

Visions from Ukraine

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Discover the revolutions and experimentation that shaped 20th century Ukrainian art.

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There can be few more extreme examples of the difference between lives embodied in a handful of glorious moments and lives represented by their whole arcs, from beginning to end, than the lives of modernists in Ukraine during the 1920s. The breakout of these exuberant, hyper-energetic artists in Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odesa amid the fevered optimism of socialist Ukraine, the explosions of colour and movement and abstract forms they made on canvas, on posters, on stage, in décor and fabrics, in literature, dazzles like a celebration of victory – and so it was. But victory is never the end, and what was to follow was defeat, and attempted extermination.

Is the life of Alexandra Exter, the blazing talent whose constellation of artistic spaces between Paris and Moscow had Kyiv at its centre, to be measured by one of her peaks of creativity in Ukraine in the late 1910s

and early 1920s – her breakthrough expressionist designs for the theatre, her synthesis of Cubo-Futurism and organically symbolic peasant art – or framed by her death in France, in poverty and obscurity, in 1949?

Do we find the life of Anatol Petrytskyi, a painter and stage designer who studied under Exter, and the life of one of his best-known portrait subjects, the poet and editor Mykhailo Semenko, prophet of Panfuturism, encapsulated in that very portrait (below), where young Semenko sits in the coolest spot in 1929 Kharkiv, Café Poc, staring petulantly out of the frame? As art historian Tetiana Zhmurko writes, even the Roman lettering on the café sign proclaims "a sense of the European liberal atmosphere and artistic community, which Kharkiv so keenly aspired to join". Or must we bring to our appreciation of the picture what happened afterwards – Petrytskyi's forced renunciation of the Ukrainian avant-garde under Stalinist repression that in 1937 led to Semenko's arrest, torture, execution and burial in a mass grave, on trumped up charges of belonging to a non-existent fascist organisation?



Anatol Petrytski - Portrait of Mykhailo Semenko, 1929

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To understand the world as seen by artists in 1920s Ukraine, the world portrayed in the RA's exhibition *In the Eye of the Storm*, the Western audience has to overturn a set of received ideas. One is that Ukrainian culture and Ukraine as a national idea depends on the romantic nationalism of its westernmost, largely rural provinces. But in the 1920s, those westernmost parts of Ukraine were under the control of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Hungary; although under Soviet jurisdiction, the rest of Ukraine had an urban, modernising, industrializing, Ukrainian-language, multi-ethnic Ukrainian identity.

Another myth is that the Soviet Union, as a country, was a straightforward takeover of the Russian Empire – that after Bolshevik victory over Tsarist forces in 1921, the USSR came instantly into being – monolithic, homogenous, communist, 'Russian' – and stayed that way until it fell apart 70 years later. The third is that the Ukrainian peasantry and intelligentsia somehow knew in the 1920s that the Russian dominated, Soviet communist regime in Moscow was their greatest enemy. In fact, many artists in Ukraine, and certainly almost all modernists, saw their great enemies in the past, receding, beaten – the harsh, anti-Ukrainian, antisemitic chauvinists of the Tsarist Russian Empire – rather than in the future. The future, they assumed, was what they would build, not what their old comrades would destroy.

The Soviet Union of the 1920s was not Stalin's but Lenin's, where the constituent republics, Ukraine biggest among them after Russia, were grudgingly allowed to experiment and develop their own culture, as allies rather than subjects – under the aegis of communism, although Lenin started allowing capitalism into the mix, too. Russian chauvinism towards the presumed primitive, rustic Ukrainians never went away, but the rise and nature of Stalin in the 1930s were hidden and unforeseeable. Simply put, the Ukrainian modernists of the 1920s were much less free than they believed – but made better use of illusory freedoms than many contemporaries in the West made of real ones.



Alexandra Exter - Bridge(Sevres), 1912

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The crassness of 20th century outside perceptions of Ukrainian modernism – lumping together, as Western art dealers did for commercial reasons, Ukraine-centred artists as part of the ‘Russian avant-garde’ – doesn’t justify a hermetic view of Ukrainian modernists as united, patriotic state-builders. Internationalism, multi-ethnicity and an openness to ideas from abroad were strengths. Not all spoke Ukrainian; for some, Yiddish was a childhood language. The art section of the Kultur Lige, the Jewish Cultural League, fostered artists such as El Lissitzky, the radical Cubists Marko Epshtein and Issakhar Ber Ryback (*City (Shtetl)*, 1917; below), and Sarah Shor, who in the late 1910s painted sweeping masses of abstract geometries electrified with cobalt blue (*Horse Riders*, late 1910s). The confidence of the Ukrainian art scene in the 1920s was such that artists felt able to attack and denounce each other and form rival groups within the overall Ukrainian socialist landscape. The Association of Revolutionary Art of Ukraine, voice of the modernists, faced off against the more naturalistic, realist painters of the Association of Artists of Red Ukraine. For old-school Ukrainian nationalists, the 19th-century poet Taras Shevchenko was the saint of their liberation, his collection *Kobzar* their holy text. In an intervention characteristic of the punk provocateurs of modernist Kharkiv, Mykhailo Semenko said *Kobzar* should be burned.



