



PIONEERS. Women artists of the Russian avant-garde

1 March to 16 June 2019
Room 43

The early years of the 20th century witnessed an unprecedented cultural renaissance in imperial Russia. In the art world, numerous exhibitions and impassioned manifestoes combined influences from foreign avant-garde movements with aspects of authentic Russian culture. In addition, this exceptional situation was defined by a feature that distinguished it from the other art movements of the time: the participation of women, which was not only sizeable but extremely active and important.

Some of the leading women artists of this movement are featured in the special installation *Pioneers. Women artists of the Russian avant-garde*, which brings together 12 works from the museum's own collections by **Natalia Goncharova**, **Alexandra Exter**, **Olga Rozanova**, **Nadeshda Udaltsova**, **Liubov Popova**, **Varvara Stepanova** and **Sonia Delaunay**, as well as texts, biographies and photographs. These women grew up and trained under a regime that rigidly maintained pre-industrial values; nonetheless, they became pioneers in the creation, dissemination and defence of the new artistic languages that both fascinated and scandalized Russian and European society at the outset of the century.

Images: Natalia Goncharova. *Fishing (Fishermen and Women)*, 1909 / Alexandra Exter. *Still Life*, 1913 / Liubov Popova *Architecture (Still Life. Instruments)*, 1915.

More information and images:

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Young, intelligent, free and rebellious, these artists did not found a group, although many of them knew and influenced each other. Their names are associated with the different movements that arose during the last years of imperial rule and their careers reached maturity when the October Revolution triumphed in 1917. The spirit and determination of these women enabled them not only to become full and equal members of the avant-garde but in many cases to lead it, marking an important turning point in the history of art.

Natalia Goncharova (Nagaev, 1881 – Paris, 1962)

Starting with her earliest works of around 1910, Goncharova perfectly combined an interest in European avant-garde movements with a quest for inspiration derived from Russia's popular roots and its folklore. Following an initial Neo-primitivist phase that reveals her admiration for Gauguin and Matisse, Goncharova focused on Cubism and Futurism then together with Larionov developed Rayonism. Based on



Natalia Goncharova in her studio, Paris, late 1920s

scientific theories of light, Rayonism transformed the pictorial space into a reflection on the action and refraction of light rays.

Alexandra Exter (Bialystok, 1882 – Fontenay-aux-Roses, 1949)

Exter was a key figure in the connections between the Russian avant-garde and the artistic trends emerging in Western Europe. Her early interest in the Parisian art world led her to spend lengthy



Alexandra Exter, 1912

periods there from 1907, meeting figures such as Picasso and Braque. Exter was fascinated by the potential of the new Cubist language and immediately adopted it, becoming one of its principal exponents in Russia. Her contacts with the Delaunays and the Italian Futurists led to an interest in introducing movement into her works and a focus on colour. On the outbreak of World War I, Exter returned to Russia where she was influenced by Kazimir Malevich, resulting in her first non-

figurative works. During this period she began to work for the theatre and from 1921 produced fashion designs.



Olga Rozanova (left) with Ksenia Boguslavskaya and Kazimir Malevich in front of the Suprematist paintings in the exhibition *0.10*. Saint Petersburg, 1915.

Olga Rozanova (Melenki, 1886 – Moscow, 1918)

Rozanova is considered one of the most original artists of the Russian avant-garde, noted for both her decided commitment to non-figurative art and her ongoing quest for new forms of expression. Her early career was associated with Futurism, which she encountered through the poet Aleksei Kruchenykh, the inventor of the experimental *zaum* language. Rozanova not only collaborated on the design of numerous Futurist publications but also began to

write trans-rational poems herself. At the same time she produced her earliest Cubo-futurist paintings, in which colour is the principal concern. These were so innovative that Filippo Marinetti decided to include them in his *First International Futurist Exhibition* held in Rome in 1914.

Nadeshda Udaltsova (Orel, 1886 – Moscow, 1961)

Nadeshda Udaltsova was associated with Cubism from the time of her visit to Paris with her friend Liubov Popova in November 1912. The two attended Jean Metzinger and Henri Le Fauconnier's classes at the Académie de la Palette and from that point onwards Cubism became the basis from which she produced works that are considered the paradigmatic examples of that movement in Russia. Following the 1917 Revolution Udaltsova took part in various cultural initiatives and taught art. She was also a member of the INKhUK (State Institute of Artistic Culture) although she left it in 1921 due to differences with the Constructivist artists who argued that painting as an artistic practice should be abandoned.



