

Kyiv: The Capital of Modernity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

JEAN-CLAUDE MARCADÉ

THROUGHOUT ITS LONG HISTORY Kyiv experienced many ups and downs, from the early tenth century, when it was the capital of the Kyivan Principality, to our own times, when it became the capital of an independent Ukrainian state.

It was not until the very end of the nineteenth century that the “gubernatorial center” of Kyiv once again began to play a role more prominent than that of a provincial capital. Between 1884 and 1889 Mikhail Vrubel’ worked in Kyiv; it was there that he completed his visionary frescoes in St. Cyril’s Church, prepared designs for painting the interiors of St. Volodymyr’s Cathedral that were never executed, and created drawings and studies for still lifes that proved to be influential for Russian and Ukrainian art.

Under the influence of Byzantine art coupled with Venetian painting Vrubel’ transformed the heritage of Aleksandr Ivanov’s “Biblical Sketches” into a completely new synthesis which contained the seeds of the future achievements of “left art,” the so-called “avant-garde.” At the same time, he shattered the traditional canons of Orthodox icon painting.¹

* * *

During his Kyiv period Vrubel’ taught at the Kyiv Drawing School, which was founded amid great difficulties by the Ukrainian realist painter Mykola Murashko. The school was financed by the entrepreneur and patron of the arts Ivan Tereshchenko. When Tereshchenko died in 1901, the Drawing School closed down and was soon replaced by the Kyiv Art School in the capital. The genre painter Mykola Pymonenko

1. See N. M. Tarabukin, *Mikhail Aleksandrovich Vrubel’* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1974).

(1862–1912), creator of idyllic paintings of Ukrainian peasant life, taught there until 1905. Among his pupils were Aristarkh Lentulov, Oleksandr Bohomazov, Alexandra Exter, Abram Manevich, and Volodymyr Burliuk—that is, the leading representatives of the future avant-garde. In one of his autobiographies, Kazimir Malevich writes that he became acquainted with Pymonenko at the beginning of his career:

His paintings made a great impression on me. He showed me the painting *Hopak* [fig. 1a, at right]. I was overwhelmed by everything I saw in his studio. There were a great many easels with paintings depicting the life of Ukraine.

I show him my own works, by now nature studies. I'm in the Kyiv Art School.²

We see no evidence that Malevich had any connection with the art works produced in the Kyiv Art School, but the influence of Pymonenko, even if not attested in Malevich's output before 1905 (for which period there is no reliable information), is nevertheless obvious. To my mind, for instance, Malevich's gouache painting *Floor Polishers* (1911) (fig. 1b, below) exhibits the rhythm of the Hopak dance. Dmytro Horbachov has pointed out his influence on Malevich's postsuprematist works; for example, *The Reapers* (1928–1929) (fig. 2a, below) and *The Flower Girl* (1930) (fig. 3a, below) from the State Russian Museum pay homage to Pymonenko's eponymous paintings (figs. 2b and 3b, below).³ Here is what Malevich recounts about his impressions of the Ukrainian capital:

Every year a great fair was held in the city of Kyiv, which was attended by merchants from all over the world...

...I felt a great attraction for the city of Kyiv. I always had the sense that Kyiv was remarkable. Houses built out of colored bricks, the steep hills, the Dnieper, the distant horizon, steamboats. Everything about its life affected me more and more. Peasant women crossed

2. N. I. Khardzhiev, "K. Malevich: Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika," in *Stat 'i ob avangarde: V dvukh tomakh* (Moscow: RA, 1997), 1:118. Malevich writes that he visited Pymonenko's studio before he left for Kursk—that is, around 1896. Malevich could also have seen Pymonenko's *Hopak* around 1909, when the painting became famous because of the gold medal it won at the Salon des Artistes Français in Paris.

3. Cf. Pymonenko's *Harvest in Ukraine* (1896), *Kyiv Flower Girl* (1897), and *The Reaper* (1889). See Dmytro Horbachov, "Kyivs 'kyi trykutnyk Malevycha (Pymonenko, Boichuk, Bohomazov)," in *Vin ta ia buly ukraïntsi": Malevych ta Ukraïna*, comp. Dmytro Horbachov, ed. S. Papeta and O. Papeta (Kyiv: SIM studii, 2006), 210–17.



Figure 1a. Mykola Pymonenko. *Hopak*. 1909. Present location unknown. Monochrome negative on glass support. Photography: François Antoine Vizzavona. © RMN-Grand Palais / François Vizzavona / Art Resource, NY.



Figure 1b. Kazimir Malevich. *Floor Polishers*. 1911. Paper, gouache. 77.7 x 71 cm. Collection Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.



Figure 2a. Kazimir Malevich. *The Reapers*. 1928–1929. Oil on wood.
71 x 102 cm. © State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



Figure 2b. Mykola Pymonenko. *The Reaper*. 1889. Oil on canvas.
137 x 75 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.



Figure 3a. Kazimir Malevich. *The Flower Girl*. 1930. Oil on canvas. 80 x 100 cm. © State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



Figure 3b. Mykola Pymonenko. *Kyiv Flower Girl*. 1897. Oil on canvas. 64 x 77 cm. Private collection. Reproduced by permission from I. V. Ohiiivs'ka, ed., *Mykola Pymonenko* (Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 2013), 116.

the Dnieper in skiffs, bringing butter, milk, sour cream, filling the banks and streets of Kyiv, infusing it with special color.⁴

After the first Russian revolution of 1905 and Tsar Nicholas II's manifesto of October 17 that same year, which permitted street demonstrations, Kyiv became the site of clashes between extreme-right monarchists and socialists.

