

Historical Background

Ukrainian Modernism - from Secession to Stalin 1900-1930s

Forgotten Modernism

The definitive history of Ukrainian Modernism has yet to be written. During the late 1930s art works by so-called 'formalists' and 'bourgeois nationalists' were mercilessly destroyed or, at best, exiled to secret repositories where many remained hidden until recently. During the period of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization, some of works by these prohibited artists reappeared in museum, though the rehabilitation of Ukrainian Modernism was only partial and serious research and reassessment of the art of the first half of the 20th century remained impossible. The Soviet canon of the history of National Modernism was established at the beginning of the 1960s when the first multi-volume history of Ukrainian Art was published – if some artists were adopted into the new pantheon (though their legacy was reduced only to 'acceptable' works), others were not even mentioned.

International interest in Ukrainian Futurism and Constructivism only formed during the 1970s – 1980s - as a part of the re-discovery of the Russian Avant-garde (the all-inclusive term covering three decades of Russian and Soviet Modernism from Cubo-Futurism to Constructivism). The Western Art Market digested certain artists from Ukraine, though their art was taken out of context and interpreted as a manifestation of Russian radicalism, excepted from the revolutionary avant-garde, as imagined by the West. The real rediscovery of Ukrainian Modernism started only after the fall of the Soviet Union and declaration of Ukrainian independence in 1991. Despite the publication of important research material with breakthrough exhibitions, the process was not free of the mythologizing.

Ukrainian art of the first half of the 20th century, however, developed against a complicated historical background of the decline of the Russian Empire, the collapse of the old world order in a result of WWI, Revolution, tragic War for Independence, Bolshevik repressions and, finally, Stalinist purges, which drew the veil on the advancement of national modernism.

Formation of the National Discourse

From the beginning of the 19th century Ukrainians began to demonstrate increasingly nationalist tendencies. According to the old-fashioned definition coined by Austro-Hungarian historians Ukrainians didn't belong to, "historic nations". By the 18th century when Catherine the Great curtailed all notions of Ukrainian autonomy, Ukraine had no strong national nobility and didn't develop noble culture. The Cossack elite was destroyed and subjugated by the Russian empire and, whilst a few families were co-opted into the Imperial Court, others were destined to become minor landlords in the country dominated by Polish magnates and Russian nobles. The majority of Ukrainians were peasants-serfs

deprived of any rights and dominated by Russian bureaucracy and Polish landed gentry and any artistic manifestation of Ukrainians was to reduced Folk Art.

These nationalist sentiments began to grow first among the representatives of the Ukrainian landed gentry and then, by the mid-century, among the growing urban middle class. However, the main medium of the nationalist discourse was literature and not visual arts. The towering figure of Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), the national poet, played an instrumental role in the formation of Ukrainian self-consciousness and, in many ways, defined the development of the national culture in the 19th century. Shevchenko was both poet and painter and outlined the poetics of national art in the second part of the 19th century, even though this was reduced to depictions of Ukrainian peasants. The first active professional Ukrainian artists were not too different to their Russian counterparts who liked to paint the exotic ethnographic types of the Russian Empire. Ukrainian Art was dominated by Russian Art – the only way to get art education was to enlist to the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg (there were no art schools in Ukraine until the beginning of the 20th century). Both academic and realist painting in Ukraine in the end of the 19th century developed as a sub-school of Russian.

The Origin of the Ukrainian Secession

The situation changed in the beginning of the 20th century, when the development of European Modernism attracted the attention of both Russians and Ukrainians. Young artists from St. Petersburg, Moscow and Kyiv started to receive art education in the West, which was more progressive than the ossified Imperial Academy. One of the main centres of such education was Munich and the Munich Secession came to be seen as an important manifestation of the New Art whose influence on the formation of both Russian and Ukrainian Modernism is considerable. Oleksandr Murashko (1875 – 1919), the founding father of Ukrainian Modernism, not only studied in Munich, becoming a member of the Secession and exhibiting widely in Germany and European capitals. Ukrainians were also tempted by Vienna, which was not only was the capital of the neighbouring monarchy, Austro-Hungary, but also had a substantial Ukrainian population. Unlike the Russian Empire, the Austro-Hungarian government granted rights to use Ukrainian language, develop national culture and to be represented in the K&K parliament. The influence of Gustav Klimt and the Vienna Secession was much stronger in Kyiv than in Moscow - the leading light of the Ukrainian secession, Fedir Krychevsky (1879-1947) studied in Klimt's studio. The style, which was called Art Nouveau, Jugendstil or Secession, became the last international style. However, it produced an unexpected paradox – if works by artists from France, Germany, Italy, Russia or Ukraine were formally close and have stylistic similarities, this style was often used to propagate nationalist content, something to which Ukrainian art was not foreign. An attempt to create a Ukrainian national style by integration of folk ornaments and national topicality into Secessionist painting, architecture and applied arts began to appear, as was reflected in Hungary, Poland, Finland and other European nations experiencing a nationalist revival at the beginning of the 20th century.