Nadeshda Udaltsova, Moscow, 1915



Liubov Popova, ca. 1920

Liubov Popova (Ivanovskoe, 1889 – Moscow, 1924)

From a very early date Popova combined her fascination with traditional Russian art with numerous family trips around Europe. Classical Italian art, particularly the compositional foundations of the Renaissance style, left a profound mark on her. Popova was also interested in contemporary artistic trends and went to Paris in 1912

with her friend Udaltsova, making contact there with Cubism. A further period in Italy allowed her to assimilate Cubism at first hand and she combined both languages in her work. Popova's subsequent output oscillated between Suprematism and Constructivism although she always maintained clear artistic independence. In 1921 she and other artists of the INKhUK (State Institute of Artistic Culture) abandoned easel painting and Popova embarked on an important career as a graphic, textile and theatrical designer.

Varvara Stepanova (Kaunas, 1894 – Moscow, 1958)

Stepanova was the youngest of the women pioneers. During her early career she admired the Futurist poets and in 1917 began to write trans-rational poems that became the basis for a series of hand-written books in which she followed Rozanova in the combination of text and abstract forms. Stepanova's enthusiasm for the triumph of the October Revolution led her to fill her works with characters that represented the ideal of the Socialist era: robotic, efficient and dynamic. In September 1921 she joined the group of artists determined to abandon easel painting. The only artist of her day who had trained in the applied arts, Stepanova extended her ideas to the field of clothing and textile design and to the decoration of public spaces and theatres, becoming one of the principal representatives of Constructivism.



Alexander Rodchenko: *Varvara Stepanova drawing textile designs, 1924*



Sonia Delaunay with a parasol, hat and jacket of her own design, Madrid, 1918

Sonia Delaunay (Odessa, 1885 – Paris, 1979)

Despite living for most of her life in Paris, everything about Sonia Delaunay's life and art seems to connect to her Russian roots. Her firm defence of colour, commitment to abstraction and interest in extending her artistic ideas to all types of everyday objects are notably close to the aesthetic principles upheld by many of her fellow avant-garde artists in Russia, with whom she was in contact. In Paris she soon became a key figure for the avant-garde due to Simultaneity, the style that she launched with Robert Delaunay, whom she married in 1910. Together they investigated colour contrasts and the breakdown of forms through light, which led them on to abstraction.

The display is completed with a **video** on the restoration of the works *Fishing (Fishermen and Women)* (1909) by Natalia Goncharova, and *Billiard Players* (1920) by Varvara Stepanova. Like those of the other historic avant-gardes, early 20th-century Russian paintings now present problems of conservation and thus require regular checks. The restoration of these two canvases allows for an analysis of some of the problems common to works of this period with the aim of ensuring their optimum conservation.

ASSOCIATED ACTIVITIES

Lecture *Pioneers. Women artists of the Russian avant-garde*: on Wednesday 5 June at 6pm the exhibition's curator, Marta Ruiz del Árbol, will give a talk on its contents. Free entry.

In the Gallery. Selected Works explanations: the museum's volunteers will explain some of the works included in this display on Thursdays and Saturdays at 12 noon and 5pm. Taking place in March: Alexandra Exter, *Still Life*, 1913; April: Sonia Delaunay, *Simultaneous Dresses. (Three women, forms, colours)*, 1925; May: Liubov Popova, *Pictorial Architecture (Still Life. Instruments)*, 1915; and June: Natalia Goncharova, *Fishing (Fishermen and Women)*, 1909. Activity included in the price of an entry ticket. Prior booking not required, free entry until all places filled.

EXHIBITION DETAILS

Title: *Pioneers. Women artists of the Russian avant-garde*

Organiser: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Venue and dates: Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, 1 March to 16 June 2019. Room 43, permanent collection

Curator: Marta Ruiz del Árbol, curator of Modern Painting at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

VISITOR INFORMATION

Address: Paseo del Prado, 8. 28014 Madrid. Permanent collection galleries

Opening times: Mondays, 12 noon to 4pm (Free entry) ; Tuesdays to Sundays, 10am to 7pm

Combined ticket: Permanent Collection and temporary exhibitions:

- Standard ticket: 13 Euros
- Reduced-price ticket: 9 Euros for visitors aged over 65, pensioners and students with proof of status
- Free entry: visitors aged under 18, officially unemployed Spanish citizens, disabled visitors, Large Families and currently working teachers

Advance ticket sales at the ticket desks, from the museum's website or on tel: 91 791 13 70

More information: www.museothyssen.org

PRESS INFORMATION

<http://www2.museothyssen.org/microsites/prensa/2019/pioneras/index.html>