Pogroms began: peasants bringing food to sell in the city robbed and beat Jews. The school [Kyiv Art School—J-C. M.] was outraged by the inaction of the authorities, and the students joined a street demonstration....The school administration decided to get rid of the dissidents and expelled forty-five students under the pretext of non-payment of tuition fees.⁵

Among these dissidents were two artists, Alexander Archipenko and Oleksandr Bohomazov, who "lost their deferment from military service."⁶ They were rescued from this unhappy fate (what a stint in the Russian army meant was well known) thanks to the painter and follower of the Barbizon school Serhii Svitoslavs'kyi (1857–1931). Many painters passed through Svitoslavs'kyi's studio, including Vadim Falileev, Bohomazov, Manevich, Sofiia Levyts'ka, and Exter.⁷

An exhibition of paintings by the pupils of Svitoslavs'kyi's studio took place in April 1906. Archipenko displayed five of his sculptures, which elicited the following commentary in a Kyiv newspaper: "Archipenko's sculptures demonstrate that there is a 'divine spark' in the young sculptor."⁸ Archipenko was nineteen at the time. He spent five years at the Kyiv Art School, and in 1908 left Ukraine permanently and settled in France. There is no doubt that those five years in Kyiv served as an indispensable foundation for the future development of Archipenko's innovative sculptural techniques between 1912 and 1920. His teacher

4. Khardzhiev, "K. Malevich," 1:114.

5. Dmytro Horbatchov, "La vie à Kiev au temps de Pevsner (1902–1909)," in *Pevsner (1884–1962): Colloque international Antoine Pevsner tenu au musée Rodin en décembre 1992 sous la direction de Jean-Claude Marcadé* ([Villeurbanne]: Art édition, Association "Les Amis d'Antoine Pevsner," 1995), 9–10.

6. *Ibid.*, 10.

7. On Svitoslavs'kyi's Saturday "open houses," see Georgii Kovalenko, "Aleksandra Ekster: Pervye kievskie gody," *Iskusstvoznanie*, 2005, no. 1, 557 and subsequent pages.

8. "Скульптура д. Архипенка досить ясно свідчить, що в молодого скульптора є іскра божя." "Vystavka kartyn khudozhnyka Svitoslavs'koho ta ioho uchniv," *Hromads'ka dumka*, no. 96, 28 April 1906, 3. Cited in Horbatchov, "La vie à Kiev," 10.

in Kyiv was the Italian-born sculptor Elia (Emilio) Sala, whose 1902 Chimaera sculptures decorated a famous Kyiv home (House with Chimaeras) (fig. 4, at right) designed in the art nouveau style by the architect Władysław Horodecki, which, to a certain degree and making due allowances, was the equivalent of Antoni Gaudí's plant-like phantasmagoria in Barcelona. At the same time, Archipenko's work was deeply saturated with all the forms and colors of folk art and the geography of his native land—as is also true of the work of Sonia Delaunay (née Sof'ia Il'inichna Shtern). The Ukrainian critic Horbachov emphasizes this point: "Archipenko frequently reminds us of Ukrainian craftsmen with their impeccable taste in the decoration of toys and ceramic dishes, and in the carving of small chests."⁹

The founding of the Kyiv Museum of Art, Industry, and Science dedicated to Emperor Nicholas II in 1904 had a paramount influence on the development of folk handicraft art, the repository of incredible richness since time immemorial: pottery, ceramics, articles fashioned from bone, horn, and metal, embroidery, women's costumes, beadwork, and the like. On 19 February 1909 the museum held an exhibition in which Alexandra Exter and her friend Nataliia Davydova (1875–1933) took an active part. Both of these artists' homes were gathering places for Kyiv's intellectual and artistic elite. One of the frequenters of Davydova's house was the famous Polish composer and pianist Karol Szymanowski, who brought along such celebrities as the pianists Arthur Rubinstein (whose memoirs feature a description of the Davydov home),¹⁰ Heinrich Neuhaus, and Felix Blumenfeld, as well as conductors such as Grzegorz Fitelberg. It was said that if there was a domain in which Kyiv had never been provincial, it was the field of music. In addition to Szymanowski's circle, there was a circle associated with the Kyiv Music Society, under whose auspices performed such distinguished musicians as Pablo Casals, Jascha Heifetz, Aleksandr Glazunov, and Sergei Rachmaninoff.

The handicrafts exhibition enjoyed great success and spurred the founding of the Kyiv Handicraft Society under the chairmanship of Davydova. Davydova played an indispensable role in helping innova-

9. Dmytro Gorbachev, "Avant-propos," trans. Jean-Claude Marcadé, in *L'Art en Ukraine* (Toulouse: Musée des Augustins de Toulouse, 1993), 23; see also Dimitri Horbachov, "Ein Überblick über die ukrainische Avantgarde," in *Avantgarde & Ukraine*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, Igor Jassenjowsky, and Joseph Kiblitky (Munich: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1993), 55–72, published in conjunction with the exhibition *Avantgarde & Ukraine* held at the Villa Stuck in Munich, Germany.

10. For a more detailed study of this artistic, philosophical, and musical Kyiv circle, see Kovalenko's outstanding article, "Aleksandra Ekster: Pervye kievskie gody," 547 and subsequent pages.



Figure 4. Władysław Horodecki (architect), Elia (Emilio) Sala (sculptures). House with Chimaeras. 1902. Photo: Anna Chukur.

tive painters become aware of new forms and colors that could replace realistic and naturalistic banality or mediocre imitations of the French impressionists. Thus, after 1916 the peasant women of the Ukrainian villages of Verbivka, near Kharkiv, and Skoptsi, not far from Poltava, began to use suprematist motifs for their pillows, handbags, and other items. This was the result of the tireless efforts of Exter, Davydova, and Ievheniia Prybyl's'ka under the aegis of the Kyiv Handicraft Society. Art critic Evgenii Kuz'min wrote in 1912 that thanks to the handicraft society, "there emerged...many centers producing folk arts and crafts that find a ready market not only locally but also in Moscow, Petersburg, Paris, London, and even far-off Chicago—for example, the carpet-weaving ateliers established by V. N. Khanenko, Princess N. G. Iashvil', and A. V. Semyhradova. In the homes of the latter two and also on the estate of Mrs. Davydova the production of embroideries based on designs both

ancient and modern (but still in the same ancient style) has become very widespread.”¹¹

