ART INTO PRODUCTION

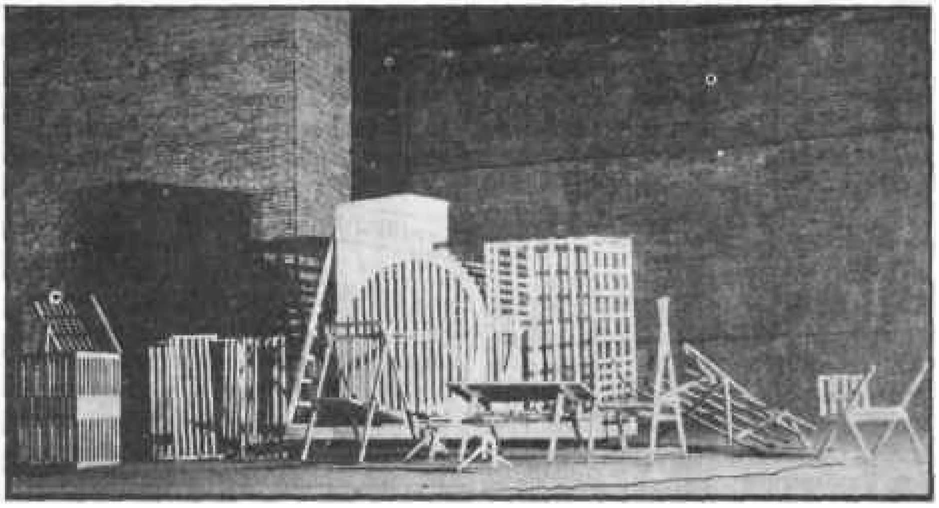
John Willett

'Art into Production', now showing at the Crafts Council in London (until April 28), is a rather more precise and concentrated affair than its title would indicate. Due in the first place to the initiative of the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and the Crafts Council, it is an exhibition put together by the Soviet Ministry of Culture from some relatively little-known Soviet public and private collections. It shows, much more comprehensively than could such all-embracing shows as 'Paris-Moscow', the achievements of the Modern Movement from the October Revolution till the early 1930s as seen in two departments of the applied arts: textiles, with a sidelong glance at fashion, and, above all, ceramics. It contains many beautiful and fascinating exhibits, sometimes of great originality, and for anybody interested in the shifting relationship between art, ideology and practical economics it could be an eye-opener.

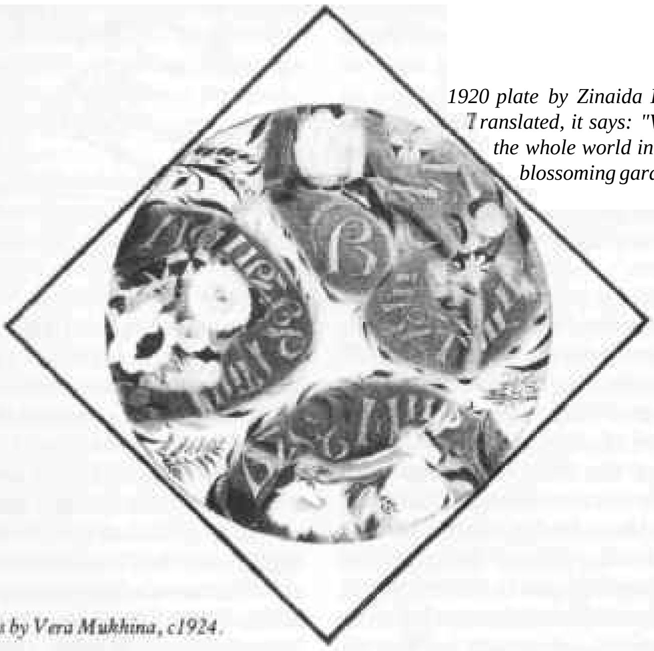
The early years of revolutionary Soviet art saw two stages in the utilisation of the modern movement as it had developed both inside and outside Russia in the early years of the century. First there had been the heroic, Utopian phase which we associate with the pageants and street decorations of Petrograd and the theoretical writings of such critics as Punin and Osip Brik, then already pressing for art to move into production. Then, some three years after the revolution proper, came the end of the civil war, closely followed by the start of the New Economic Policy and, with this, the elaboration by Rodchenko, Arvatov and others (still including Brik) of a much harder-headed Constructivist aesthetic closely geared to practical production, whether in the areas covered by the present exhibition or in such others as theatre, typography, photography, architecture and the cinema. Here the argument, mostly conducted within the new artistic think-tank called Inkhuk, was no longer about the outward symbols of socialism so much as the establishment of a non-representational, multi-dimensional visual language which could be applied to the problems involved in making socialism work. This was the situation when the *avant-garde* artists first turned to the design of textiles and clothing in 1921, after which much of the work by such Constructivists as Rodchenko, his wife Stepanova, Popova and Tatlin gives evidence of their consistent, yet daringly advanced abstract aesthetic, with results that look 'modern' even today.

