

A revolutionary journey



A masterpiece that puzzles and provokes: detail from Pavel Filonov's *The German War, 1915*

IN 1919, at a museum conference in Petrograd, formerly St Petersburg and soon to be Leningrad, the leading contemporary painters of the day there decided that a new Museum of Artistic Culture must be founded. It was to be an out-with-the-old-and-in-with-the-new institution, no matter what the intellectual and aesthetic cost, and the propaganda in support of it closely echoed the iconoclastic nonsense that the Italian Futurists had preached 10 years before. When the Futurist Manifesto of 1909 extolled energy, revolt, violence, conflict, struggle and urged the destruction of museums and libraries of past art, philosophy and culture - "... for us, the young, strong, living Futurists there must be no past, no museums ... bring on the arsonists ... take picks and shovels and destroy..." - it perfectly expressed the mood of Kasimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin and the associated painters in charge of the romantic, hopeful and absurd project that was intended to reflect in art what artists assumed to be the aspirations of the Russian Revolution.

The new museum of the new was very short-lived. In the seven years of its existence from project to closure it acquired only some 500 works - astonishingly few when we consider how many Russian artists there were, and disappointing in substance when we take into account the inclusion of so many minor prints, watercolours, posters, tin trays, bourgeois porcelain and applied arts of the peasantry. In 1921 it opened to the public; in 1923 Malevich, now of its founders the most internationally celebrated (though for other reasons), became its director, and in 1928, two years after Petrograd became Leningrad and the political climate was no longer of hope, its possessions were transferred lock, stock and barrel to the State Russian Museum, there to languish largely forgotten. The artists involved in it had little influence outside Russia: successful exhibitions in Berlin and Amsterdam in 1922 were followed only in 1924, for by then the ideas that lay at the core of this new art had been mockingly dubbed and dismissed as *Kulturboleshevismus*. Thus the first breakthrough into abstract art achieved by Russian artists in Russia was a movement without po-

terity (Kandinsky's most free-thinking and influential paintings were executed in Munich in 1910/1914 and have nothing to do with his being Russian); replaced by the official art of Socialist Realism, the real revolutionaries either fled the country to settle in obscurity in western capitals that had no patience with their theories and ideals, or stayed in Russia and saw their work reviled as "formalist" - that is, as a manifestation of bourgeois decadence - and even destroyed.

In Britain almost nothing was known of this brief era. There were faint rumblings of recollection whenever the sculpture of Archipenko (Ukrainian), Moholy-Nagy (Hungarian), Pevsner and Gabo (Russian brothers, in spite of their different names) were discussed or exhibited. Malevich and Rodchenko had entered the mythology of the art historian with their 1919 confrontation of the one's White Square on a White Ground and the other's Black Circle on a Black Ground, and Tatlin, largely in ignorance of his work, had long been held in awe as the aesthetic Trotsky of the day - this was all that we knew. More serious enquiry followed the slightly frivolous Sixties and Seventies vogue for collecting Russian designs for ballet sets and costumes, for these drew other material by Alexandra Exter and

BRIAN SEWELL



Natalia Goncharova onto the market and we began to wonder. In 1974 the now defunct Fischer Gallery took the first serious step in deliberate revival when it mounted Tatlin's *Dream*, a modest survey of Russian Suprematist and Constructivist art, and by then the art market was well aware of George Costakis, a more than slightly dotty Greek in Moscow who since 1946 had been collecting what in 1981 was exhibited at the Royal Academy as *Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia*. The Costakis holding of several thousand items was regarded by Sotheby's, who had "made" the Russian ballet market, as a well from which yet more sales might be drawn, but in spite of frantic wooing these did not take place and much of the collection has since gone to form a research archive of artists who would otherwise be utterly unknown, as well as a more conventional collection of work by artists whose reputation was better founded. This slow erosion of prejudices and ignorance is no longer driven by the market but has become the business of art historians, now taken a stage fur-

GROSVENOR GALLERY
VICTOR NEWSOME
Sculpture, Paintings and Drawings

OXFORD STAGE COMPANY AT THE WHITEHALL
"...A HOT SPOT FOR QUALITY DRAMA"
Three

New Art Sewell Standard 1 of 2

Clipped By:
ianlharris
Mon, May 27, 2024