In 1906–1908 cultural life in Kyiv, although provincial, was enhanced by guest appearances of the celebrated Russian bass Fedor Shaliapin (Feodor Chaliapin), the actress Vera Komissarzhevskaja and her theater, and the actor and director Vsevolod Meyerhold and his Society of New Drama. Aleksandr Blok’s *Balaganchik* (The Fairground Booth) was staged. In 1908 the great Sarah Bernhardt also performed in Kyiv. Literary evenings were organized featuring such Russian writers as Ivan Bunin, Aleksei Remizov, Blok, Andrei Belyi, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, and others. The literary-artistic journal *V mire iskusstva*, financed by the Davydov family, Exter, and Princess Iashvil’, appeared in 1907. Its editor and publisher in 1908 was the Ukrainian composer and music theoretician Borys Ianovs’kyi (1876–1933). The goal of the journal was to carry forward, in the Ukrainian capital, the principles of Diaghilev’s St. Petersburg–based journal *Mir iskusstva*, which had stopped publishing in 1904. *V mire iskusstva* published articles about art, reproductions of art works, literary prose, and poetry.¹²

This brief survey of Kyiv’s intellectual and artistic life cannot overlook the Religious-Philosophical Society,¹³ which was something of a counterpart to the St. Petersburg and Moscow societies of the same name. This was the setting for the philosophical work of the great thinkers of the twentieth century, the Kyivites Nikolai Berdiaev and Lev Shestov. At the beginning of his philosophical memoirs *Samopoznanie (opyt filosofskoi avtobiografii)* (Self-Knowledge: An Essay in Philosophical Autobiography), Berdiaev describes Kyiv at the very end of the nineteenth century, offering a characterization that also remained true of Kyiv at the beginning of the twentieth century up to World War I:

Kyiv is one of the most beautiful cities not only in Russia but indeed in all of Europe. It sits up on the hills, on the banks of the Dnieper, with an extraordinarily broad vista, with a marvelous Tsar’s garden and the St. Sophia Cathedral, one of the finest churches in Russia.

11. Evgenii Kuz’min, “Pis’mo iz Kishineva,” *Russkaia Khudozhestvennaia Letopis’*, 1912, no. 8–9, 132. Cited in Kovalenko, “Aleksandra Ekster: Pervye kievskie gody,” 556.

12. For discussion of this journal, see Kovalenko, “Aleksandra Ekster: Pervye kievskie gody,” 559–62.

13. On the Religious-Philosophical Society in Kyiv, see Jutta Scherrer, *Die Petersburger Religiös-Philosophischen Vereinigungen: Die Entwicklung des religiösen Selbstverständnisses ihrer Intelligencija-Mitglieder (1901–1917)*, *Forschungen zur osteuropäischen Geschichte* 19 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1973), 226–34.

Adjacent to Pechersk are Lypky, also in the upper part of Kyiv. This is the part of the city where the nobility and high officials live; it consists of large private homes with gardens....Throughout my entire life I have had a special love of gardens. But I felt myself to have been born in the forest, and I loved the forest most of all. My whole childhood and adolescence are connected to Lypky. This was a world somewhat different from that of Pechersk, a world of the nobility and officials, more influenced by contemporary civilization, a world more inclined to gaiety, which Pechersk did not permit. On the other side of Khreshchatyk, the main thoroughfare with shops that was situated between two hills, lived the bourgeoisie. At the very bottom, by the Dnieper, lay Podil, inhabited mainly by Jews, but the Kyiv Theological Academy was also there....In Kyiv one always sensed a link with Western Europe.¹⁴

* * *

The distinguished twentieth-century artist Antoine Pevsner (Natan Abramovich Pevzner), who was born in the Belarusian town of Klimavichy, spent five years at the Kyiv Art School.¹⁵ Before becoming a master of Russian constructivism after 1920, he was a painter and sketch artist influenced by Vrubel'. Of course, Kyiv was still a somewhat provincial city, but, as Horbachov writes, "There was much to take comfort in: the Tereshchenko collection (which rivaled that of Tret'iakov and Alexander III), the collection of Western European paintings belonging to Varvara and Bohdan Khanenko (a descendant of a hetman of Ukraine)...; a European standard of book printing—Vasyl' Kul'zhenko's journals *Iskusstvo* and *V mire iskusstva*; the intellectualism of the Kyivan school of philosophy—Berdiaev, Shestov, Aleksandr Zakrzhevskii; and, most important for Pevsner, the 'avant-garde' exhibitions *Zveno* (The Link) and the Izdebski Salon."¹⁶

Zveno was one of the important exhibitions of the "pre-avant-garde," which in Ukraine and Russia was called "left art" or "Russian futurism"—that is, the innovative art that would overturn, between 1907 and

14. Nikolai Berdiaev, "Samopoznanie (opyt filosofskoi avtobiografii)," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2nd rev. ed. (Paris: YMCA Press, 1983), 1:14.

15. See the biography of Pevsner by Pierre Brullé, in *Antoine Pevsner: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre sculpté*, by Elisabeth Lebon and Pierre Brullé (Paris: Association "Les Amis d'Antoine Pevsner," Galerie-éditions Pierre Brullé, 2002), 222–64.

