

## Vasyl' Iermilov in the Context of Ukrainian and European Art of the First Third of the Twentieth Century

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VASYL' IERMILOV'S OEUVRE BEST REPRESENTS constructivism in Ukrainian art. He is mostly known for his work in industrial graphics, small architectural forms, reliefs, and book designs that were executed in the constructivist style. At the same time, Iermilov's art was never restricted to any particular movement but rather reflected the multistylistic character of Ukrainian art in the first third of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Various European avant-garde trends—expressionism, cubism, futurism, neoprimitivism—left their trace in his works. No less pronounced was the influence of such unique Ukrainian phenomena as the Mykhailo Boichuk and the Heorhii Narbut schools that at different times, or on occasion even simultaneously, inspired the artist.

It is no accident that Iermilov turned to constructivism. The entire complex evolution of his artistic path appears to have prepared him for that choice. From the outset of his career as a painter he was drawn to the functional potential of art, and he had a talent for discerning the aesthetic properties of the very material used. He received his formal artistic training in the Kharkiv Applied Art Workshop (1905–1909), where his teacher was Ladislav Trakal, a graduate of the School of Applied Arts in Prague. Trakal taught painting, composition, and art material technique, with special emphasis on the study of Slavic ornamental design. This knowledge of national ornamental motifs, as well

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1. The question of the polystylistic nature of Ukrainian art of the first third of the twentieth century was first described and examined through the example of graphic art in my candidate's thesis, later published as Ol'ha Lahutenko, *Ukraïns'ka knyzhkova ta zhurnal'na obkladynka pershoï tretyny XX stolittia* (Kyiv: UAM, 1996). This topic was developed further in Lahutenko, *Ukraïns'ka knyzhkova obkladynka pershoï tretyny XX stolittia: Stylistychni osoblyvosti khudozhn'oi movy* (Kyiv: Politekhnik, 2005); Lahutenko, *Ukraïns'ka hrafika pershoï tretyny XX stolittia* (Kyiv: Hrani-T, 2006; repr. 2011).

as an understanding of the principles and the techniques of stylization, later proved useful in fulfilling social commissions (for example, his monumental painting) and, subsequently, in his graphic book design. Iermilov's keen interest in the properties of artistic media and in painting technique, which he developed in Trakal's workshop, remained with him throughout his entire life. Iermilov graduated from the Kharkiv Applied Art Workshop with the professional title of undermaster of decorative painting and, after three years of practical work, he earned the title of master. It was this interest in applied art, and, particularly, in decorative monumental painting, that introduced the young artist to the concepts of art nouveau.

In the next few years Iermilov became interested in the various styles of easel painting. He studied in the Kharkiv City School of Drawing and Painting (1910), and in the studio of Eduard Shteinberg and Oleksii Grot (1911). It is significant that in 1910 Grot had just returned from Paris, where he was perfecting his painting technique in the studio of Henri Matisse,<sup>2</sup> whereas Shteinberg had finished his studies a year earlier in Munich with Simon Hollosy. Judging by his paintings, Grot was enthusiastic about fauvism; he liked bright color splashes and treated painting as predominantly the realm of color. Shteinberg, on the other hand, taught students to appreciate the line, the famous "great line" that embraces in one uninterrupted movement the entire form of a model's body. During these two years of study Iermilov drew five hundred portraits. They may be treated as the studies of a young artist, but the sheer number of these works is impressive. One cannot help but notice the internal gravity, the lively interest in the face, the individual self-contained world, and the uniqueness.

Commenting on his early influences, Iermilov later wrote that in 1910, "I felt the fragrance of impressionism for the first time. In 1911 Van Gogh meant more to me than my own father. In 1912 I became enchanted by Picasso, and from that time to this day I have been under this spell."<sup>3</sup> In addition to painting, Iermilov also turned his attention

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2. Grot's students remembered him as a person of delicate sensibilities, who was noted for his literary and artistic erudition. His grandfather, Ia. K. Grot, was a distinguished Russian philologist, academician, and vice president of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. Grot's father was a professor of Moscow University and the founder and editor of the journal *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii*. In 1903–1905 Grot studied at the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, from which he was expelled for revolutionary activities. In 1908–1910 he worked in Matisse's studio.

3. Vasyl' Iermilov to Viktor Platonov, 18 March 1963, in *Ukrains'ki avanhardysty iak teoretyky i publitsysty*, ed. Dmytro Horbachov, Olena Papeta, and Serhii Papeta (Kyiv: Triumf, 2005), 288.

to graphic arts and technique. In 1912 he began to study etching in Georgii Gamon-Gaman's studio in Moscow. In addition, every day he visited the Prints Cabinet at the famous Rumiantsev Museum, where he studied and copied the prints of Rembrandt, Breugel, Goya, and Durer. He showed his etchings of 1912 for the first time at the 1913 Exhibition of the Society of Moscow Artists, and later at the sixteenth (1913) and seventeenth (1914) exhibitions of the Society of Kharkiv Artists.

Iermilov's etchings bear close affinity to expressionist works. The deformation of the material form reveals the subjects' nervous tension, their fear, pain, and despair. Introspection is opposed to the external world—incomprehensible and insurmountable. In *Self-Portrait* (1912) the face is drawn so painstakingly that the line not only forms the real-life object but also seems to entangle it, revealing its inner concentration and the silent turmoil of thoughts and feelings. This work depicts a clear existential crisis—the condition described in Kierkegaard's philosophical texts and in the works of German expressionists. Another Iermilov etching, *Tea Drinking* (1912), exudes an oppressive silence; horror congeals in the enlarged eyes of the subject, who clutches a deep saucer that is like the cup of life, and the scalding liquid must be consumed in small sips. Finally, in the etching *Fear* (1913) (fig. 1, below), the idea of human vulnerability is taken to the limit. The nervous movement of the hand trying to suppress a scream and the despair in the eyes' hollow abyss are reminiscent of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893).

In 1912 Iermilov entered the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, and enrolled in the senior (life drawing) class, alongside Vladimir Mayakovsky and David Burliuk. At around the same time he also met Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. Thus his social circle brought him right into the mainstream of the Russian avant-garde. Perhaps under the direct influence of the new ideas and artistic experiments Iermilov left the school and transferred to the studio of Il'ia Mashkov and Petr Konchalovskii.

While in Moscow, Iermilov became acquainted with the works of artists from the Bubnovyi valet (Jack of Diamonds) and Oslinyi khvost (Donkey's Tail) groups, but he found a truly kindred spirit in Mashkov, with his fleshy still lifes. Mashkov's *Still Life with Loaves of Bread* (*Khleby*, 1912) is transformed under Iermilov's brush into a single loaf in his *A Loaf of Bread* (*Bulka*, 1914). The diagonally positioned braided loaf just barely manages to fit into the square of the canvas; its broad center swells and attracts the viewer's attention with its exaggerated corporeality. This very love of matter, the physical validity of things, quite paradoxically, would lead Iermilov to cubism.

During this time in Moscow Iermilov saw paintings by Picasso in



Figure 1. Vasyl' Iermilov. *Fear*. 1913. Paper, etching. Collection of the Kharkiv Art Museum.

Sergei Shchukin's collection, and from that moment on, "passionately copied Picassos, studied and analyzed his style, and rendered his artistic images in his own way."<sup>4</sup> It is likely that Picasso's cubist works were particularly appealing to Iermilov, not only because they exemplified a new vision of the object and of space, but also because the object itself acquired in them such prominence that both time and space were measured according to its facets and planes. In cubism the analytical investigation of a material object became multidimensional: one could simultaneously grasp and present the object from the inside and the outside, from above and below—from different points of view—thus producing a comprehensive representation. By combining the tactile and optical images, the artist could recreate and communicate the essence of things in a sensory way. That was also the basic approach to depicting the surface of an object and its texture, as is evident, for example, in Picasso's still life *The Violin* (1912, wood, oil, from the Shchukin collection). The oval of that composition is placed into a rectangular frame and contoured with a bronze paint. Inside the oval is the cubistically deconstructed body of the violin, with meticulously reproduced wood, its texture and fibers. Later on, in the early 1920s, similar ovals within rectangles would appear in Iermilov's works; for his compositions, however, he used real wood and metal.

In 1915, under the influence of Picasso, Iermilov created his still life painting *Bread, Plate, Knife* (fig. 2, below). Here the oval is again inscribed in a rectangle, but the objects are presented with less deformity; they are shown in the foreground of the composition, portrayed from above, which creates the impression that they are moving toward the viewer. The texture of the wooden tabletop, which is positioned diagonally with geometrical breaks of form, is painted in meticulous detail, and the thick faience plate is presented in several segments. The coarse-grained surface of a slice of bread adds a textural accent to this composition, and the image of the knife reflects the gleam of metal.