However, the gifted Stepanova abandoned the Moscow First Textile Factory in 1924 to bear her daughter (one of the lenders to the exhibition); and during the same year Popova died in her mid-thirties. From then on recognisable symbols - machinery, electric light bulbs, the Red Cavalry, soldiers on skis - make their appearance, often as elements in a more or less constructivist design. The strikingly simple clothing comes mainly from before that, though the actual examples shown (on rather poor dummies) are recent reconstructions. Both here and in the relevant photographs and designs there are some appealing ideas for our own designers, who may well envy such a combination of geometric simplicity, sureness of colour and, in the case of the older fashion designer Lamanova, odd touches of traditional embroidery.

With the ceramics however we are largely back in the first, Utopian phase. Various factors seem to have been at work here. First of all, this was still a craft industry right up to the late 1920s, and with its substantial number of highly-skilled artist-craftspeople it was much more able to react quickly to the new revolutionary symbolism. On top of this there seems to have been a greater personal and stylistic continuity than in most other branches of the arts, so that the standards and, to some extent, the visible influence of the 'World of Art' movement of the 1890s persisted, particularly in the Petrograd state (subsequently 'Lomonosov') porcelain factory from which many of the show's finest exhibits come. Mitislav Dobuzhinsky, the wives of Sudeikin and Bilibin: such names belong in a very different context from those of the somewhat younger Constructivists, and it is surprising to see how well they responded to the new demands. This early porcelain is particularly strongly represented, with its unique mixture of revolutionary sentiment - expressed in symbols, representative figures or freehand Cyrillic inscriptions - of lively colouring with splendid cobalts and gold leaf, and of sensitive, sometimes quite delicate brushwork.