It is not surprising that Heorhiy Narbut (1886 – 1920), the quintessential graphic artist influenced by the Munich Secession and member of the “World of Art” group in St. Petersburg, returned to Ukraine in 1917 and created the identity of the new Ukrainian state, designing the Republic coat of arms, banknotes and stamps.

From Secession to Futurism

The next generation of artists didn't try to find inspiration in Munich or Vienna anymore. They search for it in Paris or in Rome, the capitals of new radical art. In 1908 an exhibition called “Zveno” (“Link” Ukrainian - Lanka) organized in Kyiv by Burliuk brothers manifested formation of the Ukrainian futurism. From the very beginning such members of the group as Olekandra Ekster (1882 – 1949) and Oleksandr Bohomazov (1880 – 1930) were more western-oriented than their Russian counterparts. Unlike Russian Futurists, they didn't fall under the spell of the nationalist sentiment, proving their originality as different to the Western art they were influenced by.

Like their Russian counterparts, Futurists in Kyiv tried to find inspiration in Folk Art. However, unlike the generation of Ukrainian Secessionists, they didn't search for national roots. Embroidery and painted Easter eggs from Ukrainian villages became their replacement for the exotic primitive art fascinating so many of their French and German contemporaries.

Despite of the usage of the peculiar Russian term Cubo-Futurism, Ukrainian radicals develop stylistic trends quite different to their Russian counterparts. If Ekster combined in her art different influences uniting Malevich's Suprematism with stylistic trends of the French, Bohomazov remained the impoverished Futurist, who never betrayed his initial devotion to this Italian art movement.

The fate of the main players of the Ukrainian Futurism varied – David Burliuk, the self-styled, “Father of Russian Futurism” emigrated after the Revolution to the USA, but remained linked to Ukraine and even remained a member of Ukrainian artistic organizations, Ekster, who left Kyiv in 1921, played an important role in the Russian avant-garde movement before becoming part of the Paris art scene. Bohomazov remained in Kyiv and was involved in the organization of artistic life of the new republic, taught in various art school and seriously influenced a new generation of Ukrainian artists.

The phenomenon of Alexander Archipenko

Alexander Archipenko (Ukrainian – Oleksandr Archipenko) is probably the best-known Ukrainian avant-garde artist, starting his career in the circle of Kyiv Futurists. In 1906 he exhibited his works together with Oleksandr Bohomazov, who became a mentor to the young sculptor. Two years later he moved to Paris and resumed his international career.

Living abroad the sculptor kept in contact with the Ukrainian art scene. After the fall of the Russian Empire, Archipenko became a citizen of the Ukrainian Peoples Republic. In 1923 he relocated to the United States, travelling on the passport of the new state, which ceased to exist two years prior to his emigration. Archipenko, who became one of the most important sculptors of International Modernism of the first half of the 20th century possessed strong artistic individuality and became a living legend for young Ukrainian artists.

In a sense his phenomenon was typical of Ukrainian Modernism which often produced strong individuals who created their personal “isms” and avoided collective identification.

Tale of Two Republics – Figurative Modernism versus Constructivism

The collapse of the Russian empire in 1917 paved the way to the formation of an independent Ukrainian state. From the first declaration of independence in 1918 until its defeat in 1921 the Ukrainian Peoples Republic was in state of war with both Soviet Russia and its proxy state the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic with its capital in Kharkiv.

In both republics, the main visual language was dominated by modernist trends. The chaotic War for Independence, which involved not only nationalist and pro-Bolshevik Ukrainian forces, the ruthless anarchist Nestor Makhno, German and Austrian, White Russian and Polish armies but also numerous local groups, artistic life blossomed in both Kyiv and Kharkiv. In 1918 the Ukrainian Art Academy was established in Kyiv. Among its first professors were Heorhiy Narbut, Oleksander Murashko, Hryhoriy Narbut, Fedir Krichevskiy and Mykhailo Boichuk. Boichuk was destined to play extremely important role in post-revolutionary Ukrainian Art. Educated at the Art Academy in Krakow, the artist left Ukraine in 1908 to Paris, inventing a new style of muralism, which he called *Rénovation Byzantine*. When Guillaume Apollinaire named Boichuk in one of his articles as, “the neo-Byzantine artist”, Boichuk replied that “neo-Byzantinism” was not more than a relative term and prophetically noted that, “at home we will be called something else”. He was right – the term was relative. The artist tried to establish a new style of Modern Art based on the historical samples. Boichuk believed that new Ukrainian art could exist only in form of frescoes adorning public buildings and spaces – easily accessible, ‘Art for the People’. In many ways, the work of his group is similar that that of the Mexican muralists – some have compared Boichuk to Diego Rivera.