The change in the artist's worldview during the following years was prompted not only by events of artistic life. World War I and the revolution brutally constricted his life: he was drafted into the army and felt the full brunt of military service. "In 1915 I was called up and became a private 2nd class in the Sixth Siberian Rifle Battalion stationed in the city of Orel. In 1916 I was sent to the front with the First Caucasus Cavalry Corps. I served as a private," the artist stated tersely in his autobiography. His years of service included desertion, prison, military

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4. Valer'ian Polishchuk, *Vasyl' Iermilov* (Kharkiv: RUKh, 1931), 14.

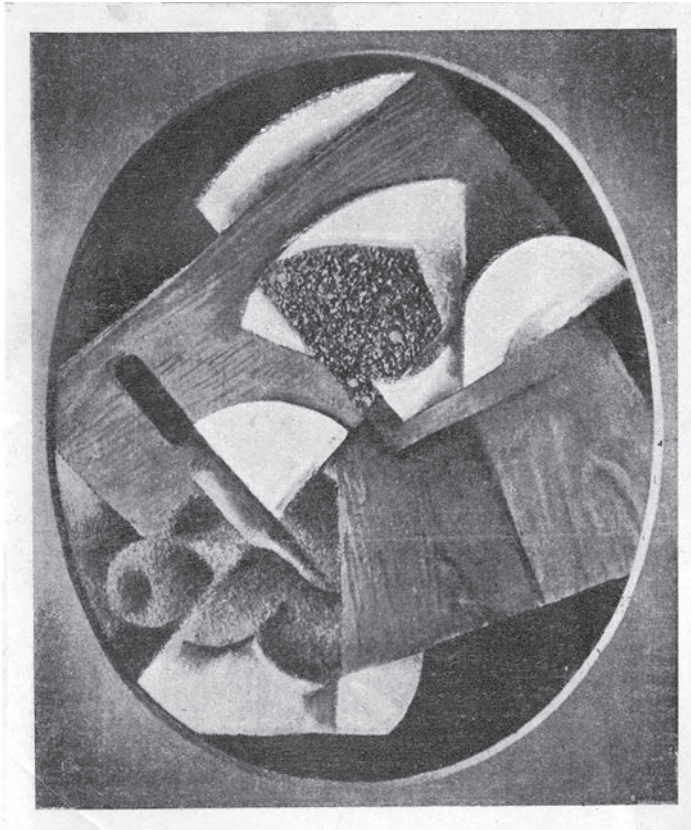


Figure 2. Vasyl' Iermilov. *Bread, Plate, Knife*. 1915. Cardboard (?), oil. Reproduced from *Sbornik novogo iskusstva* (Kharkiv: Izd. Vseukr. Otdela iskusstv Kom. Nar. Prosv., 1919), 21.

detention, military campaigns, wounding and concussion, and the Cross of St. George, Fourth Class.<sup>5</sup>

The artist could no longer believe that the world was subject to his vision; this external world turned out to be too aggressive towards the inner world of the individual. The events of the war and the revolution changed both Iermilov's view of life and his artistic outlook. His feeling

5. Vasyl' Iermilov, "Avtobiografiia," Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine, fond 337, op. 1, spr. 119, ark. 1. Undated, the last date in the text is 1940. Iermilov wrote about his wounding, post-concussion syndrome, and receiving the Cross of St. George, Fourth Class, only once: in another "Autobiography" dated 3 July 1945, which is stored in this same file.

can be compared with the observations of the Swiss artist Jean Arp, who wrote,

In Zurich in 1915, losing interest in the slaughterhouses of the world war, we turned to the Fine Arts. While the thunder of the batteries rumbled in the distance, we pasted, we recited, we versified, we sang with all our soul. We searched for an elementary art that would, we thought, save mankind from the furious folly of these times. We aspired to a new order that might restore the balance between heaven and hell.<sup>6</sup>

Iermilov returned to Kharkiv in 1918 at a time of turbulent, unpredictable social and political changes. During this period he took part in exhibitions and joint artistic actions of the avant-garde group *Soiuz semy* (*Soiuz semi*, Union of Seven), which consisted of Volodymyr Bobryts'kyi, Boleslav Tsybis (Bolesław Cybis), Mykola Mishchenko, Borys Kosarev, Heorhii Tzapok, Mykola Kalmykov, and Volodymyr Diakov, and he participated in the catalogue publication *Sem' plus tri* (Seven Plus Three) (Kharkiv, 1918). At the same time Iermilov joined the ranks of socially engaged artists and actively worked on political commissions, which he saw as an opportunity to create art in the very space of everyday life, a dream shared by both futurists and Dadaists in Europe. In the 1960s, looking back at that period in the life of post-revolutionary Kharkiv, he wrote: "The end of 1918. The beginning of my work. Who was painting 'paintings' then? We were—except that our paintings were posters, it was we who created ROSTA [Russian Telegraph Agency], UkrROSTA [Ukrainian Telegraph Agency], etc., sometimes working three days in a row without sleep or food, but as a result the city acquired an especially festive look for the public holidays. And that visual propaganda with its slogans, bright colors, constructions, and other paraphernalia (plywood, cardboard, paper, glue paint, and red bunting), presented in a new form, was indeed that proletarian art, which would soon no longer be possible."<sup>7</sup>

Iermilov's art burst into the public space of cities and villages on painted propaganda trains and colorful posters (fig. 3, below). Together with Borys Kosarev and a small group of artists he produced more than five thousand posters to decorate large and small Ukrainian cities and

6. Jean Arp, "Dadaland," trans. Ralph Manheim, in *On My Way: Poetry and Essays, 1912...1947* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1948), 39.

7. Vasyl' Iermilov to Oleksandr Parnys, 20 May 1966. Personal archive of Oleksandr Parnys [Alexander Parnis].

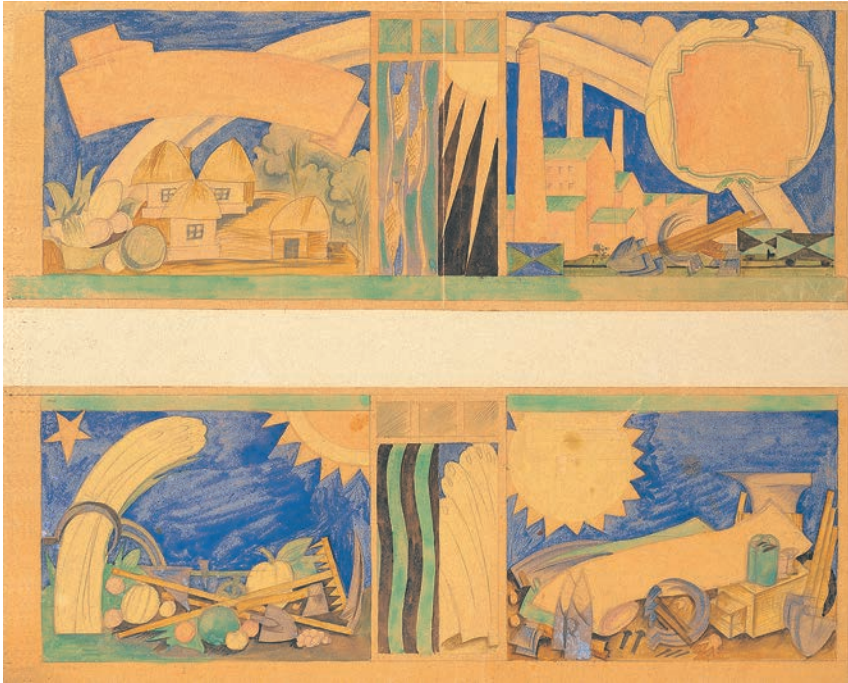


Figure 3. Vasyl' Iermilov. Sketch for the decoration of the propaganda train *Chervona Ukraina*. 1919. Paper, watercolor, gouache. 18.5 x 50 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

towns on the occasion of the 1919 International Workers' Day (May 1). Similarly to how such well-known theater artists as Anatol' Petryts'kyi, Vadym Meller, and Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov were creating designs for the public space of streets and squares, Iermilov decorated public celebrations. For Kharkiv's mass spectacles he designed arches, fences, parade floats, stages, and flags. As Valer'ian Polishchuk wrote, "Every building on every street screamed with paints, slogans, flowers, billboards, and arches made by Iermilov."<sup>8</sup> It is no accident that the postrevolutionary period of Kharkiv art was called "the Iermilov period."<sup>9</sup> His creativity and the extent to which he was able to implement his artistic projects is truly impressive—something today's public art movement can only envy.