16. Horbatchov, "La vie à Kiev," 11.

1927, all the centuries-old artistic and aesthetic foundations that had held since the Renaissance. In 1907 in Moscow the Russian symbolist exhibition *Golubaia Roza* (Blue Rose) took place, as did the exhibition *Στεφανος* (*Stephanos*, the Wreath), where the first signs of primitivism appeared in the works of the brothers Volodymyr and David Burliuk, Mikhail Larionov, and Natalia Goncharova. In 1908, however, Kyiv became a city of “modernity” with the mounting of the *Zveno* exhibition. The main organizer, David Burliuk, describes this event that shook up the artistic scene of the Ukrainian capital in the following way: “In early January [of 1908] A. Exter and Davydova stopped by the *Stephanos*. At the time Exter took an obvious liking to me. She was young and beautiful. That is how the Kyiv exhibition was born. First, I traveled to Moscow and through Larionov brought the Muscovites’ paintings from there....The exhibition opened in Jindrich Jindřišek’s shop [a Czech-owned musical instrument store on Khreshchatyk—J-C. M.] in Kyiv and was named ‘Zveno.’ Aleksandra Aleksandrovna [Exter] displayed her *Switzerland*. There was a green chill in her canvases.”¹⁷ Burliuk adds, “The works of my brother Volodymyr were blows of an ax hacking at the old. The puzzled Kyiv critics heaped abuse [on them].”¹⁸ The magazine *Iskusstvo i pechatnoe delo* wrote, “‘Zveno’ gave us unsuccessful imitations of foreign models.”¹⁹ And for his part the elderly professor Mykola Murashko expressed his opinion in these words: “To be fair, I will say that in the work of the main organizer of ‘Zveno,’ Mrs. Exter, in her paintings *Ocean* and *The Breton Shore* there is much that is fine—there is depth, there are forms and style. However, she did not raise those around her to her level of understanding, but rather made concessions; like them, she abandoned conveying her subject matter, so that if there is a rock, then it should resemble a rock, because otherwise we look and become confused, not understanding what it is. In Polenov’s [painting] *Sea of Galilee* the rocks are beautiful and alive. But these—Larionov, Goncharova, and others—are hooligans! This is not art but the vexation of our simple-hearted society.”²⁰

17. David Burliuk, “Fragmenty iz vospominanii futurista,” cited in G. F. Kovalenko, *Aleksandra Ekster* (Moscow: Galart, 1993), 181.

18. Burliuk, “Fragmenty iz vospominanii futurista,” cited in Horbatchov, “La vie à Kiev,” 11.

19. “Khudozhestvennaia Khronika,” *Iskusstvo i pechatnoe delo* (Kyiv), 1909, no. 1–2, 18. Cited in Kovalenko, *Aleksandra Ekster*, 181.

20. Mykola Murashko, public lecture in the Kyiv Society of Antiquities and Arts (November, 1908). Archive of the National Art Museum of Ukraine, Kyiv, fond 17, no. 25, pp. 15–16. Cited in Horbatchov, “La vie à Kiev,” 11. See also Kovalenko, *Aleksandra Ekster*, 181; Kovalenko, “Aleksandra Ekster: Po napravleniiu k kubizmu,” *Iskusstvoznanie*, 2005, no. 2, 499, 518nn20–21.

To mark the occasion, David Burliuk issued a manifesto entitled “Golos impressionista v zashchitu zhivopisi” (The Voice of an Impressionist in Defense of Painting). The leaflet was published in *V mire iskusstva* and the newspaper *Kievlianin*. This was a pioneering “gesture” heralding the rise of a multitude of proclamations issued by European futurists, including Ukrainians and Russians, which proliferated with increasing frequency after 1909. The impressionism of artists from the Russian Empire that was practiced, for example, by Larionov, derived from French impressionism, but it transformed it by imbuing it with pantheistic and primitivist ideas.

Kyiv became the center of the European avant-garde yet again when an exhibition from Odesa arrived in 1910—the famous first Izdebski Salon. It showcased 776 works of art, including paintings, watercolors, graphic art, sculpture, and children’s drawings. Participating in the exhibition were members of Les Nabis (Maurice Denis, Édouard Vuillard), impressionists (Paul Signac, Pierre Bonnard, Larionov, Nikolai Tarkhov), symbolists (Odilon Redon), early cubists (Georges Braque, Henri le Fauconnier, Jean Metzinger), and the Fauves (the Parisians Kees van Dongen, Henri Matisse, Maurice de Vlaminck, Georges Rouault, Albert Marquet; the Russians Aristarkh Lentulov, Il’ia Mashkov; the Kyivite Exter; and the Munich-based Russians Wassily Kandinsky, Marianne von Werefkin, Vladimir Bekhteev, Alexej von Jawlensky). In the manifesto published in the exhibition’s catalog and entitled “Novaia zhivopis’” (New Painting), the organizer of the salon, the sculptor and painter Vladimir Izdebskii (Włodzimierz Izdebski), asserted that the art was but a small part of an immense psychological wave and that it corresponded to the general trend in innovative arts in the period around 1910 in Europe and also among artists who came from the Russian Empire—not to depict the world but to reveal it. The Kyivite Benedikt Livshits, a poet, erudite theoretician, and brilliant memoirist, declared:

Izdebsky’s exhibition was a turning-point in the development of my artistic tastes and views....

This was a new vision of the world in all its sensual splendour and outstanding diversity...; it was also a new philosophy of art, a heroic aesthetics which overthrew all the established canons of art and revealed distances which took my breath away.”²¹

Livshits was a close friend of Exter’s, who, incidentally, illustrated his collection of poetry *Volch’ e solntse* (Wolf’s Sun) in 1914.

21. Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, trans. and ed. John E. Bowlt (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1977), 36.



Figure 5. Alexandra Exter. *Still Life with Grapes*. Circa 1914. Oil and tempera on canvas, collage. 46 x 35 cm. Private collection, Paris. Image courtesy of Jean-Claude Marcadé.



Figure 6. Alexandra Exter. *The City*. 1911. Gouache and oil on canvas. 123 x 73 cm. Private collection, Paris. Image courtesy of Jean-Claude Marcadé.

Exter is one of the pillars of twentieth-century art (see figs. 5–6, above). Without a doubt, she belongs to the Kyivan, if not Ukrainian, school of art, which left such a strong imprint on that century's quests for innovation. In everything she did in her creative life, in her outstanding theater sets and costumes, and, above all, in her paintings, one can sense all that she drew upon in the Ukrainian city whose dominant aesthetic was the baroque, to which were added more archaic visual elements. Exter's entire body of work, with the exception, perhaps, of her short-lived constructivist period (1921–1922) and her turn to cubistic neoclassicism in France in the 1930s, bears the mark of the baroque: the profusion and generosity of forms and colors and the swirling motion of spirals. Here I would like to cite a few lines from her biographer, Georgy Kovalenko: "The majority of Alexandra Exter's life is bound up with Kyiv, with Ukraine. She traveled a lot, she lived for long periods in Paris and Moscow, in Rome and St. Petersburg, but she would always return: her house, her atelier, her celebrated studio were all in Kyiv. And when she would have to leave Kyiv forever, she would set up her Paris house just like the one in Kyiv. It would have many bright Ukrainian rugs, embroideries, Ukrainian ceramics, and Ukrainian icons."²²

At the same time, Exter was an exceptional "conduit" of innovative artistic ideas. She moved between Kyiv, Moscow, Paris, and Italy. There is a passage in Livshits's "Polutoraglazi strelets" (The One and a Half-Eyed Archer) where David Burliuk turns to his brother Volodymyr with these words:

"My child, look, [...] what Alexandra Alexandrovna gave me..."

