

In the Eye of the Storm: Modernism in Ukraine: 1900s – 1930s.

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The proposed exhibition is dedicated to the dramatic story of Ukrainian modernism. Formed during the last decade of the existence of the Russian empire, radical Ukrainian art became if not a precursor but a seismographer indicating the inevitable tectonic changes of the upcoming revolution and an attempt to establish an independent state. The modernist artists took an active part in nation-building, trying to create a recognizable national style. After five years of the bloody War for Independence, Bolsheviks defeated Ukrainian forces and established the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. However, the initial period of communist rule created an illusion of cultural autonomy. The policy of Ukrainization, initially supported by Moscow for tactical reasons, facilitated the rapid development of the national culture. The 1920s became the time of bold artistic and literary experiments, the period of true Renaissance of Ukrainian art, literature, theatre, and cinema. Such cultural autonomy helped Ukraine prolong the period of aesthetic experimentation compared to the other parts of the Soviet Union. When such pivotal figures of avant-garde art as Kazimir Malevich and Volodymir Tatlin were blacklisted in Russia as the dangerous "formalists," they found refuge in Kyiv. In Ukraine, until 1930, they still could teach, exhibit, and publish freely. However, it was just the calm before the storm. The policy of Ukrainization was finished in 1931 by ruthless purges of the Ukrainian intellectual elite. Many poets, writers, theatre directors, and artists faced summary execution or imprisonment in GULAG. Manuscripts, books, and artworks turned into ashes. Murals were overpainted or scraped down. Later, the martyrs of the Ukrainian culture were called the "Executed Renaissance." After the severe waves of repressions, Ukrainian modernism was doomed to oblivion. Those artworks, which were not destroyed, were sent to the secret repositories.

Obviously, the Great Purges didn't spare artists and intellectuals in the other parts of the USSR, but in Ukraine, they started earlier and had a specific character. If in Russia, repressed artists and writers were classified as "the enemies of people," in Ukraine, they were accused of the "bourgeois nationalism." The destruction of Ukrainian literature and art became a cultural genocide. In a year, the artificial famine, known as Holodomor, followed, taking the lives of millions of Ukrainians.

During the period of Krushchev's abortive de-Stalinization, interest in Ukrainian modernism started to grow. Some works of the "formalists" even returned to the museum halls. This process was painful and patchy. The dark shadow of accusation in "nationalism" made the rehabilitation of numerous Ukrainian artists not more than impossible.

At the same time, the West rediscovered the revolutionary avant-garde art of the early period of the Soviet State. The fashion for "the Great Experiment of Russian Art" led to the appropriation of Ukrainian artists. They fall under the umbrella definition of "Russian

avant-garde" coined by the Western art market. The artists who spent all of their life in Ukraine and whose artistic experimentation became an integral part of the development of the national art school unexpectedly became "Russian." Thus, the Western art dealers and museum curators carelessly followed the Russian imperialist agenda. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the formation of a new imperialist ideology of the Russian state, such cultural appropriation reached new threatening levels.

The proposed exhibition will become an attempt to reclaim the history of Ukrainian modernism and return it into the context of the development of both the national culture and European art of the first half of the 20th century. It will introduce the European public to the tragic and, at the same time, fascinating history of modernism in Ukraine and offer the revision of the artistic process in one of the largest countries of Europe based on post-colonial approaches dominating the intellectual discourse of our time.