

THE
IMPACT OF RUSSIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM

ON
GRAPHIC DESIGN

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INTRODUCTION

Many artistic movements during the past century have influenced modern graphic design. Communication has evolved. From the invention of writing to the use of brand identity and strategy, design influences people everyday. One of the most influential groups to affect the structure of graphic design existed in the early 1900's. The Russian constructivist group formed in response to the wars and social issues facing people in that part of the world. Although the individual artists within the group had their own interpretations of what constructivist art consisted of, each of them based their work on a few key principles. These principles governed a working group of artists, and helped form a school for these same artists to receive training. The establishment of a grid system for organizing information, the attention to how something is constructed and the use of bold imagery and typography in poster construction makes the Russian constructivist movement one of the most important in the last century.

War has an effect on people. Artists are people. Therefore, war has an affect on art. Somehow, Russia found itself in the middle of many battles. Both World War I and the Russian Revolution tore the country apart in the first 20 years of the twentieth century. Although many people suffered; art intended to survive. "The Russian movement was actually accelerated by the revolution, for art was given a social role rarely assigned to it. Leftist artists had been opposed to the old order and its conservative visual art." (Meggs, 287) These artists united to establish a fresh voice and expand the role of art in communication.

THE RUSSIAN CONSTRUCTIVISTS

Over time, this group of artists has become known as the Russian constructivists. Led by El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko, this group of more than twenty-five artists opposed conservative visual art and doing 'art for art's sake.' They decided that they would focus their attention on industrial design, visual communications and applied arts that would serve the communist society. These artists asked other artists to join



INGA, THEATER OF THE REVOLUTION (C. 1929)
by Alexander Rodchenko
SOURCE: MOMA.ORG

them by not producing useless things like paintings, and instead, turn their focus to the development of the poster. In their minds, this new work "belongs to the duty of the artist as a citizen of the community who is clearing the field of the old rubbish in preparation for the new life." (Meggs, 287-289) This sense of creating art for the benefit of the community connected constructivist artists with one another.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

After the group formed, it was necessary to establish a set of rules to govern their purpose in the art world and to set them apart from traditional artists. To do this, the constructivists formed a three-part ideal that each artist should adhere to. These ideals include: tectonics, texture, and construction.

TECTONICS

Tectonics revolved around the idea that form and ideals must work together. It was defined as the emergence "from the ideological tenets of communism on the one hand, and, on the other, from the appropriate use of industrial materials." (Lodder, 94) In other words, "tectonics represented the unification of communist ideology with visual form." (Meggs, 289) These artists believed that the combination of the two in practice should lead to a "synthesis of the new context and the new form." (Lodder, 99) If an artist applied this ideal properly, it would demonstrate that this individual was "a Marxist who has outlived art and has a really advanced knowledge of industrial material." (Lodder, 99) Tectonics allowed constructive artists to connect art with politics for the benefit of the community.



RECHEVIK,STIKHI (C. 1924) by Alexander Rodchenko
SOURCE: MOMA.ORG

FAKTURA

The second ideal constructivist artist believed in was the use of faktura (texture). To the constructivists, "Faktura (texture) is not the working of the material as a whole and is consciously to select material and use it expediently without halting the movement of the construction or limiting its tectonic." (Lodder, 99) In the mind of a constructivist, this attention to detail helped maintain the integrity of each artistic contribution. The full use of available resources guarded against waste and anything that could be considered 'art for art's sake.' Constructivism displays a minimalist approach to design.

CONSTRUCTION

Third, a constructivist made use of construction in each piece of art. This ideal relates to the artistic process or manner in which materials are organized. This ideal is at the heart of what constructivism represents. "If the tectonic unites the ideological and formal, and as a result provides unity of conception, and the faktura is the condition of the material, then the construction reveals the actual process of structuring. Thus we have the third discipline, the discipline of the formation of the conception through the use of worked material." (Lodder, 99) In this way, construction coordinates the three individual aspects of the working group of artists. The attention to process and how something is built relates directly to how current designers and artists display their process work.

