

Soviet Graphics Arts Exhibitions Review

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The graphic arts of the early Soviet Union have long been celebrated in western design circles. Although scholars have paid varying degrees of attention to the difficult history of the Communist regime, Soviet artists, architects, and designers such as El Lissitzky, Kazimir Malevich, and Vladimir Tatlin are consistently featured in histories of modern design both for their innovative aesthetics and for their efforts to put their work at the service of the new regime. In this telling, the details of the ideology that inspired these designers matters less than their profound faith that their work could serve that ideology effectively. As such, Soviet design is celebrated not only because of its avant-garde formal qualities, but also because of its exemplary figures' deep commitment to transforming everyday life. From this point of view, Soviet design offers a model of practice as well as aesthetic inspiration for designers working today.

For those interested in the history of modern art, architecture, and design, the graphic arts of the Soviet Union are also notable because they demonstrate with particular power the complicated process by which the international trends of modernism were shaped by local conditions and joined with regional traditions as they spread across Europe. Designers working in the Soviet Union explicitly aimed to craft a new Soviet identity through their work. As the long debate over the appropriate "style" for Communist art well illustrates, however, the nature of that identity was vigorously contested, with the debate focusing in large part on the proper balance between native traditions and modern techniques imported from abroad. While the imposition of Socialist Realism under Stalin established some specific guidelines, this question continued to be debated throughout the twentieth century as the regime itself evolved.

Three exhibitions in the Chicago area recently brought these aspects of Soviet design powerfully to light: "Tango with Cows: Book Art of the Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1917" (September 23, 2011–December 11, 2011) and "Views and Re-Views: Soviet Political Posters and Cartoons" (September 20, 2011–December 4, 2011) both

Figure 1

"Tango with Cows: Book Art of the Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1917." Courtesy of Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University.



at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum at Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, and "Vision and Communism" (September 29, 2011–January 22, 2012) at the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago. Spanning the twentieth century, these exhibitions offered an expansive sampling of graphic art that illuminated the complex relationship between Russian and Soviet designers and the international avant-garde and invited viewers to think more deeply about the relationship between design and ideology. In each case, the exhibitions not only presented a compelling selection of work, but also aimed to explain how these works embody traditions of making and ways of seeing distinct to Russian and Soviet cultures. This ambition is notable precisely because, under the label of propaganda, Soviet design is so often removed from the broader visual culture in which it operated and instead celebrated purely for its formal characteristics. Although they were quite uneven in their intellectual framing, together these three exhibitions provided a much-needed and insightful examination of several key aspects of Soviet design culture.

Tango with Cows: Book Art of the Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1917

A relatively compact exhibition, contained in a single small room, "Tango with Cows: Book Art of the Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1917" presented an elegant selection of books, magazines, and other printed matter produced in the years leading up to the Russian revolution (see Figure 1). With more than 50 works on display, including pieces by such renowned artists as Natalia Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich, and Vladimir Mayakovsky, as well as figures lesser known outside Russia, such as Alexei Kruchenykh and Olga

Rozanova, the exhibition offered a tightly focused and penetrating glimpse into avant-garde circles in pre-revolutionary Russia. In particular, the exhibition effectively illustrated Russian artists' intimate awareness of the broader European discourse on modern art and design and their efforts to devise avant-garde practices that would be both rooted in their native Slavic culture and at the same time would overthrow the routines of contemporary life.

"Tango with Cows" originated at the Getty Research Institute, where it was curated by Nancy Perloff, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Collections. At the Block Museum, the works were displayed both on the wall and in free-standing vitrines, with little wall text aside from a brief introductory paragraph. To allow the viewers to engage the material more fully, the exhibition included numerous facsimiles that visitors could page through, as well as several computer terminals and "sound sticks," which played recordings of the works being read aloud.¹ This range of display techniques was very successful and at least partially surmounted the differences in language and experience that often make such material difficult to engage. The sound sticks were especially effective in this regard, as they made manifest the fact that much of the material in the exhibition was intended to be presented publicly rather than studied quietly at home.

Through its content, the show vividly conveyed how connected Russian artists were to the European avant-garde in the years before World War I, even as they were committed to developing a distinctive Russian modernism via the selective revival and appropriation of Slavic culture. These two conceptual forces, which sometimes aligned neatly and at other times worked in opposition to one another, could be seen clearly in the most compelling works in the exhibition, such as *Exploidity* (1913), a collaborative book project lead by Alexei Kruchenykh with work by Kazimir Malevich, Natalia Goncharova, Nikolai Kulbin, and Olga Rozanova; *Victory over the Sun* (1913), a book written by Velimir Khlebnikov with illustrations by Kazimir Malevich, Alexei Kruchenykh, David Burliuk, and Mikhail Matiushin; and *Tango with Cows* (1914), a book by Vasily Kamensky with illustrations by David and Vladimir Burliuk.