"Street art" soon gave way to the interior design of public buildings.

8. Polishchuk, *Vasyl' Iermilov*, 10.

9. *Ibid.*, 15.





Figure 4. Vasyl' Iermilov. Photograph of the murals in the Red Army Club. 1920. Collection of the Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine, Kyiv. Fond 337, op. 1, spr. 87, ark. 2.

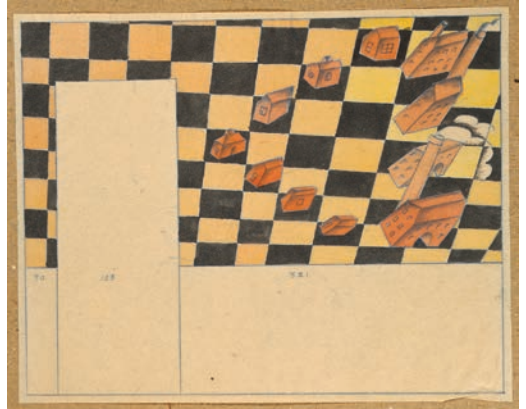
Thus, in 1919 Iermilov with a group of other artists decorated the foyer of the Kharkiv Circus, and in 1920 he decorated the walls of the Red Army Club in the city (fig. 4, above). The new, synthetic style idealized by the symbolists and followers of art nouveau was reincarnated here in the service of new authorities, and Iermilov, a master of monumental painting, adopted his style to the tastes of the new public, adopting techniques of folk primitivist art and the *lubok* (popular prints). The mural *Labor* created for the main auditorium of the Red Army Club is divided into three parts by symbolic flower-trees, each panel representing different forms of labor (fig. 5, below). The left side depicts a peasant man digging the ground with a shovel, in the center a peasant woman is binding a sheaf, and on the right a man is cutting down a tree. The artist uses soft contour lines to outline the main figures, adds a light touch of shading, and maintains a strict planarity in composing the foreground. In the background he employs cubist angularity to portray small cube-like buildings. This reduction and simplification of expressive means emphasizes the abstract and generalized images.



Figure 5. Vasyl' Iermilov. Sketch for the mural *Labor* in the Red Army Club. 1920. Paper and colored pencils. 16.2 x 24.2 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

In the murals of the club's Chess Room the artist portrays *The Red Army Victory over the White Guards* (figs. 6a–d, at right). Red pieces lead an attack across the chessboard. In one of the sketches small red houses charge ahead in the “wedge” formation, in another palaces and churches fall to the ground. The scene is reminiscent of the well-known El Lissitzky poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919) with its symbolic geometry. In a third sketch Iermilov uses the motif of St. George the Dragon Slayer, but replaces the saint with a Red Army soldier on a horse waving his bared saber. The soldier defeats a White Guard officer, who lies trampled on the ground. There are analogies here not only with folk pictures or icons but also with the *vertep* (traditional folk puppet show) or with theater performances, as, for example, in Nikolai Evreinov's *Ancient Theater* where the tragic comes face-to-face with the comic, and the sublimely romantic confronts the ironic. This approach creates a duality in the perception of images and reveals the conditional nature of the performance.

Iermilov later wrote about this work: “I have to stress that I wanted to give these murals a distinctly national character, and therefore I treated



Figures 6a–d. Vasyl' Iermilov. Four sketches for the Chess Room murals in the Red Army Club. 1920. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

the figures in the spirit of old Ukrainian paintings and prints.”<sup>10</sup> He used the icon with its symbolism, a highly stylized art form, as the basis for creating a new artistic language that would be understood by people from all walks of life. The Ukrainian icon, born as an imitation of its Byzantine model, acquired a national character over the course of many centuries of development, and in the first third of the twentieth century it became a source of ideas for a new generation of innovative artists.

In these years special attention was given to the folk icon, which was close to primitive art in its plastic language; it combined canonicity with variation in subject matter and formal means. No less attractive for artists was the primitivism of graphic prints that merged urban petit-bourgeois and peasant tastes. The conventionality of form, the symbolism of artistic language, the linear treatment of the composition, and a stress on rhythm caused traditional plastic forms to be filled with “the new wine” of modern content. Visually associative “transfusion” of the present into the past, of the mundane into the sacred, created a new symbolic language, one that bordered on the profane, however. In their grotesqueness and intentional coarseness of imagery, Iermilov’s murals *Peace to the Huts—War to the Palaces* (fig. 7, at right) and *The Proletarian Club* are close to the paintings of Larionov and Goncharova. And his triptych *Labor* can be compared with Fernand Léger’s *Woodcutters* (1909–1910)<sup>11</sup> and Kazimir Malevich’s *Peasant Cycle* (1909–1912).

In addition, Iermilov was undoubtedly familiar with the art of the Ukrainian painter Mykhailo Boichuk, founder of the movement known as Boichukism. In 1919 Boichuk’s workshop painted murals on the walls of the Lutsk regimental army barracks in Kyiv. Upholding old national traditions, Boichuk was refracting Byzantine art through the prism of native icon painting, through pagan sacral perceptions of nature, and through the symbolism of folk art. Thus, by applying ancient archetypes to the representation of modern life, the artist directed the viewer away from the temporal to a mythical time or timelessness.<sup>12</sup> Boichuk’s works acquired their clear national character through his turn to the heritage of the past, but his artistic vocabulary had much in common with neoprimitivism, an artistic movement that appeared during the

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10. Vasyl’ Iermilov, “Zamist’ spohadiv” (typescript), Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine, fond 337, op. 1, spr. 120, ark. 11. In the text the artist cites sentences from a letter to his friend, noting that it was written in March 1920, shortly after he completed his murals in the Red Army Club.

11. Fernand Léger’s *Woodcutters* was shown at the *Bubnovyi valet* (Jack of Diamonds) exhibition in 1912.

12. For more detailed discussion, see O. Lahutenko, “Neovizantyzm ta idei sakralizatsii zhyttia u tvorchosti Mykhaila Boichuka,” *Studii mystetstvoznachchi*, 2003, no. 1, 87–96.

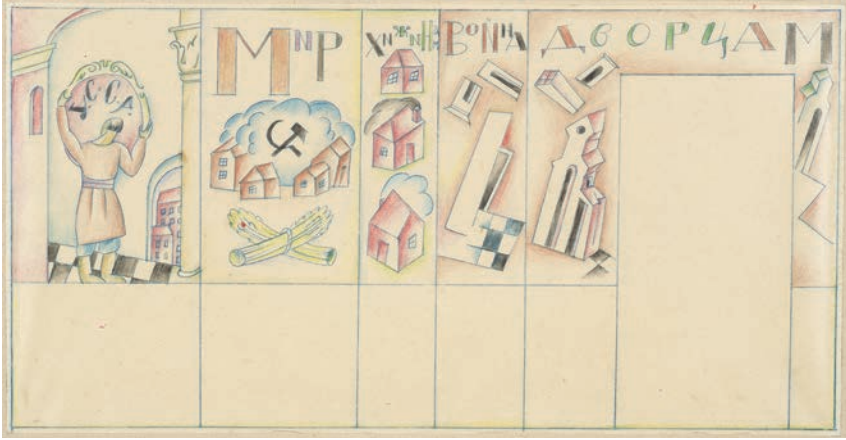


Figure 7. Vasyl' Iermilov. Sketch for the mural *Peace to the Huts—War to the Palaces* in the Red Army Club. 1920. Paper and colored pencils. 19.2 x 38.1 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

first third of the twentieth century in Europe and Latin America. The artist favored synthetic forms and symbolic representations, and he proposed a return to the practice of collective authorship. At the same time, he did not ignore avant-garde currents—in particular, fauvism with its expressiveness and the “naiveté” of its color palette, as well as cubism with its analytic bent and ordered compositional structures.

It is noteworthy that in his murals for the Chess Room of the Red Army Club, Iermilov hits an ironic note rather than one of sacralization. His portrayal of a Red Army soldier as St. George and a White Guard officer as the slain dragon recalls the ironic stylizations of Narbut, who, like Boichuk, founded an entire artistic movement in Ukraine. For example, on the cover of the journal *Sontse pratsi* (1919), Narbut depicts a worker with a rifle and hammer in the pose of Polykleitos's *Doryphoros*, and—on the cover of the journal *Mystetstvo* (1920)—Apollo strides over the flowered earth wearing a worker's blouse and holding a sickle in his right hand while his left arm is raised in the gesture of the Apollo Belvedere.<sup>13</sup> One cannot help but think of a game, a whimsical play of quotes, a kind of postmodernist *avant la lettre*... Narbut, while engaging with art nouveau, enters modernist art to search there for devices with which he can play, just as he does with the well-known examples of ancient cultures and the baroque and empire styles. He

13. See fig. 8, p. 296, in this volume.

introduces futurist rhythms, arches, and circles into his compositions, at the same time keeping the figurativeness of his art. Even as a mature artist he was still open to assimilating new influences, including an enthusiasm for Ukrainian folk art and the methods of neoprimitivism and futurism. Narbut freely adopted and merged various artistic trends and established classical styles while giving them individual expression.