Issakhar Ber Ryback - *City (Shtetl)*, 1917

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Exter and Mykhailo Boichuk were the two artists most responsible for bringing new ideas into Ukraine. Exter, born in then Russian-controlled Poland in 1882, grew up in Kyiv from the age of three, studied art there, moved to Paris in her twenties, returned to Ukraine, and later lived for a time in Russia before a permanent move to France. As well as being a brilliant and prolific artist in her own right, she was the link between the Cubists of Paris, the Futurists of Italy, the various modernist movements of Russia, and modernism in Ukraine. She knew Picasso, Braque, Léger. She was the first to publish a detailed analysis in Russian of Cubism, in the Kyiv journal *Art* in 1912. She revolutionised theatrical set and costume design in Ukraine and Russia. Short of cash in Kyiv in the violent few years of class war, peasant rebellion and foreign intervention that beset Ukraine after the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, she opened a hugely influential teaching studio. Like many modernists, she was concerned with the representation of movement, but where the Futurists dwelt on the speed and power of machines shooting through a unique space, Exter was more preoccupied with rhythm and repetition (*Bridge (Sèvres)*, c.1912). In the traditional needlework of Ukrainian peasant women she found symbolic designs echoing the abstractions of the studio modernists, and a rhythmic visual beat suggestive of the sublime. She championed the work of folk artists like Hanna Sobachko, and employed Ukrainian embroiderers to turn designs by the Kyiv-born Kazymyr Malevych into rugs, scarves and pillows. "Several art historians," writes the exhibition's co-curator Katia Denysova, "observe that Suprematism first appeared in public not on canvases but as needlework."

Mykhailo Boichuk gave his name to a Ukrainian school of painting that found its supreme expression in monumental art and frescoes. Like Exter, he brought ideas from the West. Born in 1882 in what is now western Ukraine but was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he studied art in Lviv, Krakow, Vienna and Munich, and founded a studio-school in Paris. Like Exter, he found himself in Kyiv during the upheaval of the First World War and the revolutions and civil war that followed; like Exter, he responded by making art and becoming the nucleus of an experimental group. Where Exter drew on the virtuoso practitioners of traditional Ukrainian folk art, Boichuk, inspired by Giotto and Cimabue but also by the ancient praxis of Byzantine iconography – which entered the east Slav world through Kyiv – created a style that hallowed the self-sacrificing serenity of working country women, toiling over the hemp, milk and apples of this world while reserving for themselves, like the iconic martyrs of old, a channel to the absolute (*Dairy Maid*, 1922-23).



Vadym Meller

Sketch of the 'Masks' choreography for Bronislava Nijinska's School of Movements, Kyiv, 1919

Mykhailo Boichuk

Dairy Maid, 1922-1923

In the hands of painters like Oxana Pavlenko, Ivan Padalka and Mykhailo's brother Tymofii (*Women under the Apple Tree*, 1920), the Boichukists produced flattened, stylised, monumental figures in bright colours that expressed, without patronising or idealising, the sanctity of necessary labour. Padalka's *Photographer* (1927) actualises the creative friction between the new, urban, technological Ukraine and the old Ukraine of the countryside, stately, ornate and wary; Manuil Shekhtman's *Jewish Pogrom* (1926) portrays the curse of Slavic antisemitism. Ukrainian modernism fused experimental art and ideals of liberation, but it also balanced the influence of Paris, Berlin, Vienna and Moscow – cells of elite intellectuals reaching out to connect between the great cities of Europe – with the influence of the deep past of Byzantium and the country of tiny villages far from the city. "Narratives of the avant-garde," writes the historian Myroslav Shkandrij, "often fail to consider the fact that radicalism is frequently engendered outside "metropolitan centres", or that the latter can be bastions of conservative, imperialist, or authoritarian thought."



Ivan Padalka - Photographer, 1927

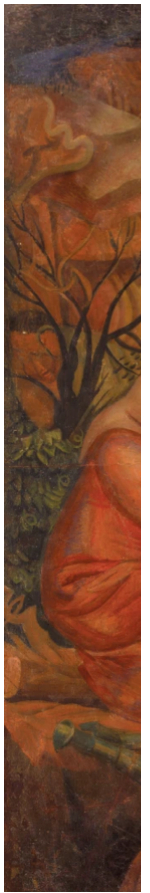
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In July 1937, Mykhailo Boichuk was shot by the Soviet secret police, along with Padalka and another of his talented followers, Vasyl Sedliar, on fake espionage charges. Later that year, the police shot his wife, the exceptional engraver Sofia Nalepinska-Boichuk. That any of their works survive is remarkable; when Stalin moved to shut down Ukrainian cultural autonomy in the 1930s, confining it to a tightly restricted, backward-looking, folkloric remnant of art and language, the Soviet secret police didn't only murder Ukrainian artists on a large scale – hence the Ukrainian characterisation of the era as the 'Executed Renaissance' – they destroyed their art. It's said that Boichuk shunned galleries; his monumental frescoes, he said, were his exhibitions. When Stalinist terror came to Ukraine, Boichuk's frescoes were plastered over.



