple failings of the *agittekstil'* and the problems within the industry, which were compounded by AKhR's struggle for hegemony in the field of the arts, prompted the editorial board of the newspaper *Golos tekstilei* to call a conference entitled, "What Soviet Textile Design Should Be", in March 1931. It was hoped that this would put a halt on the destructive influence of the Artistic Council and that the specialists that would be grouped together under the auspices of the conference could agree on the type of design most suitable to Soviet life.

Despite the storm of criticism facing the young AKhR *agittekstil'* designers at the conference, they maintained their stance - fiercely devoted to the concept of proletarian art. They asserted the importance of figurative thematic prints in the face of the controversy that this type of pattern had aroused.

D.Arkin, the leading representative from the Academy of Sciences, gave the keynote speech at the conference, in which he particularly criticised the thematic print. Throughout the many debates the Artistic Council was severely reprimanded for its censorial activities, and specialists, such as Mayakovskaia and other skilled designers from the Red Rose Silk Factory, publicly protested against the type of representational techniques popularised by AKhR textile artists. The general consensus of opinion at the conference was that an emblematic print should be developed in the place of the figurative *agittekstil'*, using, for example, factory motifs, machinery and symbols of Soviet power. However, it was agreed, this type of design should be carefully produced, so that machinism and the motifs of technology would not become the new fetish of the textile industry, since any hint of a dictatorship of a style contravenes the egalitarian ideals of the proletariat. The closing document of the conference noted that the Artistic Council should be dissolved, but even despite this, its powers became yet more expansive. The threatened creation of Central Design Studios came into existence shortly after this: one in Moscow, one in Ivanovo, both completely subordinated to the Artistic Council within VTS.

However this final step, which AKhR designers believed would procure their total domination of the textile industry, and the annihilation of other styles of patterns, leaving only their figurative, thematic *agittekstil'* prints in production, was to prove disastrous. The establishment of the Central Design Studios provoked a flood of articles in the press in 1932, protesting against the poorly designed, anti-aesthetic, inappropriate patterns, which the Artistic Council of VTS persistently approved. This led to another conference, held in Orekhovo-Zuevo in September 1933, under the slogan, "Советская ткань должна быть самой лучшей в мире", which was called to consider ways to raise the quality of Soviet textile production. Immediately after this conference came the publication in *Pravda* of an article of great significance: "Спереди трактор, сзади комбайн", which was taken as an indication of the Party's position on the *agittekstil'*. Its author G.Ryklina proclaimed:-

"Всему свое место! Картина пусть висит в картинной галерее, пусть плакат мобилизует на решение актуальных хозяйственных задач, . . . а платье и костюм пусть остаются платьем и костюмом, нет никакой надобности превращать советского человека в передвижную картинную галерею."<sup>19</sup> AKhR designers understood from this that their claims of Party support for the figurative *agittekstil'* no longer had any grounds in reality, assuming there was actually some initial approval from certain Party members. The death knell of the *agittekstil'* was finally sounded by the Sovnarkom (Council of People's Commissars) Resolution, "О недопустимости выработки рядом предприятий тканей с плохими и неуместными рисунками",

published in *Izvestiia* on the 18th December 1933.

Just as the various artistic organisations had (before their dissolution by the 1932 Decree) interpreted Party policy during the 1920s, textile designers now took this Resolution, which was aimed at the most inappropriate and poorest quality patterns, as a blanket condemnation of the thematic print in general. Designers returned to nature, secure in the knowledge that prints derived from leaves and flowers were universally popular and could not be seen to have any particular capitalistic heritage. From this point onwards, until the mid-1950s, the thematic print disappeared from the presses, to be replaced by floral and vegetal ornamentation, similar to traditional Russian patterns.

Because the end of the most extreme phase of "cultural revolution", marked by Stalin's "Six Conditions" speech of 1931, had not had any repercussions in the textile industry, the Party eventually felt obliged to act decisively. AKhR supporters had not relaxed their vigilance for ideologically deviant designs, and designers had continued the campaign for "proletarian" patterns. Despite the fact that the organisation was disbanded in 1932, its members were still in various positions of power in regard to textile production and maintained the beliefs that had drawn them to AKhR in the first place. So, in order to diminish the influence of AKhR supporters in the textile industry, and in acknowledgement of widespread discontent with the industrial disruption caused by the Artistic Council, (a power-base of AKhR

supporters), in 1933 the Sovnarkom passed a Resolution to bring the hard-line dogmatists into line with the recently initiated "softer" cultural policy. The political and economic policies of the Second Five Year Plan required that consumer commodities should become widely available. The Party was obliged to ensure that the textile industry would not fall prey to production difficulties caused by arguments relating to stylistic questions. It thus became expedient to denigrate the young Marxist designers with innuendos about their "leftist" political manoeuvring and to appease the consumers with a return to the production of floral prints.

Flora and fauna became the order of the day. Designers were given the opportunity to travel around the countryside to study folk art and traditional national textile ornamentation, so that they could produce purely Russian designs. Using a constructivist idea (although this was not acknowledged as such), they attempted to rework artistically the floral and vegetal motifs so that the patterns corresponded with the type and texture of the material for which the design was intended:-

"В оформлении легких тканей майи, маркизета, вольты, . . . заметно стремление самим рисунком и колоритом подчеркнуть воздушность и мягкость материала."<sup>20</sup> Another example of constructivist influence transcending the existence of the movement, was the continued use of geometricised patterns. These were developed in the Thirties with a slightly different stylistic treatment and used as simple ornamentation. For instance, the



first fabric of the kind, called "The Milky Way", by M.Khvostenko, depicts large and small white circles, interspersed with red ones, scattered over a dark blue background, creating an effect truly reminiscent of the night sky.

True, certain pointedly anti-Constructivist techniques also became widespread in the 1930s: the tendency to create complex patterns and colourways; exaggerated decorativeness; and a superficial treatment of the fabric, which engendered a disjunction between the material and its pattern. These aspects of textile design form part of the general direction of architecture and fine art in the Thirties towards more decorative styles. This, in addition to the naturalistic folk art orientation of textiles, constitutes the antithesis of the Constructivists' theories and aspirations for the future course of textile design. Despite Constructivism's contribution to the creation of printed fabrics, designed with the type of cloth and its future function in mind, this practice was not endemic within the industry. At the end of the day the enforcement of the artistic style of Socialist Realism inspired a return to naturalistic, representative traditional floral patterns which no longer took any account of the Constructivist creed of tectonics, *faktura*, and construction. Hardly any designs were rationally constructed, devoid of standardised concepts of taste, or suitable to the new socialist way of life. Therefore the opportunity to mass-produce a new type of textile, revolutionise the industry and revitalise the design process was missed. This was not only

unfortunate for the Constructivists, but for the whole field of textile design. A lack of progress, innovation and change will cause any industry to stagnate, and at this point in time it appears that the textile industry was actually regressing, when Party propaganda maintained that the country was advancing towards Socialism at great speed.

## FASHION DESIGN, 1928-1934.

NEP had done little to change the structure of the sewing industry, and its goods were still of poor quality and in short supply. Furthermore, the problems that had dogged the industry since the Revolution, both in the design and construction of garments, had not been resolved. Levels of technology remained low, new machinery was scarce, as was skilled labour, and industrial productivity had only just outstripped pre-war percentages:-

"...осуществлять руководство промышленным производством одежды в тот период было невозможно из-за его технической и экономической неподготовленности, недостатка кадров художников и конструкторов одежды."<sup>21</sup> The possibility of creating good quality, well-designed clothing in factory conditions appeared extremely unlikely, despite attempts by Lamanova and the designers of *Atel'e moda*, as well as by the Constructivists, to rationalise dress design and construction. Throughout NEP they had persistently designed clothing with the specifics of industrial mass-production in mind. However their designs failed to find favour with the management of sewing factories, and instead fashion designers had to rely on *kustar* fabrics and production techniques to realise their designs, which were often made to individual order and for exhibitions, or else remained at the stage of experimental models for future reference:

"Противоречивость их деятельности заключилась в том, что, стремясь творить для широких масс, на деле они вынуждены были

осуществлять свои замыслы преимущественно в частных заказах. <sup>22</sup>

This situation could not be allowed to continue if the clothing production goals of the First Five Year Plan were to be met. Industrial mass-production of quality garments had to be achieved, and in addition the designs had to be derived from the notion of purely Soviet dress, as opposed to the commonplace reworking of Parisian patterns. The task facing the sewing industry was momentous. But large, new industrial plants were being constructed in Moscow, Kiev, Baku and other cities, creating the potential for increased productivity due to modern machinery and streamlined work methods. For the first time factory specialisation was adopted, and productivity was actually increased by 15-20%. The skilled labour shortage was also tackled with the opening of technical colleges especially for the sewing industry in Moscow and Leningrad, and the creation of practical teaching facilities within the industrial enterprises themselves. The technological mechanisation of the industry made the need for designers who had been trained expressly for the purpose of creating garments within the limitations of technical conditions even more acute. A further important step in the technological advancement of the industry was the opening of the Scientific-Research Institute of the Sewing Industry in 1930. This was soon reorganised into the All-Russian Laboratory of the Sewing Industry, which had a branch especially for clothes design. Thus educational and industrial measures were being taken to meet the production targets of the Five Year Plan. However, the question

of what the designers should actually design - the thorny problem of what constituted the new socialist or proletarian dress - remained unresolved.