In his book graphics, Iermilov often turned to Narbut's technique of a contemporary stylization of folk art motifs. He also followed this practice in his well-known decoration of the propaganda train *Chervona Ukraïna*. The general interest in ornament was to a great extent connected to the tendency toward a more decorative style, to the stylization characteristic of art nouveau. But Narbut and his numerous followers transformed those features under the influence of the avant-garde's propensity for archaization, they treated ornamentation within the context of the relativity of form and space, and they regarded the repetition of an ornamental pattern as the strengthening of the rhythmic essence of a phenomenon; in other words, they favored formal elements. The artists of the Narbut school organically combined innovation with a reliance on their national traditions (which can be seen as a feature of art deco).<sup>14</sup>

The first Ukrainian artist to incorporate the motif of the folk ornament in contemporary art was Vasyl' Krychevs'kyi when he designed the Poltava Zemstvo building (built 1903–1908), which became the prototype for the new, so-called Ukrainian style.<sup>15</sup> Iermilov shared Krychevs'kyi's love for the material with which he worked. The beauty of the material was an integral component of the aesthetic qualities of the finished product. The artistic qualities in the works of both masters developed owing to their expert skill. This "cult of the material" was characteristic not only of art nouveau, but also of all avant-garde currents, and in particular of constructivism, whose herald and first practitioner in Ukraine was Krychevs'kyi. His turn to constructivism was fueled by his deep aesthetic appreciation of the functional aspect of each object, its material, and by the sense of truth and beauty of the construction itself.

The ornamental motifs that Iermilov incorporated in his works reflect his interest in abstract form; he deconstructs the ornament into its primal elements and transforms the organic motifs into geometrical forms (fig. 8, at right). As if attempting to exorcise the chaos of surrounding

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14. Ol'ha Lahutenko, "Knyzhkova hrafiika narbutivtsiv: Na perekhresti tradytsii ta avanhardu," *Rodovid*, no. 7 (1994): 9–24.

15. See figs. 3a–c, pp. 313–14, in this volume.



Figure 8. Vasyl' Iermilov. Ornamental motif. 1920s. Paper, pencil, colored pencils. 30.6 x 23.5 cm. From the unpublished album "Ukrains'kyi ornament," 1920s–1930s. Collection of the Central State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art of Ukraine, Kyiv. Fond 337, op. 1, spr. 81, ark. 29.

reality, the artist turns to ancient ornaments preserved in the works of village artisans that emerged from the slow pace of their ritualized life in harmony with the natural world. For the ancient people who created the geometrical ornament, relations with the natural world were far from idyllic. As Wilhelm Worringer wrote, "Artistic creation means for [the prehistoric person] the endeavor to escape life and its arbitrariness, means the establishment in perceptible form of a sub-

stance underlying appearance, in which the caprice and transience of the latter are overcome.”<sup>16</sup>

As an antithesis to the ever-changing, fluid nature of the external world, the ornament calms its viewer with its rhythm, fixed shape, and harmony of form. Behind the clear and simple forms of the ancient ornament lies a mystical energy, and behind the logic of its rhythm hides the mysterious force of chaos. The ornament was also a means of communication between humans and the surrounding world, both visible and invisible. Iermilov was likely not inclined to scholastic reflections; as one of his contemporaries observed, “Iermilov was never interested in revolutionizing the laws of form, or formulating any kind of philosophical-aesthetic system. He was a practical man, and he ‘thought’ first and foremost with his hands.”<sup>17</sup>

In his reliance on intuition, his holistic approach to the world, and his ability to follow the “logic” of his material, Iermilov found himself in accord with the intellectual and artistic trends of the first third of the twentieth century. The turn of twentieth century was characterized in philosophy, literature, and visual arts by the resurrection of the value of the human body. In opposition to “sanctity of the spirit,” Nietzsche put forth the idea of the “sanctity of the body”; Bergson’s “vital force” (*élan vital*) found its manifestation in visible things; Freud stressed the importance of personal physical experience in the worldview and psychology of the individual. Vladimir Solov’ev sought to give to the impersonal the definitiveness of the Divine Sophia. Pavel Florenskii saw in the icon the “incarnation” of the spiritual world.

During this period of cultural change symbolist poets, futurists, and expressionists were experimenting with the word, trying to reclaim its primal energy and purity, and its magical influence on human consciousness. In the theater, innovators continued testing new approaches to theatrical space, stage design, costumes, and gesture. In the visual arts, one can cite candid words from the letters of Mikhail Vrubel’: “One thing is clear for me—my artistic quests are exclusively in the area of technique,” and “form is the main content of the plastic arts.”<sup>18</sup>

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16. Wilhelm Worringer, *Form Problems of the Gothic: Authorized American Edition For Which the Translator [uncredited] Has Selected Illustrative Material Chiefly from American Collections* (New York: G. E. Stechert & Co., 1920), 30. Original German: “Künstlerisch schaffen heisst für ihn, dem Leben und seiner Willkür ausweichen, heisst ein festes Jenseits der Erscheinung anschaulich fixieren, in dem ihre Willkür und Wandelbarkeit überwunden ist.” Wilhelm Worringer, *Formprobleme der Gotik* (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1922), 16.

17. Polishchuk, *Vasyl’ Iermilov*, 9.

18. Mikhail Vrubel’ to A. A. Vrubel’, Moscow, 1 May 1890, in *Mastera iskusstva ob*



This understanding of the priorities of the new art became the common denominator of all new trends in painting, graphic arts, and sculpture. In art there was a revival of interest in paganism, archaic perceptions, and a mystical interaction with objects and the surrounding world.

Starting from the end of the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century the visual arts were preoccupied with form/flesh: how the spirit forms it from within, creates its curves, openings, and projections. The eye perceives the texture and the structure of the body's outer surface that contains within it the spirit/idea, fills it with matter, and locks it in the weight of the object. The analysis of the form progressed from a heightened sense of external plasticity (as in art nouveau) to an anatomical dissection of a closed form (as in cubism). Thus, having entered inside the object, the artist strove to reach the very core, the inner structural support, and even to free these immovable pillars from the capricious flesh. Constructivism condenses the artist's rapture with the act of material creativity across the boundless spaces of the Earth. Multidimensionality has been measured through and through, and the unreal strives to cast itself in the brilliant crystals of formulas. But the surface again breathes mystery. The contrasts of textures are perceived as a juxtaposition of different worlds.

Throughout the 1920s the main thrust of Iermilov's work, which he demonstrated at practically every exhibition in Kharkiv, consisted of creating compositions that incorporated various textures and materials—wood, cardboard, copper, glass, sand, oil paint, and enamel. He tirelessly experimented with combining different materials. "For some time now material has become a fetish in the European artistic world. This word never leaves the pages of art journals; all artists, regardless of their styles, toss this word around like a ball," wrote Nikolai Punin in a 1923 article. "[But] between profound and even subtle observations about material and a true feel for it lies a long road, and few are able to make the distance."<sup>19</sup>

Iermilov was one of these few; he "thought with his hands." In his studio he continued to develop his command of cubism, and moved on to create reliefs and "experimental compositions." The combination of styles characteristic of his work in the early 1920s is now viewed as a manifestation of his inner freedom, his ability not to be categorical but to absorb reality and the new artistic movements and to find his own

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*iskusstve*, ed. A. A. Guber et al., vol. 7 (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1970), 184; Vrubel' to A. A. Vrubel', St. Petersburg, April 1883, 175.

19. See Nikolai Punin, *Russkoe i sovetskoe iskusstvo* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1976), 162.

voice in this polyphony of styles. By continuing to produce individual pieces of art, he seemed to assert that in addition to commissioned monumental works, there is another path of freely apprehending the world, of mastering it through observation. But no matter what genre he worked in, Iermilov attached great importance to craft, or, as he used to say “handicraft (*rukomeslo*),”<sup>20</sup> the capacity of the hand to transform the world. Perhaps this is how his work manifested the influence of the discoveries of prehistoric cave paintings with their colorful hand-prints—magical signs of the power of the human hand. It is no accident that the ancient Indo-European root *\*ar-* is behind the etymology of both “arm” and “art.”