Vasyl Yermilov

'Nove Mystetstvo'('New Art'), Journal cover design, 1927



Manuil Shekhtman

Jewish Pogrom, 1926

Sometimes the ephemerality of Ukrainian modernism was its point. It was a time of propaganda, exhortation, celebration of new festivals; even a wall might not be enough. For much of this era Kharkiv, rather than Kyiv, was Ukraine's capital. The extraordinary Kharkiv artist Vasyl Yermilov produced frescoes, but also watercolours, realist portraits, Constructivist reliefs, newspaper kiosks, fonts and designs for magazines (*cover design for journal New Art*, c.1927). He was an interior designer. He was a working house painter. His work spilled out onto the streets. "According to his friend and collaborator, the poet and author Valerian Polishchuk," writes exhibition co-curator Konstantin Akinsha, "Yermilov transformed the post-revolutionary Kharkiv into his gesamtkunstwerk: "All streets and houses were screaming with colours, slogans, flowers, and arches designed by V. Yermilov. That was the pathos of revolution in colours. Nothing like this had existed before, and nothing unfortunately survived of it. That was the inimitable style of the epoch."



Ukrainian modernism fused experimental art and ideals of liberation but it also

balanced the influence of Europe's great cities with the deep past of Byzantium and deep country of tiny villages.

The painter Oleksandr Bohomazov, originally from eastern Ukraine but mainly practising in Kyiv, is one of the most alluring and mysterious figures in the Ukrainian modernist canon. He was that contradictory figure, the passionate theorist, leaving behind screeds of analytic thought about the depiction of colour, motion and forms.

He's sometimes described in his homeland as "the Ukrainian Picasso", presumably because of the way his style changed, from the resolute kinetic Futurism of his earlier works, which imputed a straining, yearning quality to each plane and facet of the inanimate world, through the hallucinatory billows of colour in his portrayals of the Caucasus during a sojourn there, to the lambent, subtle yet intense polychrome of his extraordinary, figurative *Sawyers* triptych, on which he spent the last years of his life. He came at the paintings through hundreds of sketches that combined a faceted Cubist representation of anatomy with the fanatical attention to corporeal surface of a Renaissance atelier (the right-hand canvas of the triptych, *Sharpening the Saws*, 1927, is on view at the Royal Academy).

Bohomazov cheated the state murderers within the NKVD by dying of tuberculosis before the Terror gained momentum; in a cruel embodiment of the thwarted ambitions of the communist system he may or may not have believed in, he was the author of a famous Soviet propaganda poster declaring "We Will Cure Tuberculosis!" It has been claimed his immune system was weakened by exhausting, underfed labour decorating a Red propaganda train. Although the Soviet authorities didn't have time to shoot Bohomazov, they punished his work after his death.

The central painting of the triptych, showing the sawing of the logs, was, like many masterpieces of Ukrainian modernism, locked away in a secret store, the Spetsfond. It was so badly damaged when it was recovered from the vaults that it took three years to restore; it was only put on display in Kyiv in 2019, 90 years after he painted it. Whatever else *The Sawyers* is, and it is many things, it is, at its most basic level, a tribute to the dignity and grace of skilled, honest labour – which was supposed to have been at the heart of the Bolshevik revolution, and for many Ukrainian modernists continued to be so. Whether one is to marvel at the contradiction in the Soviet authorities hiding a painting by a card-carrying communist that embodies the essence of the socialist ideal, or to wonder whether, by hiding it away rather than destroying it, Stalin's minions were admitting that the picture was too precious not to save, we may never know.



Oleksandr Bohomazov - Sharpening the Saws, 1927

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With Bohomazov's triptych, the balance between the moment and the whole life swings towards the moment. The finger on the scales is that of the artist's daughter Yaroslava, who in a memoir describes being with her father in the forest clearing where they saw the woodworkers. "My father drew my attention to the way the colour of the logs changed in the sunlight, causing an interesting interplay of light and shade," she writes. "The glade was covered in fresh sawdust, the logs seemed to be ringing in the sun, resinous, shiny. The figures of the workers on these log structures seemed huge against the backdrop of bright, blue sky."

James Meek is a novelist and contributing editor to the London Review of Books. He lived in Kyiv from 1991 to 1994 and is a regular visitor to Ukraine.

***In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine* takes place in The Gabrielle Jungels-Winkler Galleries, from 29 June–13 October.**