Numerous press articles addressed this problem, and authors propounded their particular ideas on the development of fashion design, and what form of dress would be most appropriate for work and leisure. Various commentators discussed the relevance of textile design to the fashion industry, and the necessity of integrating these two aspects of a garment was put forward by D.Arkin and A.Fedorov-Davydov. Although they did not acknowledge any indebtedness to the Constructivists, it is clear that they were in fact following in the footsteps of Popova and Stepanova. Fedorov-Davydov's comments, for instance, expound a distinctly constructivist message:-

"Проблема текстиля станет частью проблемы художественного оформления костюма, как в отношении проектирования, так и в отношении процессов массового производства."<sup>23</sup> The idea that the designer should work within the constraints of mechanised production was strongly advocated, but no acknowledgement was made of the input of the Constructivists and Lamanova. By the end of the Twenties constructivist ideas had been revived as the new, politically acceptable design methodology for the production of socialist clothing. However, the Constructivists themselves were not involved, nor was their influence admitted by those who were propounding their ideas.

*IZOFRONT*, the collection of articles reviewing artistic life in Russia in 1928, contained an essay by Elena Eikhengol'ts about, "The Problems of Fashion Design". She noted that the industrial mass-production of clothing would entail certain characteristics because of the fact that it was designed for mechanised sewing production processes. For example, any empty decorative feature or detail which did not fulfil a function would naturally disappear since it complicated the production process unnecessarily. Further coincidences between Eikhengol'ts's article and constructivist theory in relation to fashion design are the ideas that the clothing must be suitable to climatic conditions, meet the biological and hygienic demands of the body, and allow full freedom of movement. An additional important aspect was the concurrence of aesthetic standards, as both recommend the rejection of the accepted ideals of beauty in the name of comfort and expediency, and assert that the correct aesthetic criterion for clothing is the maximal correspondance of the form to its function. Eikhengol'ts also supported the notion that clothing could have a positive educational effect and thus have great social value:-

"The new clothing must not passively reflect everyday life, but fulfil ITS social function: it must take active part in the organisation of everyday life."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Eikhengol'ts noted that standardised clothing for different needs would be useful for mass-production. She may have been familiar with research undertaken by NOT (the Central Labour Institute) which investigated the productivity of foreign (particularly American)

workers and ways in which productivity could be increased. It was agreed that workers' clothing could be responsible for decreasing levels of productivity if it was restrictive, climatically inappropriate or uncomfortable, and that the "boiler suit", already worn by workers before the Revolution in Britain and America, was an effective working garment and could raise production levels. Eikhengol'ts advocated a total design approach to the planning of the work dress, paralleling constructivist ideas on *prozodezhda*. She maintained that work clothing should be created on the basis of proper study of the relationship to the biological requirements, efficiency and productivity of the workers. Therefore Eikhengol'ts proposed a design methodology similar to that of the Constructivists, based on simplicity, rationality, functionality, hygiene, comfort and practicality. Fedorov-Davydov also extolled the virtues of *prozodezhda* as a means by which to raise productivity in order to meet the targets of the Five Year Plan, and in addition as a mark of the new collective basis of society:-

"*Prozodezhda* will undoubtedly develop hand-in-hand with collectivisation, with the elimination of individualism in everyday life and the individual forms of labour."<sup>25</sup> Fashion designers of the younger generation were keen to pursue the route of standardisation as a sign of the rationalisation of everyday life. Their desire was to create a complete set of clothes for a person as a standard unit of dress, beginning with underwear and finishing with the outermost layer of clothing (overcoat, jacket, etc.). This was to combat the present disunity of outfits, caused

by the combination of several separate layers of clothing which did not suit each other.

The need for a standardised system of design was acknowledged by everyone within the sewing industry. The idea of the standardised unit of dress was that, by using the same design methodology, other units could be created which could then be worn interchangeably with items from another standard unit, according to personal preference, but still retain a pleasing overall effect. This can be compared to the modern idea of the "total look", whereby a person can be clothed from head to toe by a single fashion house, even including accessories such as jewelry, handbags and shoes. Furthermore present-day designers create collections which are ideally suited to the "mix-and-match" phenomenon advocated at this stage in Russia. This idea was seen as desirable because it appeared to take into account the natural human desire for some personal differentiation in one's clothing, as well as maintaining high standards in the quality of garment design and improving the average worker's outward appearance. The political ramifications of this created some disagreement, which was focused on the collectivist ethos of Communism. On the one hand critics such as E.Armand supported the right of the individual to choose his or her own clothing (as long as this constituted socialist dress):

"The types of clothing devised will be as diverse as the activities of the citizens in a socialist country...Work clothes alone are not enough; there must also be professional clothes, and



clothes for relaxation should not all be the same...Just as the ultimate aim of socialism is not total depersonalisation, so, too, the objects of daily life, and above all, clothing, will not in the slightest degree lose their personality."<sup>26</sup> Whereas some extremist designers and critics felt that a uniform was preferable to merely standard garments, believing it to be a purer expression of classlessness and equality, and also of great economic benefit. The designs offered by these fervent Marxists were, however, of poor quality and thus went against the Party's policy of upgrading all items produced by light industry.

The question of quality was raised in the press by many critical articles in 1931, which in turn renewed the debate on the form of the new Soviet dress, since it was felt that it should be of the highest standard possible. The lack of educational facilities for clothes designers was remarked upon, as was the lack of a research institute to develop the artistic principles of fashion design and a consistent, rational method of quality control. The deficiency of an experimental-technical research centre was not officially met until 1934 with the founding of *Dom modelei*, but in the meantime provisional laboratories within various sewing trusts attempted to solve the most immediate problems. The need to raise standards within the industry was so acute that the Party passed the Resolution, "On the development of Soviet trade and the improvement of the provision (with goods) of the workers" in October 1931. One of the results of this was the exhibition "Contemporary dress of the masses", which opened in the

Historical Museum in Moscow in 1932. Various sewing enterprises exhibited their works, which were often characterised with serious design flaws:-

- i) lack of artistic and constructional principles - poor construction;
- ii) lack of artistic design resolution - poor aesthetics;
- iii) lack of knowledge of the properties of particular materials;
- iv) overlooking the qualities of a material and the special design requirements that would be entailed.

Fashion designers for mass-production were clearly not cooperating with the pattern-cutters and sewing workers in the factory, and, as yet, there was no sign of the majority of textile designers adapting their *agittekstil'* thematic prints to the needs of the sewing industry. Fashion design collectives within the factories were still dominated by applied artists who simply copied foreign designs from magazines and then made certain modifications to adapt them to the Russian market. The first graduates of VKhUTEIN had started to take up positions in industrial enterprises but their influence had yet to be felt. Dramatic reorganisation of the industry was still necessary to improve the quality and quantity of mass-produced clothing.

In the early 1930s the most noticeable facet of fashion design was the effect of "street-fashion". The urban population, possibly despairing of the production of high quality, fashionable garments, developed its own style by integrating elements of traditional Russian dress with new ideas picked up from film-stars

(usually foreign) in their latest movies. Popular garments were culottes, peaked caps, red kerchiefs, the Tolstovka, and plain trousers - simple, comfortable, practical, yet stylish. Street-fashion, in general, facilitated ease of movement and was often lightweight and hygienic, as the orientation towards sports and physical exercise in the culture of the Soviet Union achieved expression in clothing.