All three factors combine to form constructivist theory. In general, the theory represents a completely impersonalized, utilitarian product. Unifying characteristics become more apparent when the design process is fully examined. The constructivist method evolved into a unique formal language, a style, and a process of working that allowed for the use of a pre-established vocabulary. This system of organization became the expression of structures, angles, rectangularity, simplicity, material, geometry and economy of line. When combined, these factors produced unique surface solutions. (Lodder, 180) Modern-day designers still apply similar techniques and processes in their work today.

THE FIRST WORKING GROUP

The creation of the constructivist ideal paved the way for the formation of a group of working artists who shared similar artistic beliefs and methods. In 1921, the First Working Group of Constructivists was formed. (Lodder, 94)

"Their mission was twofold:

- 1.) the objective analysis of works of art for the revelation of their elements (fundamental and supplementary), and the laws of their organization;
- 2.) the analysis of elements and the laws of their organization in works of art." (Gough, 32)

According to theoretician Boris Eikhenbaum, "we do not incorporate into our work issues involving biography or the psychology of creativity. Instead, the so-called formal method elaborated...seeks to define the 'literariness' of literature - that quality or factor that defines the language of verse or prose as literary and distinguishes it from other kinds of verbal expression. The Working Group's version of this question is: What factor's define painting's painterliness?" (Gough, 32) The Working Group provided a central location for constructivist artists to learn proper artistic methods and understand how the constructivist ideals work together.

КОНСТРУКТИВИЗМ

KONSTRUCTIVISM (c. 1922) by Aleksei Gan
SOURCE: MOMA.ORG

With a set of ideals and a mission statement in place, the group appointed Russian theorist and designer Aleksei Gan to represent them as chief rhetorician. "His slogans included 'we declare uncompromising war on art' and 'death to art', which he attempted to encapsulate in his designs for portable book kiosks, folding street stalls, exhibition posters and clothing, where the objects were reduced to the most simple and functional forms." (Howard) "According to Gan, 'we must ask ourselves the question: how, ideologically speaking, is our purposefulness to be defined? And we must answer clearly and precisely that in addition to its formal essence, we are [also] investigating purposefulness from the point of view of a Communist future.' Affirming Gan's assertion that 'the ideological dimension must go hand in hand with the informal,' the opening line of the Constructivist program declares, as the chief objective, "The communist expression of material structures". This provocative but rather abstruse formulation quickly becomes the group's key slogan and, as such, is often reiterated in Constructivist documents." (Gough, 68-69) Gan's precise artistic views and ideology gave artists something to internalize.

ALEKSEI GAN

One of Gan's most important contributions to the movement is his summary of the constructivist ideals found in a brochure entitled *Konstruktivism*, which he wrote in 1922. (Meggs, 289) In the brochure, Gan criticized abstract painters for their inability to break the umbilical cord connecting them to traditional art and boasted that constructivism had moved from laboratory work to practical application. Gan decided that modern painters neglected to use and recognize the principle of construction in their work. The Working Group spent many sessions trying to understand the terminology and substance that Gan had written about in his brochure. After several meetings, the Group decided that the central focus of their work would be to 'analyze the concepts of construction and composition and the factor of their delimitation.' (Gough, 38) According to Gan, "Constructivism is the 'necessary' artistic practice of its particular historical moment, because it is directly responsive to the abrupt shifts that underpin the process of the building of communism (unlike sculpture and architecture, which are 'eternalizing' and 'monumentalizing' in their aspirations). Constructivism fosters the momentary, transitional, flexible, and adaptable over the monumental and eternal." (Gough, 71) This view of how art affects the world still applies today. The ever-changing landscape of politics, products and people forces designers to adapt and change to meet the needs of the people.