In the early 1920s Iermilov began to work with painted wood reliefs. His *Guitar* (1924) (fig. 9, at right) is at the same time both constructivist and decorative, with its contours of curved and straight lines interacting. The combination of bright clear color and elements of constructivism is reminiscent of the work of Léger—for example, his *Les Disques* (1918), *The City* (1919), and *Mechanical Elements* (1924). Léger wrote about *The City*: “I made use solely of pure, flat tints in the picture. Technically, the work represents an artistic revolution....The pure tone of the blues, reds, and yellows actually leaps out of the canvas and imprints itself on posters, in shop windows, on roadsides and on traffic signs. Color has become free. It is now reality, and entity unto itself.”<sup>21</sup> Iermilov first saw Léger’s paintings in 1912 at the *Bubnovyi valet* (Jack of Diamonds) exhibition, and for the rest of his life he maintained an active interest in Léger’s works. The dominant features of Iermilov’s *Guitar* apart from the intense, clear color are the beauty of its logic and the perfection of an instrument that gives birth to sound. The head in his relief *Harlequin* (1924) has a similar quality; it resembles the perfect instrument for play—a mechanical toy.

At the beginning of the 1920s Iermilov became infatuated with textures and began introducing metal into his reliefs. During his trip to Moscow in 1921 he saw the counter-reliefs of Vladimir Tatlin, the reliefs of Ivan Puni, Ivan Kliun, and Vladimir Stenberg, the constructivist sculpture of Alexander Rodchenko and of the OBMOKhU (Society of Young Artists). The most prominent among them was Tatlin. Russian art historian Mikhail German characterizes Tatlin’s counter-reliefs in the following way: “Powerful, angularly harmonious, saturated with

20. Vasyl’ Iermilov to Viktor Platonov, 28 November 1962, in Horbachov, Papeta, and Papeta, *Ukrains’ki avanhardysty*, 285.

21. Gaston Diehl, *F. Léger*, trans. Alice Sachs and A. Clarke (New York: Crown Publishers, 1985), 24–25.



Figure 9. Vasyl' Iermilov. *Guitar*. 1924. Oil, wood. 44.5 x 44.7 cm. Private collection. Reproduced from the catalogue *Vasilii Ermilov, 1894–1968* (Moscow: Proun, 2011), 34.

'loud,' harsh colors and strangely connected contrasting materials, they seemed to accumulate within themselves the variety of artistic explorations of the time: the constructivist machine-influenced aesthetic, cubist spatial discoveries, the dynamism of futurism, and the audacity of Russian *budetlianstvo*.<sup>22</sup> These new impressions undoubtedly had a strong impact on Iermilov, on his choice of materials and expressive

22. Mikhail German, *Modernizm: Iskustvo pervoi poloviny XX veka* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka-Klassika, 2003), 196. *Budetlianstvo* was a term invented by Velimir Khlebnikov as the Slavic alternative to futurism; it is based on the native word "will be" and translated as "future-ness" or "will-be-ness."

means for his future works. And yet, his own works differ significantly from those of the Russian avant-gardists. He shares the same enthusiasms, but he is a more meticulous craftsman, his treatment of surfaces is more refined, and he strives more for harmony and clarity. There is much that brings the artists together, often even their circle of acquaintances. Perhaps Iermilov's friendship with Velimir Khlebnikov played a significant role in his creative approach to material, just as it did for Tatlin. Khlebnikov experimented with various poetic expressive means, mixing different strata of language, juxtaposing them, and freeing their underlying meanings. The poet's daring approach to the word inspired visual artists for their own experiments with the material.

Iermilov's *Self-Portrait* (1922) is made using wood, copper, and paint. The metal sheet renders the surface of the skin, gives form to the volume of the head, and outlines the rounded collar. The clearly defined geometrical contours create an impression of willpower and vitality. This *Self-Portrait* reminds the viewer of the energetic face and the angle of the head of Tatlin's *Sailor* (1911), as well as of Malevich's *Head of a Peasant Girl* (1912–1913), where the face is painted as if it were made of forged metal sheets. But those are paintings, whereas in their relief compositions neither Tatlin nor other Russian avant-garde artists use images of people. Anthropomorphic and constructivist portraits made of different materials, such as wood and glass, can be found in the sculptures of Naum Gabo and Alexander Archipenko. Although both of these artists had a connection to Kyiv because of the years they spent studying there, they made their careers abroad, and their works were known in Kyiv only through reproductions. Iermilov's portraits may be compared with Sophie Taeuber's *The Head of a Dadaist: Portrait of Hans Arp* (1918) and also with Raoul Hausmann's sculpture *The Spirit of Our Time: The Mechanical Head* (1919), which in turn pays homage to Giorgio De Chirico's mannequin heads.

In his other well-known *Portrait of a Man*, or *Portrait of Oleksii Pochtennyi* (1923) (fig. 10, at right), Iermilov gives the face greater balance by placing it within the spatial coordinates of vertical and horizontal lines. The sharp silhouette floats above the black space of the background, and is supported by stable corners that are squeezed tightly against the frame. The artist presents the human face as a strong yet thin surface beneath which one can feel the pulsating rhythms of the unknown. This combination of clarity and mystery is reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical paintings (for example, *The Nostalgia of the Poet* from 1914). One can only make analogies, but the artists share both the love of the world of antiquity and the sense of mystery in the visible. De



Figure 10. Vasyl' Iermilov. *Portrait of O. Pochtennyi*. 1923. Wood, brass, sand, oil. 59.5 x 41.5 cm. Private collection of Konstantin Grigorishin.

Chirico's paintings are dominated by objects, while humans are often likened to architectural structures or mechanisms.

The titles of Iermilov's *Experimental Compositions* of the early 1920s (known only from photographs) correspond to the specific associations evoked by each work: *The Moon in the Window*, *The Moon Has Risen*, and *The Moon Emerges*. Here the artist develops a sense of how mystery penetrates material reality. In *The Moon in the Window* he presents familiar elements—part of a window frame, and deeper inside the painting, against a black background (the sky), appears the triangular billboard from the firewall of the multistoried building facing his studio. These “beacons of reality” are surrounded by a solid, L-shaped wooden form made from boards and by the rough velvety texture of night sky, all of which is set in a vertically positioned oval.

In *The Moon Has Risen* (fig. 11, at right) the verticals have tilted and the moon stubbornly glides upwards. The textured, uneven background creates a sense of the black infinity of the cosmos. The mirror-like metal disc of the moon emits coldness. The composition evokes associations through tactile sensations also—for instance, the wood of the window frame suggests warmth. The artist applies the principles of icon framing to his composition; however, the composition's frame on the inside has the form of an oval, symbolizing eternal movement, while on the outside it is rectangular with the clarity of vertical and horizontal lines.

*The Moon Emerges* is the most laconic and mysterious composition of this cycle. The metallic moon, cut in half along a diagonal line, is etched with short, diagonal furrows, creating a sense of simultaneous movement and rotation. This work is reminiscent of Rodchenko's paintings—for example, *Composition no. 61* from his series *Color Sphere of a Circle* (1918), where in cosmic darkness a bright yellow ball slowly and mysteriously rises like a moon.

Vasyl' Iermilov creates a composition the way a craftsman creates an object, loading it with material and texture. Yet at the same time he imbues it with recognizable visual and tactile imagery, creating an associational world, a symbolic text. His tightly and firmly wedged compositions invite analogies with the art of icon painting because of the compression of their “foundation,” which functions as a symbol of the “ontological inviolability” of the image of another reality (to use the words of Pavel Florenskii).<sup>23</sup> But in Iermilov's works that reality becomes manifest not through an iconic image, but through an object. Among his *Experimental Compositions* there are examples of an even more laconic use of artistic means. He needed only the outline of a circle