Comfort, hygiene and practicality were concepts that had been introduced into fashion design only relatively recently, since the First World War. The Twenties saw the female leg (from ankle to knee) emerge from the full length dress to be displayed under drop-waisted "Flapper" dresses, as well as the release of the torso from the constraint of the corset and other restrictive garments. These developments were international, created almost spontaneously as a response to the social changes inspired by the War and the evolving concepts of feminism and sexual equality. Indeed there is an international element to *prozodezhda*, since its design principles are not exclusive to the creation of Soviet working clothes, but can be applied to the production of workaday fashions in all industrialised countries.

Working clothes were the subject of attention in Britain, France and particularly in America, where denim fabric had been created in response to the specific working conditions of 'gold-rush miners and consequently adopted by cattlehands and ranchers. As the world's most advanced industrialised country, the U.S.A.

attracted much interest from Russia, especially in relation to the efficiency and productivity of workers. The theories of F.W.Taylor were well known, and had even been accepted by Lenin as a means to advance Russia's backward economy and devastated industry. The Director of the Central Labour Institute, Alexei Gastev, was an ardent devotee of Taylor and extended Taylor's principles to cover the whole of a worker's life. Thus Gastev became interested in all the aspects of everyday existence, including the question of practical, rational clothing. His quest for the ideal worker's dress centered around the practicalities of that clothing in the day to day life of a worker:-

- i) how quickly could the worker dress and undress?
- ii) how durable was the fabric?
- iii) how easily and quickly could it be cleaned?
- iv) how suitable was it to the function of the worker?
- v) was it comfortable and appropriate to the climatic conditions involved in that particular job?

But in addition Gastev was aware of the necessity of the mass-production of work clothing, and so considered the construction of the garments from the point of view of a designer:-

- i) was it rationally produced using the minimum of materials?
- ii) was it simply and clearly constructed (which would facilitate quick repair as necessary) ?
- iii) was the fabric suitable for its function?

Clearly these questions parallel the concerns of the Constructivists and Lamanova in their production drawings and models for mass-produced clothing. Yet despite the currency of

these ideas for a number of years, they were not applied in practice on the factory floor. Even by 1934 the difficulties facing the sewing industry in the mass-production of good quality clothing (both in terms of the garment produced and its theoretical design) had not been ameliorated to any significant extent, despite considerable, protracted efforts by designers and theoreticians with the encouragement of the Communist Party.

Some progress was made however in 1934 with the creation of the House of Clothing Design (*Dom modelei*) in Moscow, as a research centre into the design and construction of clothing for mass-production. Its first artistic director was N. Makarova, a former student of Lamanova's and a devoted follower of her design theories. Makarova's influence within the institute thus enabled Lamanova's principles on functional clothing to be adopted as standard design practice until around 1937. Further positive results within the industry were inspired by members of the *Dom modelei* quality control artistic committee. This body was made up of knowledgeable artistic commentators and practitioners, such as D. Arkin, V. Mukhina, V. Favorskii, and Yurii Pimenov, who discussed the aesthetic and practical merits of designs produced within the institute intended for mass-production. In addition *Dom modelei* had extensive control over the designs produced in industrial enterprises and was therefore able to exercise its set of quality standards on a broad basis.

Unfortunately, despite these measures, there appears to have

been only meagre improvement in both the quality and quantity of clothes available to the average consumer. Even though the first two Five Year Plans envisioned vast increases in production to supply ready-to-wear clothes for the newly collectivised peasantry, in real terms clothing, usually of a very poor standard, remained a scarce commodity:-

"Попутно, однако, обнаруживается, что целый ряд типов одежды, производимой государственной швейной промышленностью, не удовлетворяет потребностям коллективизирующейся деревни."<sup>27</sup>

From the early Thirties onwards, turning away from the international concept of *prozodezhda* and the modern fashions of America and Europe, Russian fashion design became quite introverted, seeking its inspiration from forms of national costume, using motifs from the folk dress of the Trans-Caucasus, the Ukraine and the peoples of the Northern regions. This can be seen as a result of the phase of "cultural revolution", which emphasised the threat of encirclement from hostile capitalistic countries and fostered the suspicion of anything foreign, whilst pursuing the notion of "socialism in one country" and the advance of the Soviet Union. The domination of national themes in dress also goes hand-in-hand with the final eradication of all that was classed as "bourgeois" influence in artistic life: notably of the heritage of Constructivism, LEF and Formalism. Thus fashion designers felt more than ever bound to national costumes and the traditional depiction of natural forms. Makarova was one such designer who used the images of nature, including birds and

animals, in her designs with genuine flair and enthusiasm. For example she created a skirt with a hemline derived from the shapes of petals, and often used the forms and colours of flowers to great effect in other garments.

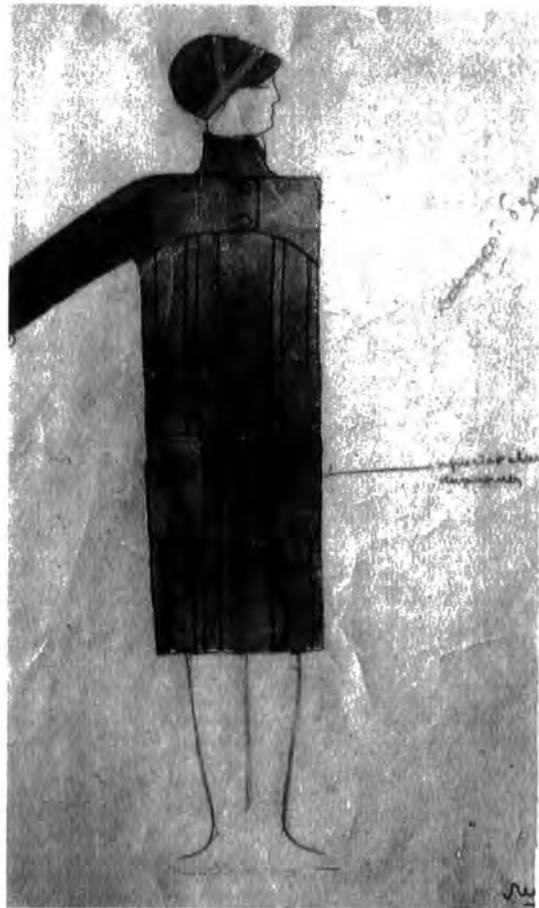
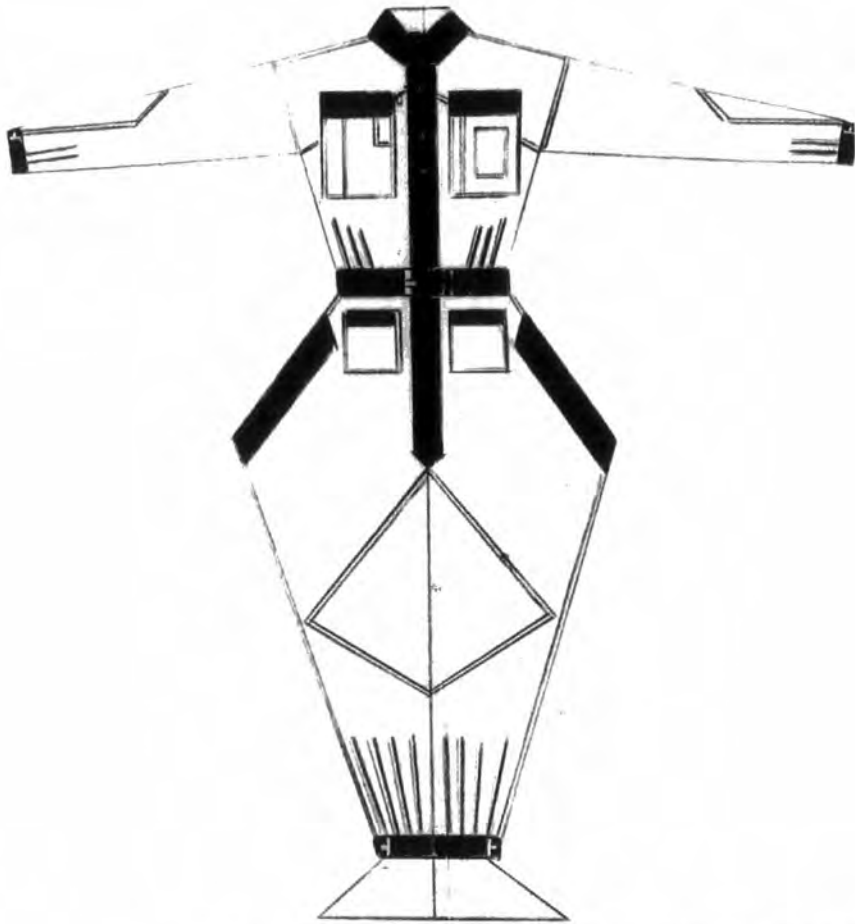
This tendency towards the use of natural forms and the imitation of certain types of national dress parallels the developments in the textile industry after the 1933 Sovnarkom Resolution and can similarly be taken as a result of political and socio-cultural influences. Since the textile and sewing industries are inextricably linked, it can be assumed that their artistic paths should, to a certain extent, run parallel or even converge. This is definitely the case in terms of their relationship to Constructivism. Both during the period when they were still advocating many aspects of design central to the Constructivist Programme, and in this new nationalist phase, both industries denied categorically any debt to the constructivist movement.