If the Kyiv art scene was dominated by artists of the Ukrainian Secession such as Narbut or Krychevsky and the followers of Boichuk, in Kharkiv it was led by Vasil Yermilov (1894 – 1968), the future leader of Ukrainian Constructivism, responsible for Bolshevik propaganda. Yermilov established a highly original style of analytical constructivism, producing numerous reliefs and paintings distinctive by their complicated textures. If Kyiv was the center of figurative modernism, Kharkiv was

the capital of constructivism and non-figurative art.
Kyiv – the Capital of Jewish Cultural Renaissance

The short-lived Ukrainian Peoples Republic, the history of which was scarred by Jewish pogroms committed by Ukrainian troops under the command of Simon Petliura became an unlikely setting for a Jewish cultural renaissance. From 1918 to 1920 the League of Jewish Culture was active in Kyiv, and included such luminaries as Lazar (El) Lissitzky (1890-1941), Issachar Ber Ryback (1897–1935) and Isaak Rabinovich (1894–1961) who combined Jewish national motives and topics with visual devices of modernist painting.

Jewish artists continued to play highly important role in Ukrainian artistic life after the end of the activities of the League. Some of them, for example Manuil Shekhtman, combined Boichuk's monumental style with Jewish tradition. Others were active in the field of book illustration.

Artists of the Avant-Garde Theatre in Ukraine

Theatre became one of the most powerful manifestations of Ukrainian avant-garde. The blossoming of theatrical experiments was connected with the name of Les Kurbas, who became the leading director of post-revolutionary Ukraine. In 1916 he established the experimental Young Theatre in Kyiv and Kurbas invited Anatoly Petrytsky (1895-1964) to become the artist of the new theatre. Petrytsky was not only a gifted painter who experienced the influence of Cubism, but also became the most important theatre artist of the state. In the second part of the 1920's, Petrytsky introduced into his theatre designs elements of constructivism. In 1922 Kurbas established the "Berezil" Theatre, which became the main theatrical movement of the Ukrainian avant-garde. The main artists of "Berizil" were Vadym Meller (1884–1962), awarded the Gold Medal at the Exposition Internationale des Modernes in Paris in 1925, but also included Matviy Drak (1887-1964), Mark Epshtein (1899–1964), Borys Kosarev (1897-1994), Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov (1895- were awarded 1968) and others.

National Bolshevism and the Lost Generation

After the Bolshevik victory the policy of so-called "Ukrainization", supported by Moscow, was introduced for the appeasement of the Ukrainian population. The decree of the Council of Peoples Commissars of Ukraine, "On the implementation of the Ukrainization of Educational and Cultural Institutions" (July 27, 1923) led to the de-facto marginalization of Russian language, which was not taught in schools until 1938. The policy of Ukrainization was not different to the national policy practiced in other republics which, in 1924, was named the Soviet Union. Initiating so-called "Korenizatsia" (rooting), the Soviet leadership used nationalist sentiments as a tool to destroy resistance to the White armies and the Tsarist oppression of non-Russian provinces.

Until the early 1930's, artistic and cultural organizations were completely independent of such Soviet structures as Narkompros (Peoples Commissariat of Enlightenment) and were managed by the Ukrainian government. Ukraine, was the only republic of the USSR (bar the Russian Federation) to have separate representation at the Venice Biennale - being an autonomous section of the USSR pavilion.

Naturally, Ukrainian artists had contacts with their Russian counterparts. For example, Ukraine became a refuge for Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin, who were invited to teach in the Kyiv Art Institute, undoubtedly influencing Ukrainian constructivists. However, the dominating force in Ukrainian art life remained the figurative-modernist painting of the school of Boichuk.

The last generation of Ukrainian modernists formed at the end of 1920's - beginning of the 1930's. Artists like Semyon Ioffe, Kosiantyn Yeleva, Oleksandr Syrotenko and others were fascinated by Neue Sachlichkeit, Novecento Italiano and such Russian art groups as OST (Society of Easel Painting). However, their activity was soon interrupted by the radical change of the political climate.

The political U-turn started in the beginning of the 1930's when the first wave of repressions targeted the national intelligentsia - the Ukrainian purges, which climaxed in 1933, happened 4 years earlier than in other parts of the USSR and numerous writers, poets and artists, including Boichuk, were executed.

By 1937 the period of the national Ukrainian modernism ended and Ukrainian Art was turned into a provincial department of Socialist Realism - "national in style, socialist in content".