

Russia's cutting-edge is still so sharp

Art

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New Art for a New Era Kandinsky Naum Gabo

MOST people think abstract art is tosh, and rightly so. But "art" only applies to a fraction of the stuff made in its name, whatever the style, and there is good and bad abstraction like anything else. Non-figurative art dates from the earliest times and has embraced whole cultures, but in its modern form it is under 100 years old.

The first wave of 20th-century abstract artists remains among the best, as a glut of shows currently reminds us. *New Art for a New Era* at the Barbican Art Gallery (until June 27, sponsored by Ing Barings) is the place to start, constituting the largest single loan of works by Russia's first avant-garde painters ever made by the State Russian Museum, St Petersburg — a unique collection in that it was selected in the 1920s by the artists themselves, under the directorship of Kazimir Malevich, to form probably the first modern art museum, the Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture.

From the 1930s until the fall of Communism, abstract art in Russia was hidden and forbidden on ideological grounds. This long hiatus has distorted art history. Go into Western collections of modern art — the Tate as bad a culprit as any — and you would hardly know the Russians existed. And yet, in the pursuit of pure abstraction,

they briefly led the way. This Russian phenomenon is not only of interest because of its historical context. "Astonish me!" the great artistic impresario Diaghilev would say. And one is indeed constantly astonished at the Barbican by works of timeless beauty and of an invention that still looks cutting-edge.

The late Patrick Heron claimed that in the 1950s he made the first abstract painting consisting purely of stripes. And here is Mikhail Matiushin doing it on a grand scale in 1922! Anyone who thinks abstraction a con, anyone who, like the novelist William Boyd, thinks it impossible for there to be such a thing as a masterpiece of abstract art, should stand corrected — humbled, exhilarated — by the spectacle of so much verve, humour and ecstasy expressed by colour and form alone, as in music emotions are touched by tone, tempo and rhythm.

The selection makes a token attempt to explain some of the seminal influences on the thinking of these avant-gardists. Most important was their contact with Paris and Munich — an internationalism hindered by war and eventually stamped out by Communism — a fact one has to guess at through their obvious debt to Fauvism, Cubism and Futurism; but the inclusion of a few tea-trays, dolls and illustrated books reveals their nationalist resurgence



Female star Natalia Goncharova's *Gathering Grapes*, 1911

of interest in indigenous folk art. And some icons are a reminder of the abstracting tendency in their foremost pictorial tradition.

Iconography provides a spiritual foundation for Russian abstract art lacking in the West, and so does the Russian concept of space — encouraged by the cosmic nature of the landscape, a wilderness of wood and tundra dominated by the sky and extending through 11 time zones. Russians are notably religious, and this sense of wonder must surely in part be explained by their awesome surroundings.

Artists at the dawn of a new intellectual era, its suspicions, certainties and ways of life everywhere scientifically challenged and technologically changed, found release in artistic freedom from an

Orthodox God and eventually (disastrously) the Tsar. Beginning by tentatively questioning the conventions of landscape, portraiture and figuration they slowly developed a new language of "non-objective" art.

The Constructivist movement inclined to dynamic utopias represented by shards of geometry. The more visionary Suprematists preferred to paint cosmic equivalents of infinite possibility.

A selection of posters, prints and china show how these painters also invigorated the applied and decorative arts. As for paintings, there are wonderful examples by Chagall, Kandinsky, Malevich and other stars, but also by lesser names — Bruni, Drevin, Lebedev, Shterenberg — and, especially, by women: Dymshits-Tolstaya, Exter,

Goncharova, Stepanova, Udaltsova and, for me the best of these female stars, Olga Rozanova (1886-1916), who died at the height of her still youthful powers. Any male clinging to the prejudice that women cannot paint will be blown away.

WASSILY Kandinsky (1866-1944), generally considered the father of modern abstract art and certainly its first theoretician, is the subject of *Kandinsky* at the Royal Academy (until July 4), a gem of an exhibition exceptionally well selected and catalogued by the art historian Dr Frank Whitford.

The choice is confined to watercolours — and amazingly bright, fresh and undated they are. Colour was of prime importance to him, so it can be argued that it is in the brilliance and saturation of watercolour that his sensibility finds its fullest expression.

Kandinsky saw colours as symbols. "Red," he wrote, "has more of the constancy of a powerful emotion; but can be extinguished by blue, as a red-hot iron by water." He did not take up art until middle age, and hints of figuration survived in his work until he was 50. Thereafter he created a geometric style of less fantasy but even greater delicacy — increased by a technique, learned from his friend Paul Klee, in which he used scent atomisers to create some of the first spray paintings.

The influence of Klee and, later, Miro can verge on pastiche, but such trading is common in art and no doubt worked both ways. Certainly Kandinsky invented a lan-

guage and never tired of extending it. Spindly and colour-dislocated 1950s design seems almost uniquely indebted to him.

How appropriate that Annelly Juda, whose gallery has done so much to safeguard the history of "non-objective" art, should put the icing on the cake with an important selection of sculptures, paintings and drawings by *Naum Gabo (1890-1977)* at Annelly Juda Fine Art, 23 Dering Street, W1 (to June 26). Gabo helped found the Constructivist movement and, like Kandinsky, backed his art with words. "We renounce in sculpture the mass as a sculptural element," he declared, in a famous manifesto written in 1920.

Exiled after the Revolution, he spread the gospel of Constructivism far beyond Russia, in Holland, in England, where he inspired Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth, and in America where he settled. As his son-in-law, the sculptor Graham Williams, writes, "Of all the 'isms' founded at the beginning of the century, Constructivism is the only one alive and well."

This selection of 40 works from 1916 to 1975 is made especially memorable by its inclusion of two cardboard heads made in 1916-17, and seminal to the entire movement. They were smuggled out of Russia in a box by his brother in 1968, and kept secret by Gabo from all but his assistant until his death. Now, with the fall of the Soviet Union, his daughter Nina has deemed it politically safe to reassemble them. No story could more vividly express the potency of Gabo's art, and indeed the timeless achievement of the Russian pioneers.

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