## THEATRICAL DESIGN, 1928-1934

The increasing pressure brought to bear on constructivist artists and all other artists outside the fold of the organisations which advocated an expressly "proletarian" art, made the continued use of Theatrical Constructivism as a viable production style virtually impossible. Constructivists found themselves in an untenable position, without the means and an appropriate arena for their art. However, despite various problems and the general atmosphere of hostility, Constructivism had not yet (1928) met its demise in the theatre. Rodchenko was the most active Constructivist in theatrical design in this last period before the style of Socialist Realism was adopted in all branches of the arts.

In 1928 Rodchenko worked on the set and costume designs for a constructivist production of the play Inga by A. Glebov. He designed new, comfortable, rational wooden furniture that could either have two uses or be easily stored away, taking up a minimum amount of space. These items of furniture had an obvious application in real life, since housing shortages meant that every square metre of living space had to be utilised as effectively as possible and each person tried to make the most of his meagre allocation of accommodation. The costumes Rodchenko created were strictly functional, but unusual, some with Cubist forms. They show formal elements which Rodchenko went on to develop in his costume designs for The Bedbug (1929), notably the crossover tiers





of material and the easy fastening button detail. The addition of flaps, buttons and turned under sections of fabric appears to have been popularised as a fashionable style. A coat illustrated in *Iskusstvo odevat'sia* (No.2, 1928), designed by Yakunina, is similar in spirit to Rodchenko's designs of the late Twenties, although the inclusion of so many pockets and buttons emphasises the stylisation of Rodchenko's constructivist work, since these somewhat superfluous details were included as decoration rather than to fulfil any particular function. The Inga costumes were in fact made up in a handicraft workshop headed by Lamanova, which constructed designs from orders by theatres and other state bodies.<sup>28</sup> The set and costumes attracted the attention of the audience and appeared as almost active characters in the play themselves. This can be seen as evidence of the Constructivists' premise<sup>29</sup> that the theatrical arena was a justifiable medium through which to educate the masses. The interest that the set and costumes inspired was certainly seen as a success by Rodchenko, and as a Constructivist he may have hoped that the audience would attempt to rationalise their environment along the lines he had shown in his designs for Inga. The Constructivists' theoretical aim to bring art into the lives of the masses was fulfilled in practice by this production. After the play finished its run the furniture was taken home by enterprising stage workers - so this set really did enter the lives and homes of the ordinary man!

Good quality Soviet plays were another scarce commodity in

the 1920s, and Meyerhold became extremely excited at the prospect of producing a politically "sound" play by Mayakovsky in the late Twenties - something Meyerhold had been encouraging Mayakovsky to write for some time. In late 1928 Mayakovsky completed The Bedbug and, acknowledging the Constructivist links with Mayakovsky's group LEF, Meyerhold decided to use Rodchenko as one of the designers for the set and costumes for the production. The play's action occurs in the then present day Soviet Union of 1929 for Part One, while Part Two's scenes take place fifty years in the future, 1979. The set, costumes and props for Part One were designed by the *Kukryniksy* cartoon group, who managed to buy everything in ordinary Moscow shops in order to show how ugly and pretentious current fashions were. Part Two had its settings and props designed by Rodchenko, who created a clean, utilitarian image of the socialist future. The costumes he designed were interesting and had innovatory elements in their forms, for example, quick and easy fastenings and, for the sake of practicality, a general reduction in the volume of clothing. The sketches for the costumes are based on geometrical shapes, most notably the rectangle and the semi-circle, to create simple, comfortable, economical and clearly constructed garments suitable for everyday life. Rodchenko devised a futuristic setting of bright metals, plastics, linoleum, and glass in streamlined, nonrepresentational forms. These objects, including sliding glass doors and a movie screen, were strobed with flashing lights as blaring public-address systems sounded out. The difference between the old and the new was stressed by giving a more or less

realistic treatment to the episodes relating to NEP, and a purely constructivistic treatment of those set in the future.

Criticism was also rife for Meyerhold's next production of another Mayakovsky play - The Bathhouse - some of which was published even before its first performance, as critics rushed to condemn the play's content on hearsay and rumours. The setting and staging were similar to Meyerhold's early forays into Theatrical Constructivism. Once again the stage was bare, the back wall and wings were in plain view and fitted out with a system of nonrepresentational steps and platforms zigzaging high across the stage. The set, designed by Vakhtangov, also included long banner-like strips with slogans printed on them, descending from the rafters in a montage-like style. The "good", true socialist characters in the play wore overalls, in *prozodezhda* spirit, and were constructing a time machine from neat, geometrical drawings. Conversely the "bad" characters, bureaucrats, who were victim to Mayakovsky's biting satire, were lumbering oafs, opposed to the modernity and technicism of the new machine age.

Rodchenko's work in the theatre in the 1930s stands in contrast to his earlier functional, rational, geometrical designs. In 1931 he designed the set and costumes for "Шестая мира", which demonstrates a compromise in his artistic beliefs. The costume sketches are treated in a completely different manner to his previous designs and show an indebtedness to folk art and national

costume in their colouration and style. This can be seen as his response to the critical atmosphere of the "cultural revolution", as his recent overtly constructivist work (in photography) had received widespread condemnation in the press.

Another artist who apparently felt obliged to alter his work due to the extra-artistic situation was Tatlin. Tatlin's work in the theatre after 1933 marks a turning point, and to some extent a compromise in his artistic orientation. In 1922 he had designed the set and costumes for Khlebnikov's play Zangezi in the spirit of corner counter-reliefs, typical of his early constructivist work. Returning to theatrical design in 1933 for Ostrovsky's play A Comic Actor of the Seventeenth Century, his artistic style seems greatly altered. The costume sketches show graceful silhouettes of girls wearing the *sarafan*,<sup>30</sup> drawn to emphasise the flowing line of the dress, but still carefully constructed. Tatlin appears to have attempted to comply with Party policy and turned away from the strict design methodology of Constructivism in this and further theatrical productions. It can thus be seen that Tatlin retreated to an arena in which he could make a connection between simple handiwork and art, whilst pursuing his beliefs on quality design in the best way possible at the time.

After the failure of Mayakovsky's last play, Meyerhold turned away from Theatrical Constructivism in favour of other production styles and techniques. The unceasing criticism of Constructivism for "formalism" and for lacking "Communist content"

must surely have contributed to this stylistic change of direction. Without a major constructivist director, let alone a theatrical company or a theatre devoted to the ethos of Constructivism, Theatrical Constructivism was bound to disappear from the stage in Russia eventually. This process was simply hurried along by external influences and exigencies, spurred on by the Proletarian art groups' desire for a readily comprehensible, traditional theatrical style and suitable repertoire.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For further detail on this concept see S.Fitzpatrick's article by the same name, "Cultural Revolution as Class War", Cultural Revolution in Russia 1928-1931, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> S.Fitzpatrick, *ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> S.Fitzpatrick, *ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>4</sup> VKhUTEIN - acronym for the Higher Artistic-Technical Institute.

<sup>5</sup> S.Fitzpatrick, *ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>6</sup> Brandon Taylor cites the first usage of the term in late 1932 in the second volume of Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks, 1924-1932, Pluto Press, London, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> T.Strizhenova and A.Alpatova, "Tekstil". Sovetskoe dekorativnoe iskusstvo 1917-1945. Ocherki khudozhestvennaia promyshlennost'. Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1984, p.139.

<sup>8</sup> Gosplan - the state economic body responsible for the Five Year Plans.