This last work, from which the name of the exhibition was taken, presents a series of short free-word poems, which the authors called "ferro-concrete poems," devoted to various modern subjects such as the cabaret and airplanes. The poems are each laid out in a different arrangement inspired by Futurist typography, and the volume as a whole is printed on wallpaper. It also includes several lithographic prints that combine irregular abstract compositions with a crude, figural quality, reminiscent of traditional popular prints. It is through works such as this that exhibition introduced visitors to the complex and sometimes uneven synthesis

1 Much of the digital material from the exhibition is still available on a website hosted by the Getty Research Institute: http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/tango_with_cows/ (accessed June 19, 2012).



Figure 2
 "Views and Re-Views: Soviet Political Posters and Cartoons." Courtesy of Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University.

of international trends and local culture that was the aim of the Russian avant-garde in the days before WWI. Although narrowly focused, the exhibition offered a clear, concise, and engaging introduction to the subject.

Views and Re-Views: Soviet Political Posters and Cartoons

On display at the same time at the Block Museum was "Views and Re-Views: Soviet Political Posters and Cartoons," a much larger exhibition in both size and scope (see Figure 2). Organized by Jo-Ann Conklin, Director of the David Winton Bell Gallery, and Abbott Gleason, Professor Emeritus of History, the exhibition originated at the David Winton Bell Gallery at Brown University. In its manifestation at the Block, the exhibition presented approximately 110 works spanning almost the entire history of the Soviet Union; represented were a number of well-known artists and designers, including Viktor Deni, Gustav Klutssis, and Victor Koretsky. As the title suggests, the aim of the exhibition was to reevaluate Soviet poster design in light of the historical distance separating the present day from the collapse of the regime in 1989. In this effort, the exhibition was of mixed success. By virtue of its broad chronological scope, the exhibition presented some important Russian precedents for Soviet designers and gave visitors a sense of their

evolving concerns—both aesthetic and political. The exhibition failed, however, to address in any depth how the posters were used and viewed within the Soviet Union.

“Views and Re-Views” was set almost entirely in a single large room divided with several three-quarter height walls. Given that all of the works were hung for display, this design was obviously a practical requirement, but the curators also used the walls to define a number of smaller areas devoted to specific themes within the chronological structure of the exhibition. At the entrance, for example, viewers confronted a section exploring the influence of *lubki*, traditional Russian popular woodcut prints portraying both religious imagery and scenes addressing contemporary political and social mores. Other areas considered themes such as “Women Artists and Workers” and “Cults of Leadership.” In addition to introducing particular thematic concerns, these areas effectively disrupted the otherwise continuous walls of the gallery to demarcate zones more amenable to looking closely at the posters. This was done to particular effect for works such as “We Will Repay the Country’s Coal Debt” (1930) by Gustav Klutsis, and “Workers of the World, Unite! For a World-Wide October!” (1932) by Nikolai Dolgorukov. The presentation of these works in the exhibition made clear their tremendous power—both as graphic compositions and as images of the world that do not simply re-present reality to the viewer but re-define it.

Confronting the power of these posters reveals the failure of the exhibition to engage the matter of how these works functioned in their own time. This failure is especially notable given that, in the American context, these posters are too often dismissed as propaganda—a label that serves effectively to sever their aesthetic qualities from their political content. The shortcomings of the American notion of propaganda for explaining how these posters would have operated within Soviet culture are well illustrated by works such as “Capitalism Devours Everything” (ca. 1920) by Dimitri Moor and “Get Him Out of Vietnam!” (1973) by Alexander Zhitomirsky. Neither the remarkable sparseness of form, powerful use of line, and sophisticated play of shapes of Moor’s work, nor the harsh juxtaposition of imagery in Zhitomirsky’s photo-collages can be separated from the critical ideological impulse of these works. Indeed, it is impossible not to be caught up in the powerful sense of opposition and conflict that powered Communism as both a political and a social project when viewing these works.

Unfortunately, the exhibition did not explore the broader visual culture that determined how these works would have been seen at the time they were made, nor how their content would have been understood within Soviet culture. Without addressing these questions, “Views and Re-Views” was limited in its impact.



Figure 3
 "Vision and Communism." Photo by Michael Tropea. Courtesy of Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago.

Although the exhibition afforded the opportunity to see a wonderful selection of work and offered visitors a real taste of the remarkable power of much Soviet design, it only hinted at the very different world in which the posters and cartoons were actually produced and disseminated. As a result, visitors were left to see the work through contemporary terms far removed from their original context. In this sense, the curator's ambition for historical distance was perhaps too successful.