EL LISSITZKY

Many artists contributed to the success of the constructivist movement in Russia. One of the most successful was El (Lazar Markovich) Lissitzky. His varied interests and willingness to experiment with forms, shapes and balance contributed to his success. As an artist, Lissitzky was a proficient painter, architect, photographer, and graphic designer. His vision and success influenced the history of graphic design. (Meggs, 289) One of Lissitzky's most important contributions to the constructivist movement was his personal definition of the fundamental of style in regards to objects.

KURT SCHWITTERS (c. 1924) by El Lissitzky
SOURCE: MOMA.ORG





PROUN 19D (C. 1922?) by El Lissitzky
SOURCE: MOMA.ORG

He concluded that there were five qualities that produced their expressive qualities:

- 1.) they represent themselves, they do not depict something completely different.
THEY ARE HONEST.
- 2.) the eye takes them in as a whole. **THEY ARE PRECISE.**
- 3.) They are simple, not from any poverty of formative energy or imaginative fantasy, but from richness, striving towards laconism. **THEY ARE ELEMENTARY.**
- 4.) Their form, as a whole and in detail, could be made from circles and lines.
THEY ARE GEOMETRICAL.
- 5.) They were made by man's hands by means of the working parts of the modern machine. **THEY ARE INDUSTRIAL."** (Lodder, 157)

Lissitzky completely rejected the application of ornamentation. He believed the Russian Revolution represented a new beginning for mankind. He felt that "communism and social engineering would create a new order, technology would provide for society's needs, and the artist/designer (he called himself a constructor) would forge a unity between art and technology by constructing a new world of objects to provide mankind with a richer society and environment. This idealism led him to put increasing emphasis on graphic design, as he moved from private aesthetic experience into the mainstream of communal life." (Meggs, 290)

VKHUTEMAS

Similar to other artistic movements of the twentieth century, the Russian constructivists established a school for training and producing their work. Formed in 1920, the constructivist training facility was called VKhUTEMAS. The school was established to train "highly

qualified master artists for industry." (Lodder, 109) The school was organized to move students toward the "synthesis between art and life, art and technology, (and) lay through the creation and training of the 'artist constructor.'" (Lodder, 109) With these goals in mind, the VkhUTEMAS artistic training would allow each artist to fully participate in the constructive work that was, at that time, forming a socialist environment. In other words, the school transformed artists into constructors. (Lodder, 109)

ALEXANDER RODCHENKO

VkhUTEMAS instructors found success as they applied the constructivist ideals to their work. Over time, various styles and forms of constructivism



DOVROLET (c. 1923) by Alexander Rodchenko
SOURCE: MOMA.ORG

emerged. The style that was initially built for society developed into commercial success. One of the most successful Russian constructivists to break into the world of advertising was Alexander Rodchenko. His work included a mixture of typography, montage and photography. Some of the most recognizable characteristics of Rodchenko's work include concise letterforms, strong geometric construction and large areas of color. (Meggs, 294) "Texts and pictures were succinct, devoid of unnecessary information." (Karginov, 120) Rodchenko wanted the message to be a quick read for those who viewed the work. "Passers-by had to be drawn to the poster and held until the information was absorbed... he used large, plain, easily legible letters, and often extra large exclamation points and question marks, in order to make the poster more attractive." (Karginov, 120)

CONCLUSION

Several artists, including Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and Gan combined to build the constructivist movement. Their adherence to a unifying set of ideals and desire to do art for the betterment of the community are admirable. The Working Group of artists and training received at VKhUTEMAS provided Russian artists with a fresh perspective on the purpose of art and design in the community. The constructivist separation from decorative arts created a unique voice in a time of war and turmoil. The process of construction, the use of angles and shapes, and the minimalist approach to design are still applicable in modern-day design. All of these contributions demonstrate why Russian constructivism is one of the most important artistic movements of the 20th century.

RESOURCE MATERIALS:

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