<sup>9</sup> A.Fedorov-Davydov, "Iskusstvo tekstita". IZOFRONT. Klassovaia bor'ba na fronte prostranstvennykh iskusstv. Sbornik statei ob'edineniia "Oktiabr", Moscow and Leningrad, 1931, Ed. P.Novitsky et al., p.89.

<sup>10</sup> Strizhenova and Alpatova, *op.cit.*, p.139.

<sup>11</sup> "Izobrazheniye i upravleniye proizvodstvom tekstila", Za promyshlennoye iskusstvo,  
No.7-8, 1932, p.25. Quoted in

T.Strizhenova and Alpatova, op.cit., p.140.

<sup>12</sup> N. Polukhetova "Bor'ba za sovetskii tekstil", Za proletarskoye iskusstvo,  
No.1, 1931, p.20. Quoted in T.Strizhenova, "Problemy tekstil'nogo  
promyshlennogo dizaina, 1928-1933", Sovetskoye dekorativnoye iskusstvo,  
Vol.8, Sovetskii khudozhnik, Moscow, 1986,  
p.239.

<sup>13</sup> Strizhenova and Alpatova, "Tekstil" op.cit., p.140.

<sup>14</sup> D.Arkin, "Iskusstvo veshchi", Szhegodnik literatury i iskusstva na 1929 god, Komakademii  
Moscow, 1929, p.450.

<sup>15</sup> E.Eikhengol'ts, "Problema massovoi odezhdi", IZOFRONT, op.cit.,  
pp.55-66, p.64.

<sup>16</sup> Strizhenova and Alpatova, op.cit., p.141.

<sup>17</sup> D.Arkin, "Risunok - neotemlemaia chast' kachestva tkani," Golos  
tekstilei, March 24, 1931, p.3. Quoted in C.Douglas, "Russian  
Fabric Design,1928-1932," The Great Utopia. The Russian and  
Soviet Avant-Garde,1915-1932, (exhib.cat.), Guggenheim Museum, New  
York, 1992, p.642.

<sup>18</sup> A.Fedorov-Davydov, "Iskusstvo tekstila", IZOFRONT, op.cit.,  
pp76-77.

<sup>19</sup> Pravda, 6 October, 1933. Quoted in Strizhenova and Alpatova,  
op.cit., p.142.

<sup>20</sup> Strizhenova and Alpatova, op.cit., p.143.



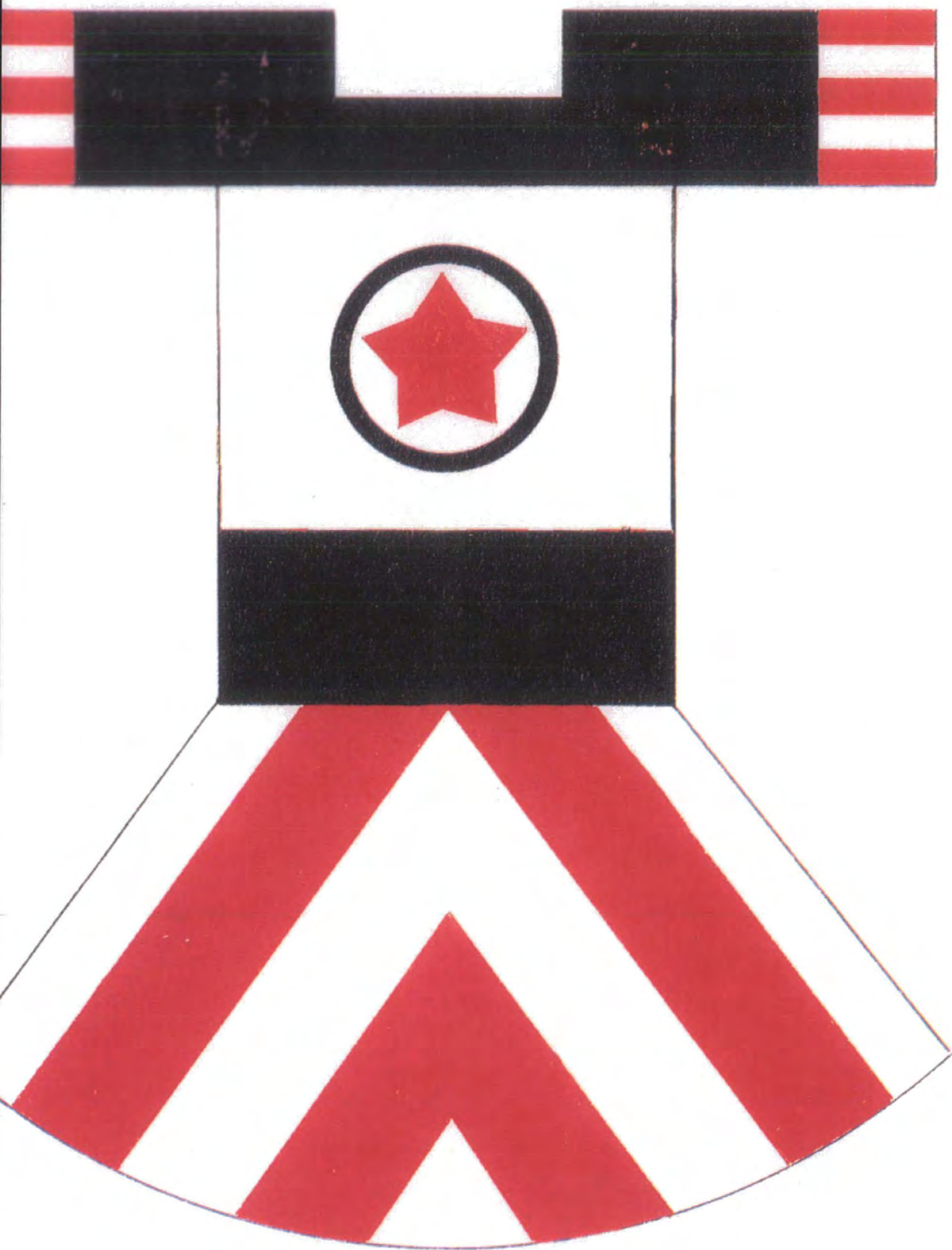
- <sup>21</sup> T.Strizhenova, "Искусство текстиля в СССР, 1917-1945", op.cit., p.150.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.150.
- <sup>23</sup> A.Fedorov-Davydov, "Искусство текстиля" IZOFRONT, op.cit., p.90.
- <sup>24</sup> E.Eikhengol'ts, op.cit., p.64.
- <sup>25</sup> A.Fedorov-Davydov, Russkoe i sovetskoe iskusstvo. Stati i ocherki, Moscow, Iskusstvo, 1975, p.138. Quoted in T.Strizhenova, "The Soviet Garment Industry in the 1930s", The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, No.5, Summer, 1987, p.157.
- <sup>26</sup> E.Armand, "Odezhda budushchego". Shveinaia promyshlennost', Moscow, 1931, no.12, pp.10-11.
- <sup>27</sup> D.Arkin, Искусство бытового текстиля. Задачи и творческие аспекты. Творчество одежды pp.151-160, Moscow-Leningrad, 1932, p.160.
- <sup>28</sup> From 1932 Lamanova worked as a consultant and constructor at the Art Theatre and was also active in cinematography, making the costumes for The Generation of Winners, The Circus, The Inspector General, and Alexander Nevsky.
- <sup>29</sup> This was not an original idea of the Constructivists, but had been important since the days of Mamontov, Stanislavsky, Mir iskusstva and the synaesthesia of Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk*.
- <sup>30</sup> An item of national costume - a long, flowing dress.

## CONCLUSION

The work of the Constructivists, although not necessarily revolutionary in all its aspects, constituted a revolution in art parallel to, but in no way subservient to (or engendered by), the political Revolution. This parallel effect mirrored the iconoclastic change realised in the government of a vast country, and represented the Constructivists desire to achieve an art form which would be suited to the new bases of society. It is precisely because the Constructivists developed their ideals through a period of radical experimentation, and not by means of Party guidance, that they suffered at the end of the 1920s as the new ideologues of art began to speak for the Party. The insurgence of politics into art was inevitable because the Revolution extended its influence into all spheres of life. Yet the responsibility for the dissipation of innovatory art groups in the late Twenties does not lie exclusively with the Party leaders. They may have passed the Decree dissolving all art groups in 1932, but this occurred ostensibly as a result of the chaos engendered by the politically oriented inter-group power games, which were proving damaging to the art world, as well as constituting a rival force to the authority of the Party in cultural matters. Theorists, critics and ideologues, claiming to have the right to interpret Party policy on the arts, created insurmountable difficulties for the artists and artistic styles of which they

disapproved. It was grass roots support for such vilifying denigration of the "avant-garde" that hastened its demise.