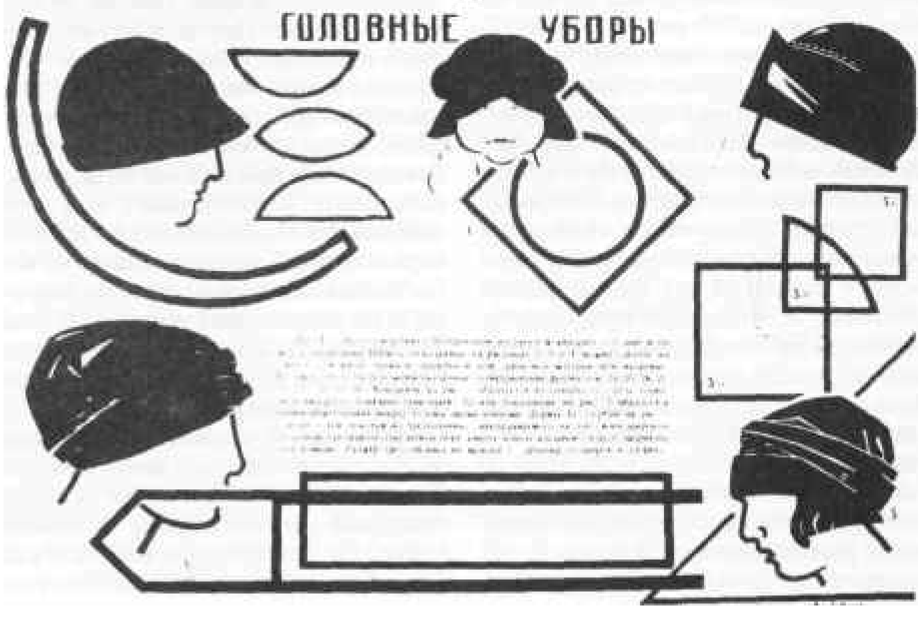


Acting apparatus designed by V. Stepanova for 'The Death of Tarelkin', 1922.



1920 plate by Zinaida Kobyletskaya. Translated, it says: "We will turn the whole world into a blossoming garden."

Millinery designs by Vera Mukhina, c1924.



Admittedly these inscriptions (sometimes supplied by Commissar Lunacharsky himself, it seems), are apt to strike slightly absurd echoes in an English ear, though you have to be sadly lacking in historical imagination not to be moved by Kobyletskaya's plate of 1920 with its swirling message that 'We will turn the whole world into a blossoming garden'. It is amazing what hope, and (so it still seems) what gaiety emanate from these one-off dishes and little figures - the woman sewing a dull red banner for instance, with her paisley blouse and narrow striped skirt, or the woman worker making a speech: white blouse with green dots, red beret, long blue skirt, one foot on a leafy plinth, left hand clenched against her heart, right hand holding the magazine *Robotnitsa (The Woman Worker)* all rounded off by a few light strokes delineating the face. How unlike a Dresden shepherdess, to say nothing of flying geese or a china Alsatian. . . Perhaps it is not fair to compare these highly skilled products (done largely for export) with the experiments of Kandinsky and the Malevitch group, but the bulk of the abstract of Suprematist work in the show looks depressingly like preconceived decoration applied more or less arbitrarily to undistinguished ceramic forms. Only exceptionally did Malevitch or Suetin let their imagination run riot, and then none too successfully, as in the former's rather crazy half-cup and clumsy monochrome teapot, while oddly enough the Constructivists contribute virtually nothing. Tatlin's plate being unrepresentative, their only exhibits are some feeble designs by Rodchenko and a delightful tray of breast-like babies' bottles by the former's assistant Sotnikov.

If the show of textiles is dominated by those remarkable women constructivists, the ceramics perhaps owe most to a couple who remained working in Paris and make no appearance in the exhibition. This was Larionov and Goncharova, whose mixture of Fauve primitivism, Russian populism and Futurist dynamism seems to underlie so much of the work of the State Porcelain Factory artists. Theirs was a much more pliable approach than any type of geometrical abstraction, though clearly it was better suited to hand-painted pieces than to mass production. For in textiles and ceramics alike there was a marked falling off in design standards after the mid-1920s, when the best artists had detached themselves from 'production' in the one area before the problem of mass production had seriously begun to be tackled in the other. Crockery forms, it seems, were thereafter standardised and mechanical methods of decoration such as transfer and stencilling introduced. The relatively few examples of the results of this important development - like the Vkhutein tea set of 1927 - are much less impressive than the first factory-produced textile designs, and are certainly not to be compared with the equivalent services produced by German industry under the influence of the Bauhaus.

It would be simple then to write off the evident decline from 1924 on as part of a general European reaction, or more specifically as the beginnings of a slide towards the cultural conservatism of the Stalinist 30s. Yet the exhibition suggests that, if only the constructivists had kept up their momentum and applied themselves to ceramic design as effectively as they had begun to do in textiles, the story would have been rather different. As it was, the industrialisation of the potteries came too late.

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March, 384 pp, £24.95

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