23. Pavel Florenskii, *Ikonostas* (St. Petersburg: Mifril, 1993), 130.

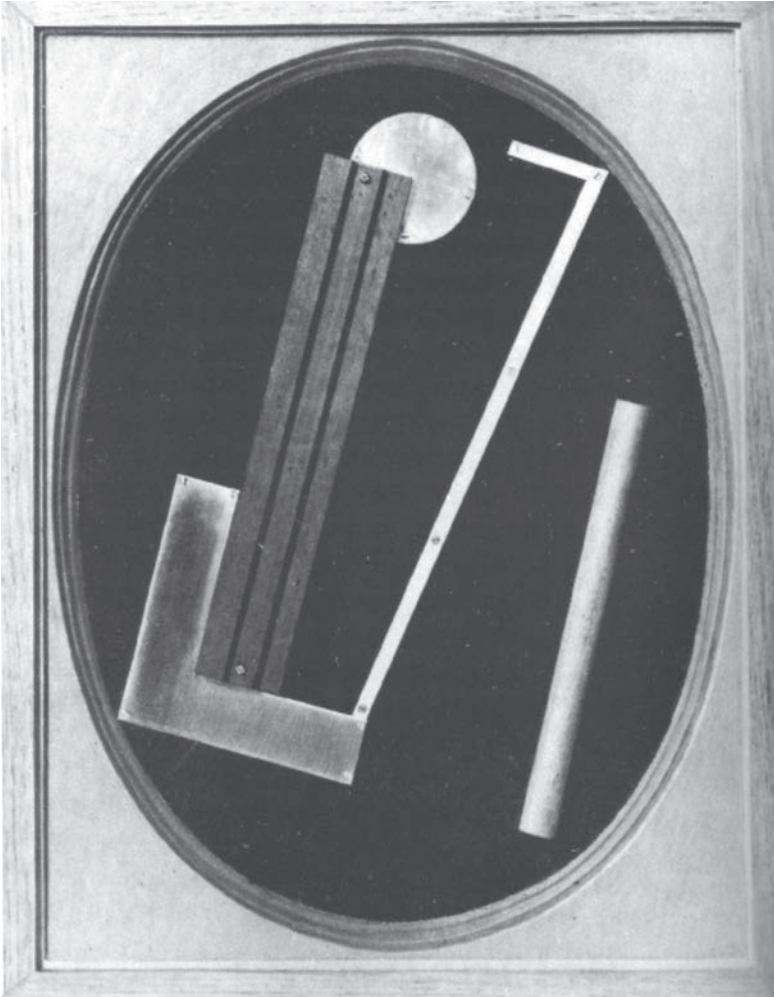


Figure 11. Vasyl' Iermilov. *The Moon Has Risen*. Early 1920s. Wood, metal, sand, oil. Glass plate negative. Photo: Vasyl' Iermilov. Iermilov photo archive, private collection of Dmytro Horbachov.

and a right angle to construct a correlation between the human world and the cosmos in a clear-cut and simple, yet not simplified way (fig. 12, below). In this respect his approach is closest to that of Piet Mondrian and László Moholy-Nagy.

Iermilov built a durable universe out of all the materials at his disposal. He proclaimed the value of the ordinary by revealing the architectonic



Figure 12. Vasyl' Iermilov.  
*Experimental Composition*.  
 Early 1920s. Wood, metal, oil.  
 Glass plate negative. Photo:  
 Vasyl' Iermilov. Iermilov photo  
 archive, private collection of  
 Dmytro Horbachov.

principles of everyday objects, their simplicity and authenticity. When he puts a knife or a matchbox into a composition, he is being thoroughly concrete, but as we perceive the close, familiar, “ready-at-hand,” he activates our senses and our intuition. He reawakens the feeling that behind an object something unknown is hidden—the unknown of matter itself, its structure, its “flesh,” and the very uncontrollability of its being. This phenomenon was described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “The ‘visual quale’ gives me, and is alone in doing so, the presence of what is not me, of what *is* simply and fully. It does so because, as a texture, it is the concretion of a universal visibility of one sole Space...”<sup>24</sup>

In his *Experimental Compositions* Iermilov produced that highly concreted matter through which the invisible vibrates and reveals itself.

24. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, translation editor Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 147.





Figure 13. Vasyl' Iermilov. *Composition no. 3*. 1923. Wood, brass, varnish, oil. 82 x 43 cm. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Glass plate negative. Photo: Vasyl' Iermilov. Iermilov photo archive, private collection of Dmytro Horbachov.

His austere abstract *Composition no. 3* (fig. 13, above)<sup>25</sup> can be compared in its purity to Edmund Husserl's phenomenological reduction. It calls for a perception that is free of any sociocultural associations; it is a

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25. This work is usually reproduced inaccurately as a relief composition with the form of an open angle on which the arch is mounted. On the glass negatives in Iermilov's photo archive, which were made by the artist himself, is a photograph of an exhibition of his works where *Composition no. 3* is hung differently. It has the form of an angle that closes the space in the upper-right section; i.e., this angle visually halts the movement of the arch.

dialogue with what is present, with the object as such. This work is close to suprematism, as the pure white area inside the composition acquires a cosmic resonance. Another link to suprematism is the use of the arch and diagonals. The fundamental difference, however, is that in Iermilov's composition one senses the density of the material in every element, its gravity, its "umbilical" connection to the world of the workshop. It is not simply that we feel this subconsciously; we seem to actually see the artist's physical efforts needed to smooth out the surface of the wood, to tighten the bolts, and to measure with perfect precision the exact location of the laths and arch.

The same meticulous approach in selecting elements and in creating a clear composition is visible in his *Plate, Bread, Knife, Matches* (1921) (fig. 14, at right) where real objects are present—a knife and a matchbox—as well as a hypothetical oversized plate and slice of bread presented as a wood relief. Here Iermilov made a work visually close to suprematism in which he used ready-made objects.<sup>26</sup> And once again, the boundary between Iermilov's sense of the world and Malevich's philosophy is defined by the fact that Iermilov does not reject "the world of flesh and bones," but rather embraces the object as such.

At the end of the 1920s Iermilov began to incorporate the principles of collage into his work, using photographs, clippings from newspapers and magazines, and constructivist elements made of metal and wood. With this technique he created the wall newspapers *Generator* and *Kanatka* (Cableway) that were shown at the Press Exhibition in Cologne in 1928. In *Generator*, the first thing that attracts attention is a small black square, followed by photographs of events of the past decade in rhythmically arranged horizontal frames. The rows of letters, the numbers of the dates, and the photographs as well as color accents create an integrated, well-balanced construction. The wall newspaper *Kanatka* is constructed of three folding squares; the two lower ones are filled with texts and photographs, while the upper one is a constructivist composition that plays with the title of the wall newspaper, in which seven metal strings are stretched diagonally above the relief. These particular works bring to mind associations with such significant examples of avant-garde art as Malevich's *Black Square* (1915) and Tatlin's *Corner Counter-Relief* (1915). They seem to serve as starting points for these photo-facts arranged in constructivist fashion.

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26. In his monograph *Vasilii Ermilov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1975), Zinovii Fogel' dated this work to the first half of the 1920s. The date of 1929 appeared by mistake in subsequent studies. In the catalog of the artist's solo exhibition in 1962, which took place when he was still alive, this work is dated 1921.



Figure 14. Vasyl' Iermilov. *Plate, Bread, Knife, Matches*. 1921. Gypsum, wood, metal, oil. 49 x 38.3 cm. Collection of the Sepherot Foundation, Liechtenstein. Reproduced from the catalogue *Vasilii Ermilov, 1894–1968* (Moscow: Proun, 2011), 41.