If Constructivism really had been the art of the proletariat, meeting the needs of the new society and playing a vital cultural role, then surely it would have had popular support. Without a wide "consumer-base" it was inevitably doomed. The Party may have developed different views on "leftist" art if its supporters - the working class - had expressed a keen interest in it. However, as so many critics were happy to point out, the average worker was not equipped with an adequate education and enough cultural knowledge to appreciate "modern art". To him it was "incomprehensible", and merely underlined the class difference between an artist and the ordinary working man. No matter that the artist was attempting to educate the worker, improve his environment and his lifestyle and create a new socialist culture. The average worker enjoyed simple, representative art that was readily understandable, such as the greatly popular paintings of the old Peredvizhniki and traditional folk art. The Party may have thought that adopting the style of Socialist Realism would ensure the production of works of art which everyone could enjoy. This effectively brought the artist out of his "ivory tower" and into the real world of the worker, because only by an active involvement with the working class could he fully appreciate the tastes of his audience and consequently produce works which would be inspirational to them and pleasing to the Party. Only by the creation of "politically correct" works of art could an artist



hope to survive and prosper in post-"Revolutionary" Russia.

The fact that many constructivist designs do not look out of place today points to the fact that the Constructivists were ahead of their time, and also that they understood the ideas involved in the modern concept of classic design. They posited ideas on the field of design which still have resonance today. In fashion and textile design, the theorems of Lamanova and the Constructivists are widely acknowledged and form the basis of the education of budding designers - although these ideas are not accredited to either Lamanova or the Constructivists, but are accepted as common knowledge. Furthermore, the top fashion houses now include a ready-to-wear section in their seasonal collections - an indication of the need for designers to translate their concepts into mass-production - a primary concern of the Constructivists.

Another aspect of contemporary fashion which constructivist designers anticipated is the use of sports clothing for leisure-wear. Modern fabrics, such as lycra, facilitate the production of expedient, comfortable, practical, washable, economical garments, which are mass-produced and widely available. Nowadays the track-suit is generally accepted as an item of casual wear for a broad spectrum of activities, and is more often seen out of the sporting arena. *Sportodezhda* is a youth "street" fashion, but its advantages are evident to people of all ages. The "fashion" element is perhaps typically "bourgeois": teenagers buy their sports clothing according to the reputation of the producer - for

the brand name emblazoned on the front (or back) for all to see - rather than the more practical considerations, and in addition there is the "snob factor", which entices people to buy the more expensive, exclusive lines of clothing. Thus although the Constructivists advanced the idea of sports clothing as general leisurewear, the principles by which they hoped to produce and market these garments have been left by the wayside - out of place in today's capitalistic, consumer-oriented fashion industry.

Although the concept of working clothing was not originated by the Constructivists, it is certain that their particular contribution to *prozodezhda* was innovative and valuable. *Prozodezhda* can be said to be alive and well today in the guise of clothing made out of denim. Denim jeans are by far the most popular item of clothing in the modern world, and they are historically the basic item of "work clothing". First produced in California in the 1850s, by Levi Strauss, as practical, hard-wearing trousers for the gold-rush miners of San Francisco. The first pair of Levi's jeans - known as "waist overalls" - was fashioned from heavyweight brown canvas-like material, but jeans were soon to be made from a sturdier fabric that had originated in France: serge de Nimes, or denim, for short, that was made in the Amoskeag Mill in New Hampshire. Comfortable, fashionable, hard-wearing, washable, practical, widely available, affordable, economical - jeans can be found in almost everyone's wardrobe. The fact that the Constructivists did not emphasise the use of denim in their designs suggests that this French fabric had not made its way into

Russia - or if it had it was not produced by the major textile mills to any great extent. The most suitable fabric and garment for a worker in the "Workers' State" did not materialise.

Jeans are such a common garment, particularly for the under 30s, that some liken them to a 'uniform for the young'. It would indeed be a major step forward for school uniforms to be designed with denim as the favoured textile for trousers, skirts, shirts and jackets. Schoolchildren would be delighted with this fashionable innovation, as would practical parents, who would face reduced uniform costs, and also be pleased by the material's ability to wash and wear.

Uniforms in general do not catch the imagination of contemporary designers. Industrial clothing remains at the level of unprepossessing overalls, and the design of specialised work clothing has hardly changed despite innovations in the quality and range of textiles available to improve the practical and safety aspects of the garments. This sense of inertia may have occurred due to a feeling of traditional values and the prospect of 'unnecessary' expense. Nonetheless, uniforms have been used by large firms in pursuit of a corporate image - for example, bank clerks, office workers and shop assistants have had their clothing revamped and restyled by some leading designers in the last few years. However, the main problem with these designs is that they were not produced with the worker in mind. The average person does not have a model-like body, yet designers seem to insist on

producing clothing that suits a size 10 catwalk model. In addition, the fabrics chosen are often synthetic - lacking the hygienic and climatic comfort of natural materials - and tend to crease easily - appearing to lose the smart edge so desired by the firm quite quickly. Despite the level of discomfort incurred by the shirt and tie and the suit (for men and women), they are still, albeit decreasingly, demanded by the business community worldwide. On the eve of a new millenium such conservative traditionalism seems somewhat misplaced. Let us hope that the year 2000 will see the principles of practicality, rationality, comfort, expediency, functionality and economy actually adapted to the design of all clothing.

The sense that Constructivism was not suited to the very situation from which it emerged is quite ironic. The First Working Group of Constructivists deliberately chose their agenda and worked out their Programme according to the specifics of their political, social, cultural and economic environment as they saw it at the time. Yet, for all its claims to be exclusively appropriate to the new socialist society, it was more popular abroad, particularly so in France. Indeed, Constructivism lived on in a mutated European form, and the designs for fashion, textile and theatre were greeted with far greater enthusiasm in Europe than they were in the Soviet Union. It is ironic that the movement could probably have extended its influence and its life far beyond the limits it reached in Russia had it originated in, for example, France. Was Constructivism therefore a "bourgeois"



art? Perhaps only in the narrow Soviet use of this word - it was created by artists who were not proletarian by birth and who had experienced the benefit of an international education. This, however, does not mean that constructivist art cannot be appreciated by the working class. Most constructivist/productivist work was inspired for the workers, for mass-production, and artists attempted to produce works which were exclusively adapted to socialist society. Avant-garde art was condemned as incomprehensible, tasteless, Futurist rubbish even before the constructivist movement began, and it was perhaps the hostility that constructivist works evoked which caused it to be refuted and criticised.

Possibly feeling that they were lacking in culture, certain members of the new Soviet intelligentsia (advanced from the ranks of the urban proletariat and the peasantry) campaigned against anything that could bring their lack of education or culture on artistic matters into the limelight. By castigating all artistic styles and subjects which were not easily comprehensible to the average worker, supposedly in deference to the proletariat, the critic neatly casts doubt on the political suitability of the style, whilst negating the necessity of commenting on the work from the point of view of artistic merit. There seems to have been vast collusion along these lines amongst many lowly Party officials and members, all desirous of following Party policy and receiving promotion for services rendered. In their turn most workers would want to agree with their immediate superiors as well

as with their peers in any discussion on the subject of avant-garde art. It can hardly be surprising therefore that at the end of the day any experimentation in the arts was judged to be reprehensible.

Whether or not the Party intended that its decisive action in 1932 to dissolve all artistic groups should culminate in the adoption of a single, officially approved artistic credo is a contentious issue. However, the idea of creating a single artistic body (a Union) surely implies the inauguration of a set of rules for all members to uphold, and thus the possibility of positing restrictions on style or content must have been considered. The delay in the adoption of the style of Socialist Realism may only have occurred due to the fact that the Party had not decided on what exactly was to constitute Soviet art until 1934, when the guidelines were given to the Writers Union by Andrei Zhdanov:-

"Socialist Realism,...demands from the writer an authentic, historically specific depiction of reality in its revolutionary development. This authenticity and historical specificity in the depiction of reality should be combined with the task of ideologically reshaping and educating the toilers in the spirit of socialism."<sup>1</sup> Those artists who wished to survive (both materially and physically) felt obliged to follow the creed of *идейность*, *партийность*, and *народность*: producing art which was ideologically correct, politically 'sound', supportive of the Party and its policies, and intended specifically for the ordinary working man.