It's a photograph of Picasso's latest painting. Exter had just brought it from Paris.

The last word in French painting. Pronounced over there, in the avant-garde, it will be passed on like a slogan. It is already being passed on—along the entire left front. It will occasion a thousand responses and imitations and will lay the foundation of a new movement.

Like conspirators huddled over the captured plan of an enemy fortress, the brothers bend over the valuable photograph—the first experiment in disintegrating the body into planes.

They raise their hands up to their eyes. While examining the composition they mentally break up the picture into parts.

A woman's skull split open, the back of her head transparent, reveals dazzling perspectives...

22. Kovalenko, "Aleksandra Ekster: Pervye kievskie gody," 537.

“Jolly good...,” mutters Vladimir, “curtains for Larionov and Goncharova!”²³

This took place in the winter of 1909–1910 at the Burliuks’ Ukrainian estate in Taurida gubernia. Kyiv had reassembled there, and there arose so-called Russian futurism, whose source must be sought in Kyiv and in Ukraine.

* * *

But Kyiv, in a most unfortunate way, also became the site of a most odious form of “modernity.” The city had its own “Dreyfus affair,” the Beilis trial, which had international repercussions. Benedikt Livshits, who himself was of Jewish background, recounted in his reminiscences the various aspects of anti-Semitism in the Russian Empire and the atmosphere that reigned in Kyiv in 1912.²⁴ It was no surprise that in these conditions the charge against the Jew Beilis of the ritual murder of a young Christian would have a far-reaching scope. But the most extravagant and tragicomic aspect of this tense atmosphere was the fact that futurism was invoked in order to introduce arguments for and against. According to Livshits,

[The lawyer] Shulgin claimed that [the detective] Krasovsky’s testimony...was related to the data contained in the indictment in the same way that a work by a skillful artist is related to a piece of Futurist daubing; in Petersburg the police carefully studied Khlebnikov’s *Bobebobi* before the evening in the Tenishev Hall because they suspected an anagram for Beiliss in it; and finally they forbade us to appear at Chukovsky’s lecture for fear that we would organize a pro-Jewish demonstration.²⁵

* * *

Fortunately, Kyiv’s notorious reputation did not last long, and artistic life soon reappeared with its customary brilliance. In February–March 1914 the *Kol’ tso* (Kil’ tse, The Ring) exhibition was organized by Oleksandr Bohomazov, one of the most important representatives of Ukrainian

23. Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, 43–44.

24. *Ibid.*, 69–72.

25. *Ibid.*, 154.

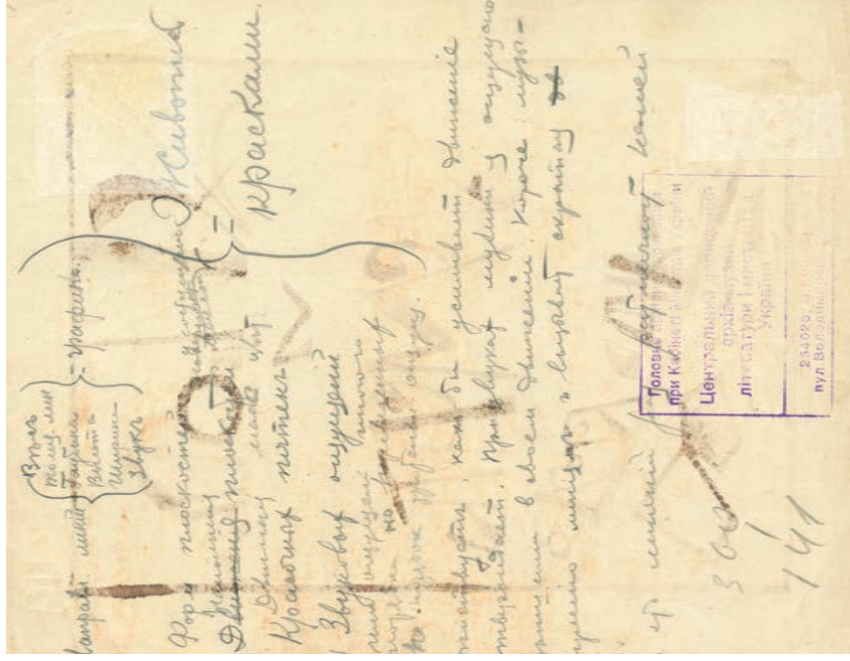
cubo-futurism not only in painting but also in theoretical writing.²⁶ Bohomazov was a friend of Exter, and like her, he was deeply attached to Kyiv. He describes the Ukrainian capital thus: “Kyiv, ...across its entire three-dimensional space is filled with a beautiful, varied, and profound dynamism. Here the streets reach to the sky, forms are full of tension, lines are energetic and powerful, they fall, shatter, sing, and play. The general pace of life emphasizes this dynamism even more; it endows it, so to speak, with legitimate foundation, and spills out broadly all around, until it calms down on the quiet shores of the Dnieper’s left bank.”²⁷