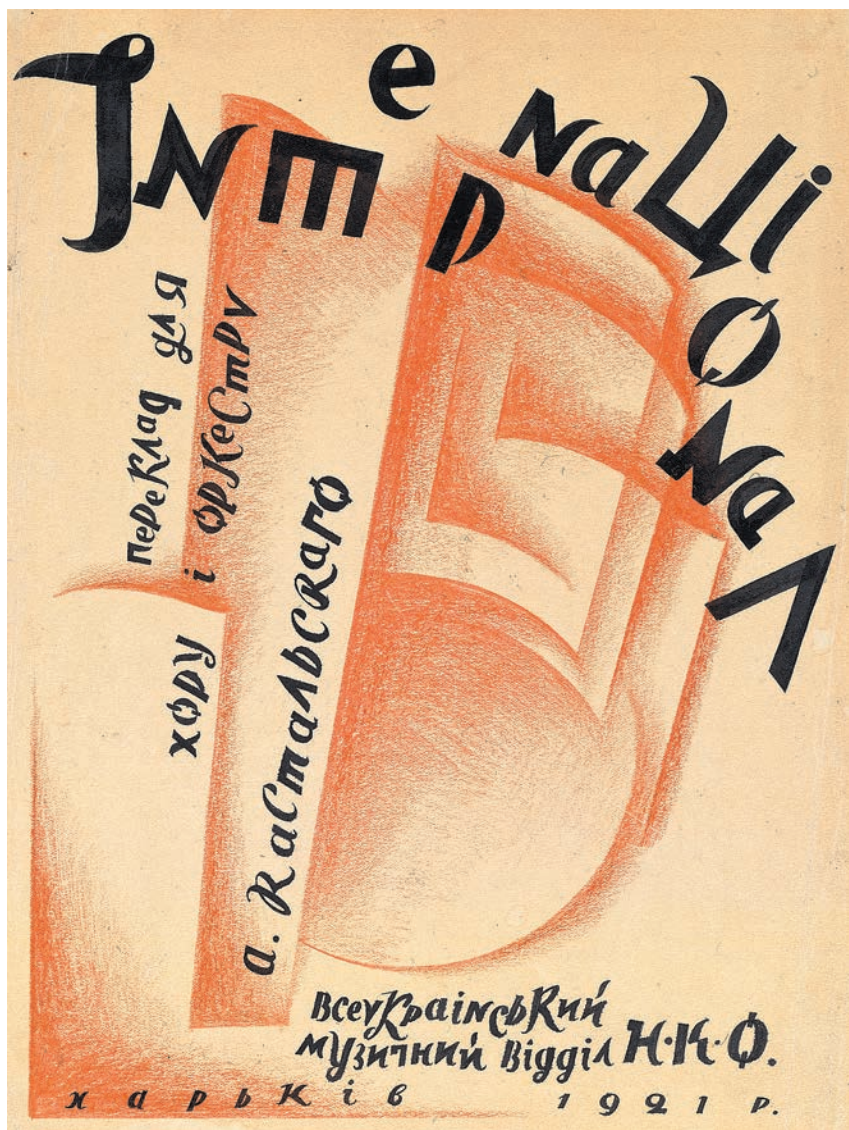


Figure 15. Vasyl' Iermilov. Cover art for the score *Internatsional: Pereklad dlia khoru i orkestru A. Kastal'skago* (The International: Arrangement for Choir and Orchestra by A. Kastal'skii). 1921. Paper on cardboard, India ink, red pencil. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

Iermilov's book designs reflect his enthusiasm for various avant-garde trends. For the cover of *Internatsional: Pereklad dlia khoru i orkestru A. Kastal'skago* (The International: Arrangement for Choir and Orchestra by A. Kastal'skii) (Kharkiv, 1921) (fig. 15, at left) he created a cubo-futuristic design. The object of this composition is arranged in different spatial planes, creating the impression that its parts exist in different times. The image is abstract and yet the artist manages to convey the melody's flow, the swell of its monumental sound with its fortes, crescendos, and codas. Iermilov's ability to create evocative metaphors for books was noted by Valer'ian Polishchuk, who wrote that "when Iermilov designs an abstract, constructivist book cover he uses shapes and lines to express the main idea of the book, be it the dynamism of rupture, the tranquility of accord, the excitement of jagged forms, or the struggle between sharp and soft (round) elements."<sup>27</sup>

Sometimes Iermilov followed the strict prescriptions of functionalism in his book design, using mainly one typeface and treating it as poster art in the manner of N. Astaf'iev or Zinovii Tolkachov. On Iermilov's cover for Arkadii Liubchenko's book *Vona* (She) (Kyiv, 1929), the central element of a design constructed of black horizontal and vertical lines is the large title printed in red sans serif letters. The design reveals Iermilov's former experience with posters, where emphatic and clear text must be visible and easily read from afar. It is noteworthy that Iermilov, like other Ukrainian constructivists, did not use stock typeset fonts for book covers, because at that time printing houses did not have at their disposal typefaces with the kind of polished and perfectly proportional letters that would meet the artists' high standards. Vasyl' Krychevs'kyi, for instance, rarely used standard type; instead "he often improvised sans serif fonts" in accordance with the concept of his design, and "he manipulated them freely."<sup>28</sup>

Iermilov borrowed from agitprop art and used bright colors and garish color combinations for his book covers. For example, in a sketch of a typical cover for the series *Biblioteka: Tekhnika i pobut* (Library of Technology and Daily Life) (fig. 16, below) he paints the background orange, draws a Г-shaped form in red, and a square in dark purple. The composition is simple and logical, though it has the distinct feel

27. Polishchuk, *Vasyl' Iermilov*, 21.

28. "Вільно володіючи шрифтами, Василь Кричевський рідко дотримувався стандартних друкарських стилів їх. Він часто імпровізував гротескові шрифти і вільно порадкував ними, напр., поєднуючи дві або й три літери до купи в разі потреби." Vadym Pavlovs'kyi, *Vasyl' Hryhorovych Krychevs'kyi: Zhyttia i tvorchist'* (New York: Ukraïns'ka Vil'na Akademiia Nauk u S.Sh.A, 1974), 158.



Figure 16. Vasyl' Iermilov. Cover art for books published in the series *Biblioteka: Tekhnika i pobut* (Library of Technology and Daily Life). 1920s. Paper, India ink, gouache. 17.6 x 25 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

of an advertisement. The cover of issue no. 23 of the magazine *Nove mystetstvo* (Kharkiv, 1927) depicts a “tribune-stand” (speakers’ platform) constructed of geometrical forms that Iermilov created for an exhibition celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution (fig. 17, at right).

Among Iermilov’s covers from the 1920s there are examples of pure typographic design where the artist created exquisite work using only sans serif fonts, rectangular blocks of color, and typographic lines. This is how he created his famous and most laconic works—the covers of the journals *Biuletyn’ Avanhardu* (Kharkiv, 1928), *Mystets’ki materiialy Avanhardu* and *Avanhard 3: Mystets’ki materiialy* (both Kharkiv, 1929), *Radians’kyi teatr* (Kharkiv, 1923), as well as the cover of Valer’ian Polishchuk’s book *Vasyl’ Iermilov* (Kharkiv, 1931). His cover of *Kataloh vystavky ukrains’koi knyzhkovoï hrafiiky* (Catalogue of the Exhibition of Ukrainian Book Graphics) (Kharkiv, 1929) is reminiscent of Mondrian. And his sketch of the cover for the brochure *Bil’shovyts’kyi zasiv* (Bolshevik Seed) is a suprematist diagonal composition made of black rectangles and wide and narrow black typographic lines.



Figure 17. Vasyl' Iermilov. Cover art for the journal *Nove mystetstvo*, 1927, no. 23. Paper, India ink, gouache. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.

It is interesting to note that Tatlin and Malevich, both of whom taught in 1927–1928 at the Kyiv Art Institute, also designed book covers for Ukrainian publishers. These were the only book covers they produced, a fact indicative of the importance and high level of book graphics in Ukraine during that period. The constructivist genre in Ukrainian book graphics was being created by an entire constellation of artists: Iermilov, Vasyl' Krychevs'kyi, Vadym Meller, Nina Henke-Meller, Heorhii Tsapok, Georg Fisher, Anatol' Petryts'kyi. Some constructivism-inspired work was also done by Adol'f Strakhov, Ilarion Pleshchyns'kyi, and Sviatoslav Hordyns'kyi.

In his 1929 design for the cover of *Mystets'ki materiialy Avanhardu*, Iermilov uses a combination of black and red, which was considered both traditional and sacred. He contrasts modern sans serif with more traditional serif typefaces in the words “avanhard,” “avangardo” and “avangarde.” In so doing, Iermilov, like Mykhail' Semenکو before him, emphasized the universality of the language of avant-garde, the common artistic aspirations of painters and writers in the various countries of Europe. See figure 18, below.



Figure 18. Vasyl' Iermilov. Cover art for the journal *Avanhard*. 1928–1929. Paper, India ink, gouache. 30.5 x 22.9 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum of Ukraine.



While investigating the possibilities of print and experimenting with various expressive means, Iermilov designed not only covers but also books, often constructing them from a variety of typesetting elements. Having established constructivism in book graphics, at a certain stage he came to see that a work of art resembles a manufactured product. And this led him to turn his attention to photography.

At the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s, many constructivists returned to figurative art and incorporated photography in their works. Photography made use of technical advances and was, in a way, the embodiment of “pure fact”; it secured the objectivity of perception. The art of photography not only made images more specific, it corresponded to the constructivist strategy of replacing elitist vision with mass appeal. Similar processes were taking place in Russian art where “in the middle of the 1920s the group LEF declared that photography is a mass product, not made by human hands, and the ideal ‘screen for meaning.’”<sup>29</sup> Photomontage was widely used in the late constructivist works of Gustav Klutsis, Alexander Rodchenko, and El Lissitzky.

Among the first works of Iermilov created in this genre was the cover of a brochure for workers, *Tokarstvo po derevu* (Wood Turning) (Kharkiv, 1929). In it the artist treats a photograph as a “second melody” that is incorporated in the main constructivist composition as an independent, self-sustaining motif. In the works that followed, his use of photography changed. He became bolder in his treatment of photo images, weaving them directly into the fabric of his compositions. This approach can be seen on his cover of Ivan Senchenko’s *Hihanty pustel’* (Giants of the Deserts) (Kharkiv, 1932) and on his design of Mykola Sheremet’s *Ni piadi* (Not One Inch) (Kharkiv, 1932). Photography of the early 1930s already had a graphic quality owing to its rejection of fine detail and lumping together masses of black and white. Reproductions of art photography became a constant presence on the pages of the journal *Nova generatsiia*. Most frequent were photographs by Man Ray and Dan Sotnyk. The latter often worked with Iermilov and Georg Fisher on various book designs. During that period Petryts’kii, Oleksa Vlyz’ko, and many other uncredited artists used photographs for their cover designs.