These three factors were the basis of the official style of Socialist Realism - although the 'realism' at times was hardly true to life. Depicting life in its "Revolutionary development" often involved presenting an ideal representation of life which was actually a grotesque parody of life in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. The disparity between the real and the ideal image of life was matched by the failings of Constructivists to translate their theories into practical results. Even some of the most memorable, realised constructivist works, such as Aelita and The Bedbug, were set in the future. Certainly the movement did not belong in the present and it is therefore understandable that constructivist designs appeared far more acceptable in a futuristic environment. Brandon Taylor points to the idealistic nature of Constructivism, acknowledging that it had no place in the real world of 1920s Russia:

"...it [Constructivism] personified the gap between theory and practice that became visible within Bolshevik culture in such a multitude of other ways".<sup>2</sup>

The heady days of experimentation, innovation and freedom inspired by the Revolution drew decisively to a close. Constructivism was no more, and it cannot be revived. It belongs to an era of idealism, to 1920s Soviet Russia. It was an art created in the name of Communism - which disavowed it - for the workers - which the workers did not want. Nevertheless, Constructivism remains the most innovative, inspirational, productive movement of the post-Revolutionary years.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> G.Hosking, Beyond Socialist Realism, Granada Publishing in Paul Elek Ltd., London, Toronto, Sydney, New York, 1980, p.3. This description, derived directly from A.Zhdanov's speech at the First Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union in 1934, is found in Ruskaia sovetskaia literatura, Uchpedgiz, Moscow, 1963, pp.315-316.

<sup>2</sup> Brandon Taylor, Art and Literature under the Bolsheviks. Volume 1: The Crisis of Renewal 1917-1924, Pluto Press, London, 1991, p.126.

## BREIF BIOGRAPHIES

### ALEXANDRA ALEXANDROVNA EXTER (1882-1949)

Alexandra Exter was born in Belestok, near Kiev, in 1882, and graduated from the Kiev Art School in 1906. She travelled widely in Europe and became acquainted with many famous artists, such as Picasso, Braque, Marinetti and Apollinaire, thus acquiring the most up-to-date knowledge available on Cubism and Futurism, which was reflected in her work at this time. From 1914 onwards Exter remained in Russia, exhibiting at various avant-garde exhibitions, including Tramway V (Petrograd, March 1915) and The Store (Moscow, spring 1916). She began work in Theatrical Design (both stage and costume) for Tairov's *Kamerny Theatre* in Moscow in 1916, thus initiating a working relationship which was to last, intermittently, until her emigration in 1924. Exter continued to paint as well as pursue a number of other activities, such as teaching at her own studio in Kiev, (from 1918-1921) and at the VKhUTEMAS (1921-1922), involving herself in the decoration of agit-trains and ships and the decoration of Kiev for the May Day celebrations of 1918 and for the first anniversary of the Revolution, and beginning extensive work in the fashion industry in the early Twenties. 1921 was the year in which Exter became widely associated with Constructivism after contributing to the 5x5=25 Exhibition. In 1923 she designed (along with Nivinskii) the decorations for the pavilions at the All Russian Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow, and also in this year began work on the set and costumes for the film *Aelita*. Exter emigrated in 1924 and, after settling in Paris, continued to teach and maintained her numerous interests, particularly those relating to the theatre.

### NADEZHDA PETROVNA LAMANOVA (1861-1941)

Nadezhda Lamanova was born near Moscow into a military family. Her early years were quite difficult materially, as she had to work to support her younger sisters after the death of her parents. She spent two years studying in the famous school of the seamstress O.A.Suvorova in Moscow, and then went to work in the fashion studio of Voitkevich. Lamanova had a natural talent for creating garments. She mastered all the sewing and constructing techniques quite brilliantly, and opened her own fashion studio in 1885. She became well-known at Court and was couturier to many nobles and aristocrats. Despite her Tsarist connections, Lamanova devoted herself to the new Soviet State after the Revolution. She worked for IZO Narkompros and directed the Workshops of Contemporary Dress, which had been inaugurated at her suggestion under the aegis of Narkompros. Lamanova became a member of the clothing section of the State Academy of Artistic Sciences from the date of its foundation, and in 1925 began to work in *Kusteksport*, the exporting section of *Vsekpromsoiuz* (an umbrella organisation for co-operative enterprises usually *kustar* in

origin), creating garments for international exhibitions. Lamanova's designs were awarded numerous prizes, most notably the Grand Prix at the International Exhibition in Paris in 1925. As well as designing clothing for everyday wear, Lamanova created costumes for theatrical productions. She began working in the theatrical costume workshop of MKhAT in 1901 and continued to do so until her death, producing designs for such plays as The Cherry Orchard, The Marriage of Figaro, Anna Karenina, and Dead Souls. She also worked on productions such as Princess Turandot, Hamlet, and Egor Bulichov at the Vakhtangov Theatre and completed costumes for other theatres: the Red Army Theatre and the Theatre of the Revolution. Lamanova pursued many aspects of fashion design, and particularly became interested in producing a theoretical programme for the instruction of Soviet fashion design. Her press articles in *Atel'e* and *Krasnaia niva* attest to her desire to propagate her ideas to the widest audience possible. The theoretical position of Lamanova was very close to that of the Constructivists and she was interested in the same ideas of simplicity, economy of form, construction and material, durability, practicality and functionality. Lamanova was a multi-talented designer and her theoretical work still retains its value to this day - as Stanislavsky wrote, "Lamanova is a great artist".

## LIUBOV' SERGEEVNA POPOVA (1889-1924)

Liubov' Popova was born near Moscow in 1889 into a wealthy family. This privileged background enabled her to travel quite extensively in pursuit of her artistic education, making many trips to ancient Russian cities in the late 1900s, then travelling to Italy and Paris in the early 1910s. Popova contributed to numerous exhibitions in the 1910s, including *Tramway V* and *The Store*, and her work displayed the varied influences of the artistic movements to which she had been attracted both in Russia and abroad. Closely associated with Malevich's Suprematist group for some time (despite her close involvement with Tatlin in 1912 and 1913 at the Tower studio in Moscow), Popova was nevertheless drawn to accept the credo of Constructivism and the theory of Productivism as the means by which to express it. After exhibiting at 5x5=25, Popova rejected easel painting and chose to be active as an 'engineer-constructor' in theatrical, fashion and textile design, as well as turning her hand to ceramics and book design. Her time at the First State Textile Print Factory (c.1923-1924) proved very productive, and also at this time was involved with the journal *LEF* and its founding group. Unfortunately Popova's life drew to an untimely close, as she suffered the death of her child from scarlet fever, and then contracted it herself, dying in the early spring of 1924.

<sup>1</sup> K.Stanislavsky, Collected Essays, Vol.8, Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1961, pp.136-37, quoted in T.Strizhenova, Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiuma, Sovetskii Khudozhnik, Moscow, 1972, p.36.

## ALEKSANDR MIKHAILOVICH RODCHENKO (1891-1956)

Aleksandr Rodchenko was born in St.Petersburg, but was educated in Kazan', where he attended Art School (and met Varvara Stepanova whom he would later marry). He moved to Moscow after graduation and briefly studied at the Stroganov Institute of Applied Art. The 1910s saw Rodchenko grow increasingly interested in Futurism and Cubism and he became acquainted with the Moscow avant-garde, including Tatlin, Popova and Malevich. After the Revolution Rodchenko pursued many activities: in 1918 he joined Narkompros, becoming particularly involved with the Museums Office and the Subsection of Art and Production; from 1919 he was a member of Zhivskul'ptarkh; in 1920 he was one of the original members of INKhUK and was co-founder of the First Working Group of Constructivists in 1921; he taught in the VKhUTEMAS; he designed posters and photomontages (working with Mayakovsky) as well as fashion, textile and theatrical designs, but became increasingly involved with photography, typography and graphic design in the late Twenties and Thirties. Rodchenko had taken part in exhibitions whilst still at Art School, and had continued to display his works after moving to Moscow, contributing to the Fourth Contemporary Painting Exhibition (Moscow, 1916), The Store, the Third OBMOKhU exhibition, and  $5 \times 5 = 25$ . In 1925 Rodchenko designed the interior and furniture for the Workers' Club at the International Paris Exhibition, which popularised the notion of Constructivism in Europe. During the late Twenties Rodchenko's strict adherence to constructivist principles began to wane, and his multi-faceted designing abilities became constricted to a more narrow vein. However he remained an extremely notable photographer and designer until his death in 1956.

