

The Museum of Modern Art

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LIUBOV POPOVA

February 14 - April 23, 1991

The first American retrospective of works by Constructivist artist Liubov Popova (1889-1924) opens at The Museum of Modern Art on February 14, 1991. Comprising approximately fifty-five paintings and sixty works on paper, as well as a selection of theater, textile, and graphic designs, LIUBOV POPOVA illustrates the artist's stylistic development from figuration to abstraction to utilitarian design. On view through April 23, the exhibition was organized by Magdalena Dabrowski, associate curator, Department of Drawings, in collaboration with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

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Liubov Popova is recognized, along with Kasimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, and Vladimir Tatlin, as one of the most important and original artists of the Russian avant-garde. Although she is also one of the most vital and talented women artists of this century, her work--largely in Soviet collections--is not well known and has rarely been shown in the west. Popova's intensely personal vocabulary, inspired by the vibrant colors of Russian folk and religious art, as well as contemporary trends, embodies

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tactile surfaces and vigorous compositions. The artist's career, cut short by her death at age thirty-five, spans the years of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the immediate post-revolutionary period.

The exhibition begins with Popova's early art, including landscape, still-life, and figure studies, which are marked by loose drawing, thick brushstrokes, and vivid colors. Following an extended visit to Paris in 1912, her work shifted toward Cubism. In 1913-14 she became involved with the Cubo-Futurists, and her work became completely abstract with the *Painterly Architectonics* cycle, which lasted from 1916 until 1918. In these brilliantly colored works, for which Suprematism was also a stimulus, bold forms push against the picture surface.

Throughout the years 1920-21, an increased preoccupation with line rather than plane and color became evident in the artist's work. Bare plywood and cardboard are often the ground for these works, predominately titled *Space-Force Constructions*; and their highly textured surfaces are built up by sand, as well as metallic and marble powders. The imagery in some of these works consists of raylike shapes and circular sections interrupted by oblique axes. In others, the plane is intersected by beams of different widths. These works were first shown in the 1921 exhibition, $5 \times 5 = 25$, which was organized as a final presentation of easel painting.

Later that year, together with many of her colleagues in the Constructivist group, Popova signed a declaration renouncing the traditional medium of easel painting. This proclamation of "Art into Life" called for the artists' total commitment to production and, consequently, for a fusion of art and technology. From 1922 until the end of her life, Popova worked exclusively on utilitarian design.

The exhibition features the range of Popova's designs, from theater sets and costumes, through book and magazine covers, to textiles and clothes. Her graphic designs juxtapose colors and arrange bold lettering asymmetrically to create block-like configurations that later came to epitomize Constructivist typography. The textile designs incorporate geometric forms and bright colors into rhythmical, lively patterns. Interested in reflecting the practical needs of the consumer, Popova's clothing designs combine functionalism with high aesthetic appeal.

Popova's theatrical work, the most widely recognized part of her utilitarian art, is considered an implementation of Constructivist ideas. Ms. Dabrowski writes in the catalogue essay, "Popova's sets and costumes made the theatrical production a composite of gesture, movement, music, light, and architecture; the interaction of forms, materials, time, and space resulted in a living, unified work of art." The artist's stage design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922), for example, is based on an interplay of verticals and horizontals and the use of planes and rotating platforms, elements she explored so persistently in her late paintings. This production contributed to a radical change in stage design, eliminating the idea of sets and costumes as backdrop and illusion and bringing them into the realm of living art.

Liubov Sergeevna Popova was born in 1889 near Moscow to a prosperous, cultivated family. In her youth, she traveled extensively in Russia and Western Europe. Interested in art from a young age, Popova became involved with the avant-garde circle and exhibited in such major group exhibitions as *O.10* (1915), *Jack of Diamonds* (1916), and *5 x 5 = 25* (1921). In addition to making art, she taught art and color theory at the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow. Her brief marriage to art historian Boris von Eding ended

tragically in 1919 with his death. Popova died in Moscow in 1924 from scarlet fever which she caught from her young son. A posthumous exhibition of her work took place in Moscow that same year.

Following its New York opening, the exhibition travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (June 19 - August 18, 1991), The Museum Ludwig, Cologne (October 1 - November 30, 1991), and the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (December 18, 1991 - February 16, 1992).

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PUBLICATION *Liubov Popova* by Magdalena Dabrowski. Essay on working methods and materials by Eugena Ordonez, Associate Conservator, The Museum of Modern Art; essay on Popova at the Tretyakov Gallery by Irina Pronina, Senior Research Curator, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. 136 pages. 92 color and 38 black-and-white illustrations. Chronology and bibliography. Published by The Museum of Modern Art. Hardbound, \$39.95, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.; paperbound, \$19.95; both available in The MoMA Book Store.

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