The *Kol'tso* exhibition featured 21 artists and 306 works of art, 88 of which were Bohomazov’s (paintings, watercolors, graphics, and drawings). The principles espoused by the *Kol'tso* group were formulated in the introduction to the catalog. They supplanted an architectural perspective with one of rhythmical vibrations of lines that was more closely related to sensibility and expressed more aesthetic emotions. The connection between Bohomazov’s aesthetic and that of Izdebski and, above all, Kandinsky, is evident. In his treatise entitled “Zhivopis’ i elementy” (Painting and Elements) (fig. 7a, at right), written in Russian in 1914, Bohomazov maintains that a painting is a living organism, not a frozen illustration. Painting is connected to nature in the dialectical (as in Plato!) movement between the two. Movement and music are key notions in his entire painterly poetics; he writes about “movement... of colorful spots and auditory sensations,” which is expressed in his abstract paintings of 1914–1915 (see figs. 7b–d, at right and below). Bohomazov’s text is extraordinarily rich. It is one of the most profound essays in the literature on Ukrainian and Russian avant-garde art of the 1910s and 1920s, on par with the essays of Kandinsky, von Werefkin, Vladimir Markov, Ol’ga Rozanova, Larionov, Malevich, Georgii Iakulov, or Mikhail Matiushin.

In parallel with these trends, which functioned within the dominant Russian culture and language, there developed a movement of Ukrainian identity and language. This was Ukrainian futurism, whose brilliant spokesman was the poet Mykhail’ Semenko (1892–1937), the future

26. See the catalog of the exhibition organized in Toulouse with the assistance of Dmytro Horbachov and Mikhail Kolesnikov, *Alexandre Bogomazov, Jampol, 1880–Kiev, 1930: Musée d’Art Moderne, Réfectoire des Jacobins, Toulouse; Exposition du 21 juin au 28 août 1991* (Toulouse: éditions ARPAP, 1991).

27. Aleksandr Bogomazov, “Doklad na Vseukrainskom s’ezde khudozhnikov, Kiev, 1918: Osnovnye zadachi razvitiia iskusstva zhivopisi na Ukraine,” in *Ukraïns’ki avanhardysty iak teoretyky i publitsysty*, ed. Dmytro Horbachov, Olena Papeta, and Serhii Papeta (Kyiv: Triumf, 2005), 81.



Figures 7a-7b.

Oleksandr

Bohomazov.

Cover art and

handwritten notes

on reverse side for

his unpublished

manuscript

"Zhivopis' i

elementy", 1914.

Collection of the

Central State

Archive-Museum

of Literature and

Art of Ukraine,

Kyiv. Fond 360, op.

1, od. zb. 141, ark.

1r, 1v.



Figures 7c–d. Oleksandr Bohomazov. Selected pages from his unpublished manuscript “Osnovni kol’ory palitry. Z’iednannia dvokh kol’oriv. Rivnovaha kil’kosti i iakosti. Tablytsia sumisnykh kol’oriv,” 1916–1930. Collection of the Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine, Kyiv. Fond 360, op. 1, od. zb. 189, ark. 17, 18.

editor of the Kharkiv avant-garde journal *Nova Generatsiia* (1928–1930). In late 1913 Semenko, his brother Vasyl' (d. 1915), and the painter Pavlo Kovzhun (1896–1939) founded Ukraine's first futurist group in Kyiv called Kvero, from the Latin word *quaero*, meaning "I seek." In February 1914 the Kvero group published the first futurist publication in the Ukrainian language, an eight-page brochure entitled *Derzannia* (Daring), which mocked the official celebration of the centenary of the birth of Ukraine's national poet Taras Shevchenko. At the same time and in the same way Russian cubo-futurist poets were jettisoning Pushkin and the nineteenth-century classics from the "steamboat of modernity." The Kvero group invoked Italian futurism, not Russian, and in April 1914 it published a collection of Semenko's poems entitled *Kvero-futuryzm*. However, owing to the outbreak of World War I, this first effort was never continued.²⁸ Despite the relatively isolated nature of this movement, Ukrainian futurism, as it emerged briefly in 1914, did not die. Opportunities opened up not only for creating experimental Ukrainian poetry, but also for publishing in Kyiv in 1919, under Semenko's editorship, four issues of the magazine *Mystetstvo* (fig. 8, below), the first journal of its kind to appear in the Ukrainian language.

* * *

An event of the utmost importance occurred in March 1917, when the Central Rada, the central Ukrainian council, was formed, which would proclaim Ukraine's independence. However, the October Revolution in Russia was followed by a savage civil war in Kyiv and Ukraine as a whole among the Whites, Reds, and Greens, which lasted until 1923. Before the situation worsened, it was still possible, in October 1917, to found the Ukrainian State Academy of Fine Arts (Ukrainian Academy of Art), which became the national center of art education. One of its professors was Mykhailo Boichuk (1882–1937), whose "neo-Byzantinism" was noted by Guillaume Apollinaire in Paris as early as 1910–1911.²⁹ Boichuk was the leader of a movement known as Boichukism, which aimed to portray contemporary subjects in the Byzantine-Ukrainian style. Among the

28. On the Kvero movement, see Myroslava M. Mudrak, *The New Generation and Artistic Modernism in the Ukraine* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986), 9–13; Mudrak, *Nova generatsiia i mystets'kyi modernizm v Ukraïni* (Kyiv: Rodovid, 2018), 25–30; Oleh Ilnytskyj, *Ukrainian Futurism, 1914–1930: A Historical and Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1997), 3–10.

29. Cf. Guillaume Apollinaire, *Chroniques d'art (1902–1918)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 79, 167.