## VARVARA FEDOROVNA STEPANOVA (1894-1958)

Varvara Stepanova was born in Kovno, Lithuania, and attended the Art School in Kazan' (c.1910), where she met Aleksandr Rodchenko (her future husband). In 1912 she moved to Moscow to continue her artistic education and studied at the Stroganov Institute of Applied Art (1913-1914). Stepanova pursued various artistic activities, including book and graphic design and painting, as well as her most notable work in theatrical, textile and fashion design. She worked alongside Popova at the First State Textile Print Factory, and attacked the challenge to produce workers' clothing enthusiastically, both theoretically by means of her press articles, and practically, through her actual designs. Stepanova was a co-founder of the original Constructivist group at INKhUK, and was strongly associated with LEF in the early 1920s. She also disseminated her constructivist principles whilst teaching at the VKhUTEMAS in the Textiles Faculty. However, the late 1920s saw the waning of the constructivist spirit, and Stepanova ceased much of her innovative constructivist design projects. Turning her attention primarily to typography and graphic design, Stepanova continued to work in these fields until her death in 1958.

## VLADIMIR EVGRAFOVICH TATLIN (1885-1953)

Vladimir Tatlin was born in Moscow, grew up in the Ukraine, but began his artistic training in Moscow at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, (1902-1904), and then went on to the Penza Art School, from which he graduated in 1910. His education was interrupted by various trips abroad as a sailor, which had some effect on his future artistic inclinations. Tatlin was associated with the Russian Avant-garde and contributed to many Union of Youth exhibitions, as well as those of the Knave of Diamonds and the World of Art in the early 1910s. In 1913 he visited Berlin and Paris, where he met Picasso and acquainted himself with the most recent trends in European modern art. In 1915 Tatlin began to produce 'corner counter reliefs', which he exhibited at O.10 (Petrograd, January 1916) and The Store, and it is from this time that his work develops a constructivist orientation, despite the fact that the theory of Constructivism had not been formulated at that point. After the Revolution Tatlin pursued multifarious activities in order to bring 'Art into Life!': he worked for IZO Narkompros; taught in the State Free Art Studios in Petrograd; was active in the Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture; set up the Petrograd GINKhUK, within which he organised his own Department of Material Culture, and began work on workers' clothing as an integral part of his conception of 'material culture'. From 1925 to 1927 Tatlin worked in Kiev at the Art School, and then at the VKhUTEIN in Moscow. Although never a member of the Constructivist group, he was widely acknowledged as the 'Father of Constructivism', and his work appears devoted to those very same principles which motivated the design work of the Constructivists. Tatlin was active in theatrical design as well as furniture and ceramic design - in fact Tatlin was involved in many design fields, and even worked on the production of an economical oven. However, in the Thirties Tatlin's artistic style seems to have been tempered by the political demands of the age, as he returned to figurative painting and producing more conventional costumes for classic plays. He died in 1953 from food poisoning.



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## GLOSSARY OF COMMON ABBREVIATIONS

AKhR	Association of Artists of the Revolution ( <i>Assotsiatsiia khudozhnikov revoliutii</i> ).
Dermetfak	Wood and Metalwork faculty at the Moscow VKhUTEMAS ( <i>Derevo i matelloobrabatyvaiushchii fakul'tet</i> ).
INKhUK	Institute of Artistic Culture ( <i>Institut khudozhestvennoi kultury</i> ).
IZO	Art Department ( <i>Otdel izobrazitelnykh iskusstv</i> ).
IZOGIZ	State Publishers for Art ( <i>Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo izobrazitelnykh iskusstv</i> ).
Komintern (Comintern)	Communist International ( <i>Kommunisticheskii internatsional</i> ).
Komsomol	Communist Youth Organisation ( <i>Kommunisticheskii soiuz molodezhi</i> ).
LEF	Left Front of the Arts ( <i>Levyi front iskusstv</i> ).
Narkompros	People's Commissariat of Enlightenment ( <i>Narodnyi kommissariat proveshcheniia</i> ).
NEP	New Economic Policy ( <i>Novaia ekonomicheskaiia politika</i> ).
NOT	Central Labour Institute ( <i>Nauchnaia organizatsiia truda</i> ).
Novy LEF	New Left Front of the Arts ( <i>Novyi levyi front iskusstv</i> ).
Oktiabr'	October Group.
OMAKhR	Youth Organisation of AKhR ( <i>Otdelenie molodezhi assotsiatsii khudozhnikov revoliutsii</i> ).
Peredvizhniki	Association for Travelling Art Exhibitions.
Proletkul't	Proletarian Culture ( <i>Proletarskaia kul'tura</i> ).
RAPP	Russian Association of Proletarian Writers ( <i>Rossiiskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei</i> ).
Sovnarkom	Council of People's Commissars ( <i>Sovet narodnykh kommissarov</i> ).
SVOMAS	(State) Free Art Studios ( <i>Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskie</i> ).
VKhUTEIN	Higher State and Technical Institute ( <i>Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhniccheskie institut</i> ).
VKhUTEMAS	Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops ( <i>Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhniccheskie masterskie</i> ).
VKP(b)	All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) ( <i>Vserossiiskaia kommunisticheskaiia partiia [Bolshevikov]</i> ).
VSNKh	Supreme Council of the National Economy ( <i>Vserossiiskii sovet narodnogo khoziaistva</i> ).
VTS	All-Russian Textile Syndicate ( <i>Vse-rossiiskii tekstil'nyi syndikat</i> ).

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. This photograph of the 5th Party Conference in 1918 shows some Party delegates dressed in pre-revolutionary "bourgeois" garments, vestiges of their class origins.
2. Designs for a woman's suit by Stepanova, 1924, (reconstructed by E.Khudiakova).
3. Rodchenko wearing the "worksuit" he designed in 1922 (reputedly made up for him by Stepanova), and an example of the graphic design work he also undertook in the 1920s.
4. *Sportodezhda* by Stepanova, 1924.
5. *Sportodezhda* by Stepanova, 1924.
6. Dress designs by Popova, 1923, using specifically created to utilise her textile prints, (reconstructed by E.Khudiakova).
7. Tatlin's designs for a new type of everyday clothing, inspired from his ideas of *material'naia kul'tura* (Constructivism).
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9. Sketches of clothes which could be mass-produced on a factory conveyor belt, designed by Exter, printed in *Atelier*, 1923.
10. A pattern for textiles by Rodchenko, 1922.
11. A textile print by Stepanova, 1924.
12. Simple geometric textile designs, by Popova, 1923.
13. Fashion and textile designs by Popova, 1923.
14. Lamanova's folk-inspired dress designs; the dress on the left won a Grand Prix at the 1925 Paris Exhibition.
15. Two air-brushed velvet designs (developed from shells and rosebuds) by L.Mayakovskaia, dated before 1927.



16. Rodchenko designed this geometric textile print in 1924 - a remarkable anticipation of computer graphics.
17. *Prozodezhda* for Actor No.3 in the play The Magnanimous Cuckold, designed by Popova, 1921.
18. A maquette of the stage design for The Magnanimous Cuckold, designed by Popova.
19. A scene from the production of The Magnanimous Cuckold showing the costumes and set designs of Popova.
20. *Prozodezhda* for Actor No.7 in the play The Magnanimous Cuckold, designed by Popova, 1921.
21. Examples of Biomechanical exercises showing the strength and gymnastic ability Meyerhold demanded from his actors.
22. and 23. Scenes from The Death of Tarelkin showing the "acting instruments" and the costumes designed by Stepanova.
24. A still from the film Aelita, showing Aelita's servant's costume, designed by Exter, 1924.
25. A maquette for the proposed theatrical spectacle I Want a Child, by Tretyakov, designed by El Lissitzky.
26. A cotton print by L.Raitser, "Mechanisation of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army", 1933 - this was the swansong of the *agittekstil'*.
27. An example of an *agittekstil'* textile print by M.Nazarevskaya, "Red Army Soldiers Help with the Cotton Harvest", 1932.
28. A design variation on Rodchenko's "worksuit", and costume designs for Inga, also by Rodchenko.
29. A final example of constructivist *sportodezhda* to contrast with modern sportswear.