Vision and Communism

It is precisely this issue of different ways of seeing that was taken up by "Vision and Communism" at the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago—the most provocative and ambitious of the three exhibitions (see Figure 3). Designed to "emphasize the experiential over the informational," the exhibition gave visitors an immersive introduction to the visual culture of the Soviet Union.² Focused on the posters of Viktor Koretsky, the exhibition included more than 80 of his works along with a small number of other pieces, including films and songs by Aleksander Medvedkin, Chris Marker, and a number of South African singers and political leaders. (The films were screened outside the exhibition while the songs and other audio recordings were played continuously within the exhibition space.) This eclectic combination of material was intended to articulate the critical power of Koretsky's work in social terms rather than artistic ones, just as the exhibition

2 "Press Release: Vision and Communism" (Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, 2011). This conception likely reflected the unusual composition of the large curatorial team, which comprised Robert Bird, Associate Professor in the departments of Slavic Languages and Literatures and Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago; Christopher Heuer, Assistant Professor in the Department of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University; Matthew Jesse Jackson, Associate Professor in the departments of Art History and Visual Arts at the University of Chicago; Tumelo Mosaka, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and Stephanie Smith and Richard Born, Chief Curator and Senior Curator, respectively, at the Smart Museum of Art at University of Chicago.

itself aimed to construct an environment through which visitors would engage the work on display not from outside Soviet visual culture, but from within it by sharing Koretsky's way of seeing the world.

This aim was hinted at by quotations from Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Nelson Mandela that greeted visitors at the entrances to the exhibition. The first, from Solzhenitsyn, repeated the conventional critique of Communism as a mortal danger to freedom, while the second, from Mandela, offered a dramatically different point of view, announcing that in Africa, the Soviet Union—and not the United States—was celebrated for its support of freedom.³ The ambition to open visitors to the critical impulse of Koretsky's vision was also made manifest in the design of the exhibition, which comprised a series of relatively compact rooms arranged in an S-shaped path. The walls of these rooms were painted shades of dark gray and brown that, when combined with the low light necessitated by such fragile works, created a somber mood that matched the dark and violent subject matter of most of the posters. At the center of the exhibition was a small room with a dense array of posters and speakers playing South African freedom music, which could be heard throughout the exhibition and heightened the mood, fraught with tension.

Although the exhibition nearly spanned Koretsky's entire career, most of the work dated from the 1960s and 1970s and critiqued American policies or celebrated the South African struggle for freedom ongoing during those years. In addition to the posters, the exhibition included original maquettes and photographs that Koretsky prepared as he worked toward his final design.⁴ Among the most compelling works in the exhibition were *America's Shame* (1968) and *Africa Fights, Africa Will Win* (1971). These posters and the related photographs and maquettes illustrate Koretsky's intensive process of building up his imagery through photographs of models, collages of those photographs, and lush hand illustrations to add color and frame the subject more powerfully. They also make explicit the intimate connection between aesthetic and ideological concerns in Koretsky's work and, when seen in person, offer a palpable sense of the rage and energy that motivated it.

Moreover, these two works illustrate the distinctive intellectual structure of the exhibition, which effectively introduced visitors to what in the accompanying catalogue the curators called "dissident public visual culture." Although Koretsky's critique of American imperialism at home and abroad might be quickly dismissed as propaganda, his critique of African colonialism cannot be so easily ignored. By presenting both of these works within one exhibition, the curators exposed the ideological link connecting

3 "For many decades, communists were the only political group in South Africa who were prepared to treat Africans as human beings and their equals; who were prepared to eat with us, talk with us, live with us, and work with us. They were the only political group which was prepared to work with the Africans for the attainment of political rights and a stake in society. Because of this, there are many Africans who, today, tend to equate freedom with communism." Nelson Mandela, quoted at "Vision and Communism" and in Robert Bird, Christopher P. Heuer, Matthew Jesse Jackson, Tumelo Mosaka, and Stephanie Smith, eds., *Vision and Communism: Viktor Koretsky and Dissident Public Visual Culture* (New York and London: The New Press, 2011), vii.

4 The exhibition's interest in the process of design is supplemented by a small exhibition adjacent to "Vision and Communism," titled "Process and Artistry in the Soviet Vanguard." This supplemental exhibition presents a compact collection of works illustrating Koretsky's working process in greater detail.

the various struggles for civil rights around the world and carried visitors into Koretsky's way of seeing those struggles. Although some visitors undoubtedly were not caught up by this way of presenting Koretsky's work, the exhibition at least called into question the notion of propaganda and made palpable the different way of seeing the world that inspired these posters and determined how and where they were originally seen. In this way, "Vision and Communism" was a success, raising compelling questions about how vision itself is structured by ideology and in turn made manifest in design.

With "Tango with Cows," "Views and Re-Views," and "Vision and Communism," visitors were afforded a rare opportunity to see first-hand an expansive sample of Russian and Soviet graphic arts, from books and cartoons to prints and posters. The exhibitions also opened up important questions about this material and, in the case of "Vision and Communism," proposed new ways of approaching it. As such, these exhibitions offer several intriguing models for the critical exploration of modern design more broadly. Indeed, from the tension between local ambitions and international imperatives manifest in pre-Revolutionary Russian book arts to the complex relationship between design and ideology brought to the fore in Soviet posters, the issues raised by these exhibitions are central to understanding not only Soviet design but also the development of modern design across Europe and America. Despite their various shortcomings, together "Tango with Cows," "Views and Re-Views," and "Vision and Communism" offered an engaging, probing, and provocative survey of Russian and Soviet graphic arts of the twentieth century.