Figure 8. Heorhii Narbut. Cover of Mykhail' Semenکو's journal *Mystetstvo*, 1920, no. 1. Reproduced by permission from *Proiekt "Vidkrytyi arkhiv": Elektronni materiialy z istorii ukrains'koï kul'tury*, no. 1 (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2004).

other professors of the Academy were Mykola Burachek (1876–1942), a master of the lyrical landscape, Vasyl' Krychevs'kyi (1872–1952), who derived his subject matter from ancient Ukrainian art ornament,³⁰ and his brother Fedir Krychevs'kyi (1879–1947), who created paintings in the spirit of Far Eastern art. There was also Abram Manevich, who gained renown in Paris as a fauvist and expressionist. Heorhii Narbut (1886–1920) achieved a fusion of the Ukrainian graphic tradition with the mastery of illustration that he acquired through his connection with the St. Petersburg–based magazine *Mir iskusstva* (his teachers were Ivan Bilibin and Mstislav Dobuzhinskii). Finally, high-quality Munich realism was represented by Oleksandr Murashko (1875–1919). There was obviously no single direction in the academy's teaching program, but its very existence was a major milestone on the way to Kyiv's cultural autonomy. The academy was short-lived, closed down during the 1922–1923 academic year, and the Institute of Visual Art was founded in

30. See Vadym Pavlovs'kyi, *Vasyl' Hryhorovych Krychevs'kyi: Zhyttia i tvorchist'* (New York: Ukrains'ka Vil'na Akademiia Nauk u S.Sh.A., 1974).

its place, becoming the Kyiv Art Institute in 1927 after its merger with the Institute of Architecture. Vladimir Tatlin and Malevich came to teach there in the second half of the 1920s,³¹ when repressions against avant-garde artists, which began with the closure of the State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK) in 1927 in Leningrad, intensified in Russia.

In 1918, during the chaotic revolutionary period, Alexandra Exter was able to open a studio which took in a number of painters who later would gain fame, such as her assistant Isaak Rabynovych (Rabinovich), Oleksandr (Aleksandr) Tyshler, Nison Shyfryn (Nisson Shifrin), Pavel Chelishchev (Tchelitchew), Vadym Meller, Klyment (Kliment) Red'ko, Solomon Nikritin, André Lansky, and others. Exter brought with her the entirety of cubo-suprematist-futurist knowledge, which she employed in painting, the theater, and applied art.

Performing arts enjoyed great favor in Kyiv, where Les' Kurbas founded his Young Theater (Molodyi teatr) in 1916, which subsequently became the celebrated Berezil' Theater in Kharkiv, and where some of the boldest art quests of the twentieth century were realized. Kyiv was also the city where the great Bronislava Nijinska established her ballet studio; it was here that her career as a choreographer began in 1919–1921 and where she developed her theory of movement.

* * *

One cannot speak about Kyiv as one of the centers of “modernity” in the first quarter of the twentieth century without mentioning the Kultur-Lige, which was founded in late 1917 by members of the Jewish intelligentsia who devoted their efforts to Yiddish culture: Nakhman Maisel (Nachman Meisel), Davyd Bergel'son (David Bergelson), and Moshe Litvakov. The Kultur-Lige championed three principal causes: the education of the Jewish people, the production of literature in the Yiddish language, and the creation of Jewish art.

In Kyiv, as in Odesa, a quarter of the population was Jewish. Before the 1917 revolution the Jewish community was exposed to a variety of movements and their spokesmen: assimilationists, acculturationists, socialists, Zionists, “Yiddishists,” and orthodox traditionalists. The goal of the Kultur-Lige was to secure the Jewish population's access to knowl-

31. For new documents on this period, see Tetiana Filevs'ka, ed., *Kazymyr Malevych: Kyivs'kyi period, 1928–1930* (Kyiv: Rodovid, 2016); for the English-language edition, see Tetyana Filevska, ed., *Kazimir Malevich: Kyiv Period, 1928–1930; Articles, Documents and Letters*, trans. Marta Skorupsky and Wendy Salmond (Kyiv: Rodovid, 2017).

edge and art by creating public universities, gymnasia, libraries, drama circles, choirs, and the like. The Kultur-Lige issued its own Yiddish-language publications, which it disseminated throughout Ukraine and Russia.

With respect to art, there were artists in the Kultur-Lige who had started out as primitivists and cubo-futurists, such as the painters Issachar Rybak (1897–1935) and Oleksandr Tyshler (1898–1980), the sculptor Iosyf (Iosif) Chaikov (1888–1980), and the artist El Lissitzky (1890–1941).

Jewish artists like Rybak and Boris Aronson (1898–1980) wanted “to create a modern Jewish plastic art which seeks its own organic national form, color and rhythm.”³² In their 1919 manifesto in the publication *Oyfgang* (Sunrise) Rybak and Aronson repudiated the realism and naturalism of Jewish artists like Iurii (Yehuda) Pen and genre scenes “in the Jewish style.” They accepted the primitivism of folk forms and futurism, but rejected pure abstraction because, as they claimed, “the modern Jewish artist...in such an art painting cannot reveal living emotions.”³³ Rybak and Aronson adopted a position identical to one we observe in the Jewish school in Paris in the twentieth century, where the expressionist element predominated.

On the other hand, El Lissitzky, whose marvelous primitivist-style illustrations to the traditional Passover song “Khad gadye” (One Kid) were issued by the Kultur-Lige publishing house in 1919 (figs. 9a–b, at right), turned to a cubo-futurism that verged on total abstraction while still in Kyiv (fig. 10, below).³⁴ In 1920 he moved to Vitsebsk, where he ultimately sided with Malevich (not with Chagall), and where he created his celebrated series of drawings and lithographs *Prouns* (Project for the Affirmation of the New, 1919–1923).

Other artists of Jewish background, such as Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo, neither of whom was steeped in the Kultur-Lige aesthetic, created their own distinctive art that was part of the international modernist movement.

32. *Kultur-Lige Zamlung* (Kyiv: Central Committee of the Kultur-Lige, November 1919), 38. Translation quoted in Seth L. Wolitz, “The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia,” in *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912–1928*, ed. Ruth Apter-Gabriel (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1987), 35.

33. Issachar Rybak and Boris Aronson, “Di Vegn Fun der Yidisher Moleray,” in *Oyfgang*, bk. 1 (Kyiv: Kultur-Lige, 1919), 124. Trans. Reuben Szklowin and quoted in Wolitz, “The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia,” 35.

34. Cf. El Lissitzky’s 1919 canvas entitled *Composition*, housed in the National Art Museum of Ukraine in Kyiv, in the catalog *Die grosse Utopie: Die russische Avant-garde, 1915–1932* (Frankfurt am Main: Schirn Kunsthalle, 1992), no. 197.



Figures 9a–b. El Lissitzky. Title page (9a) and illustration to verse 5 (9b) of *Khad gadye* (Kyiv: Kultur-Lige, 1919). Reproduced by permission from Hilel' Kazovs'kyi, ed., *Kul'tur-Liga: Khudozhnii avanhard 1910–1920-kh rokiv* (Kyiv: Dukh i litera, 2007), 119, 120.



Figure 10. El Lissitzky. *Composition*. 1919. Oil on canvas. 58 x 71 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine. © 2020 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

In April 1920 the Kultur-Lige organized the first and only exhibition of Jewish art in Kyiv. Among the eleven participating artists were El Lissitzky, Chaikov, Tyshler, and Shyfryn.³⁵ But by 1921 the Kultur-Lige's prospects in Kyiv came to an end. In 1927 the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences in Kyiv opened a department of Jewish culture.

* * *

I will dwell briefly here on the magazine *Semafor u maibutnie: Aparat panfuturystiv* (Semaphore to the Future: The Panfuturists' Appara-

35. See "Introduction from the Catalog of the 'Jewish Exhibition of Sculpture, Graphics, and Drawings,' February–March, 1920," trans. from the Yiddish by Seth L. Wolitz, in Apter-Gabriel, *Tradition and Revolution*, 230.



Figure 11. Cover of Mykhail' Semenko's journal *Semafor u maibutnie: Aparat panfuturystiv*, no. 1 (May 1922). Image courtesy of Rodovid Press.

tus), which Mykhail' Semenko issued in Kyiv in 1922 (only one issue ever appeared). It contains a random mixture of European futurist and Dadaist influences: the most important thing was to establish a distance from Moscow.³⁶ The cover of the magazine presents a composition featuring a mix of Cyrillic and Latin letters (fig. 11, above). By suggesting that the Ukrainian language could be written in the Latin alphabet, the Ukrainian Futurists also declared their desire to separate themselves from Russian influence. Semenko looked to Berlin and Paris, the German and French Dadaists (Richard Hülsenbeck, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Arp, and others). Nonetheless, Semenko's "poetry-painting" would not have been possible without, for example, Vasili Kamenskii's "ferro-concrete poems" or El Lissitzky's typographical experiments and the arrangement of letters in his book designs.

36. For detailed discussion, see Marina Dmitrieva-Einkhorn, "La revue *Signal vers l'avenir* dans le réseau des avant-gardes: L'axe Milan–Paris–Berlin–Kiev," in *Russie, France, Allemagne, Italie: Transferts quadrangulaires du néoclassicisme aux avant-gardes*, ed. Michel Espagne (Tusson: Du Lérot, 2005), 214–31.

All these attempts were short-lived. Tatlin and Malevich's teaching stints in Kyiv (1925 and 1929–1930, respectively) were the last “flash” of innovation in the Ukrainian capital, as was Malevich's retrospective exhibition in 1930, which was the Polish/Ukrainian/Russian artist's last before the retrospective that took place in 1978 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.

In conclusion, I would like to provide a brief analysis of Malevich's exemplary painting *The Carpenter* (1928–1929) (fig. 12, at right), which was exhibited in Kyiv in the spring of 1930. This painting is part of a series of postsuprematist works that were a return to the painter's pre-1914 cubo-futurist village motifs. We see the same aesthetic of the icon, the popular print (*lubok*), and signboard with their hieratism of poses and almond-shaped “strabismus.” In *The Carpenter*, as in this entire late series, the distinctive feature is a Ukrainian polychromy. What remains of cubo-futurism is the geometrization and “metallic” colors. The artist builds the background of the painting with horizontal bands that delineate broad, monochromatic surfaces. The intersecting paths recall works exploring suprematist space created by the UNOVIS (Champions of New Art) movement at the Vitsebsk Art School. The wood element is accentuated. The color yellow is used for the pile of girders ready to be used in construction, the fence, the house (a church?), and the handle of the hatchet and the cutter-bit held by the carpenter. Both the hatchet and the cutter-bit are painted blue and yellow; they comprise the main color element of the whole surface. These “Ukrainian” colors coexist alongside the “Russian” colors of white, blue, and red, as often occurs in the works of Exter, who loved to play with the colors of various national flags (French, Italian, Russian, and Ukrainian). The green-and-red color combination was present in Malevich's cubo-futurist period. In particular, it is seen in the *Perfected Portrait of Ivan Vasil'evich Kliunkov* (1913) (fig. 13, below), a representation of a painter-constructor, the artist Kliunkov (Kliun). Thus, *The Carpenter* constitutes a new image of a peasant/Orthodox believer/builder/painter—as well as of a martyr condemned to silence. Christ was a carpenter, and here in camouflaged form one can see an allegory of the crucified artist under the horrific conditions of the Stalinist terror. In addition to the tragic nature of the image, an aesthetic polemic with two important Ukrainian trends of the 1920s is detectable in this painting: Bohomazov's spectralism (for example, his triptych *Sawyers*, fig. 14, below) and the neo-Byzantinism of the Boichukists. Postsuprematist polychromy reveals, despite the symbolic aspects, the non-objective nature of the world, and it is not associated with variations of light and color as seen through the retina. This is internal vision, like in an icon. At the same time, Malevich does



Figure 12. Kazimir Malevich. *The Carpenter*. 1928–1929. Plywood, oil. 71 x 44 cm. © State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



Figure 13. Kazimir Malevich. *Perfected Portrait of Ivan Vasil'evich Kliunkov*. 1913. Oil on canvas. 111.5 x 70.5 cm. © State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



Figure 14. Oleksandr Bohomazov. *Sharpening Saws (Pravka pyl)*, panel from triptych *Sawyers*. 1927. Oil on canvas. 138 x 155 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

not clothe contemporary reality in the garments of an icon; he creates his own “icons” and a reality that did not at all exist until then.

In the early 1930s Stalinist terror once again reduced Kyiv to the role of satellite, and this status continued until the rebirth of an independent Ukraine in the 1990s.