The futurist publication *Avangard-al’manakh* regularly reproduced the covers of the Bauhaus group, as well as the works of Oswald Weise, Paul Urban, John Heartfield, Walter Dexel, Jakob Bauman, and El Lissitzky. Art critic Gustav Adol’f wrote,

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29. Ekaterina Degot’, *Russkoe iskusstvo XX veka* (Moscow: Trilistnik, 2002), 111.

In recent years here in Soviet Ukraine and in Western Europe, due to the colossal growth of book production and a certain renaissance of book publishing in the West in the postwar years, there is a notable demand for a “dynamically designed” book (to use the apt expression of the functionalist Theo van Doesburg). Book covers of this type present a free, uninhibited, and most varied multidirectional combination of various typeset sizes together with splashes of paint in the form of dots, columns, stripes, and lines, as well as a broad application of elements of photomontage or stylized geometrical drawings.<sup>30</sup>

In his work with book graphics Iermilov brings to light the aesthetic qualities of photography, which he strengthens with the use of color. The right side of the cover of Gro Vakar’s book *Poizdy pidut’ na Paryzh* (The Trains Will Go to Paris) (Kharkiv, 1932) shows a photograph of a man near a cannon wheel, while the left side consists of three stripes of blue, white, and red, overwritten by the black-lettered title. On the cover of John Dos Passos’s *Try soldaty* (*Three Soldiers*) (Kharkiv, 1933) a vertically stretched photograph of New York skyscrapers forms an integral element of the composition among analogous rectangles of white and brown. Iermilov took advantage of all the possibilities provided by the rapidly developing art of photography. At that time, observing the dynamics of photography’s development, Theo van Doesburg noted, “Today it has entered a stage where it can already play with the technical means that it mastered. And play is the first step toward creativity.”<sup>31</sup> Iermilov uses photomontage in his book designs, as, for instance, on a cover of Oles’ Dosvitnii’s *Kvartsyt* (Quartzite) (Kharkiv, 1932). This cover shows a large-scale poster-like miner’s head against the background of a photo-collage combining people at a rally and metal structures. On the front cover of Ostap Demchuk’s *Chornozem* (Black Soil) (Kharkiv, 1933), Iermilov combined photographs of a 1920s rally with a demonstration from the 1930s; on the back cover a tractor plows a field.

In his photomontages and photocollages Iermilov once again focused on directly presented, visible, and precisely reproduced reality. But each time, just as in his three-dimensional “experimental compositions,” his concrete, meticulous, even technical analysis of objects produced generalized symbols. His objects and compositions are “objects sui

30. Gustav Adol’f, “Knyha,” *Avangard al’manakh proletars’kykh myttsiv novoi generatsii*, no. b (April 1930): 74.

31. Teo fan Dusburg [Theo van Doesburg], “Fil’m, iak chyste oformlennia,” *Avangard al’manakh proletars’kykh myttsiv novoi generatsii*, no. a (January 1930): 78.

generis," and in perceiving them, we sense the presence of an independent, self-sufficient, and self-contained world.

The art of Iermilov, despite its obvious and striking originality, remains open to dialogue with the works of other masters. It exists within the context of national and pan-European artistic development: in looking at the whole body of Iermilov's creative work, we see that it passed through the same styles, currents, and movements as did the rest of Europe. The starting point was the turn-of-the-century art nouveau with its grand intellectual program aimed at capturing fleeting reality by the means of art. In his first monumental paintings (which we know from his sketch album of decorative wall paintings [1909] created in Trakal's studio), one can discern the general desire of art nouveau artists to transform life into a work of art. By granting art such an important role in the life of an individual and family, the artists were elevating it to a level of social significance. In Ukraine at the beginning of the twentieth century these ideas went hand in hand with the aspirations of national revival. This process manifested itself most fully in the works of Vasyl' Krychevs'kyi, Narbut, and Boichuk. Iermilov remained under the influence of these artists as he worked on wall paintings and book graphics in the postrevolutionary period.

The idea of reviving national arts was an integral part of the development of synthetic art. The sought-after synthesis was understood as a process of overcoming the contradictions of the times, the current world crisis. For Boichuk the synthesized ideal was the temple, for Krychevs'kyi it was a peasant home (*khata*) with all its vessels and utensils, and for Narbut the model of synthesis was a book. All these artists went through and, in a way, were molded by the art nouveau style, under the influence of which art fuses with daily life and thus broadens its parameters. The model of synthetism for Boichuk, Krychevs'kyi, and Narbut was folk art, which existed inseparably from daily life, and in which there was no boundary between its aesthetic qualities and nonaesthetic functions. The artists strove to restore the high status of art in society, to make it meaningful for everyone. In his *Istoriia ukrains'koho ornamentu* (History of Ukrainian Ornament) (Kyiv, 1927) the art historian Hryhorii Pavluts'kyi emphasized, "Works of folk art should not be viewed too narrowly, as art created by the peasants in order to satisfy their everyday spiritual and material spiritual needs.... Folk art, folk ornament is our ancient art, and therefore the property of the entire nation, and not its separate strata."<sup>32</sup>

Regardless of their artistic and stylistic differences, Boichuk, Kry-

32. Hryhorii Pavluts'kyi, *Istoriia ukrains'koho ornamentu* (Kyiv: UAN, 1927), 14.

chevs'kyi, and Narbut shared certain basic principles. All of them wanted to create an ideal form of Ukrainian national art, and therefore it was essential for them to rely on the local artifacts. The past appears as the harbinger of the future, and it was there that one could see the dawn of the national Renaissance. The repetition of tradition was viewed as a reactualization of past experience. In turning to the treasury of traditional national art, the artists plumbed the depths of historical memory lodged in the multiple layers of the human psyche where ancient traditions are stored. At a time of historical upheaval the force contained in those traditions rose to the surface, but it acquired completely new forms and a modern timbre.

The desire of Ukrainian artists to master their national traditions did not divert them from the mainstream of European art, because Ukrainian culture itself is a repository of many traditions. Its territory was the site of the earliest Paleolithic and Neolithic cultures, of a flourishing ancient Greek and Byzantine heritage, and a place where the classical and contemporary styles of Western Europe and the art of the Near East were introduced and adapted. Thus, for example, Mykola Holubets' notes in his *Nacherk istorii ukrains'koho mystetstva* (Outline of the History of Ukrainian Art) (Lviv, 1922) that during the baroque period Ukrainian engraving became a constant, even if not always wide and deep, conduit of influences from Western European art.<sup>33</sup>

In attempting to define the place of Ukrainian art within world history, the artists investigated the past, analyzed relationships and mutual influences, and absorbed contemporary artistic achievements. The internationalization of world culture brought about by the various avant-garde movements coincided in time with the trend for national artistic self-affirmation. The new art from Western Europe brought fresh creative impulses to Ukrainian culture at the turn of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their subsequent development was almost synchronic.

The art of Vasyl' Iermilov demonstrates the extent to which Ukrainian art of the first third of the twentieth century was integrated into European culture. Numerous threads—his discoveries in the plastic arts, creative aspirations, philosophical positions, and practical craftsmanship—all linked his artistic path with a world of art that, it seems, easily conquered existing official borders, whether state, political, or ideological, creating a single space of the avant-garde. Iermilov's work reflects

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33. Mykola Holubets', *Nacherk istorii ukrains'koho mystetstva*, pt. 1. (Lviv: Fond "Uchitesia, braty moi," 1922), 226.

such diverse movements as expressionism, cubism, cubo-futurism, neoprimitivism, constructivism, and art deco.

It is important to note that the evolution of his work through successive stylistic currents was concurrent with his adopting of different genres. It is especially noticeable when one compares his easel painting, graphics, or reliefs with his commissioned works—that is, his monumental painting. In the former the artist maintains fidelity to one stylistic trend, be it expressionism, cubism, constructivism, or synthetic cubo-futurism. In his monumental pictorial art (be it murals or decorations for the *Chervona Ukraina* propaganda train) Iermilov's unique artistic language emerged through his combining traditional motifs with avant-garde technique. Features of neoprimitivism and art deco coexist in his art.

Iermilov's art of the period from the 1910s to the early 1930s is especially fascinating for the multitude of styles he used, for its multidimensionality, and for the freedom with which he chose various means in expressing his ideas. Overall, Iermilov's artistic language reflects a complex interplay of the ancient and the contemporary, the folk and the professional, the all-European and national. His work represents a foremost expression of Ukrainian culture and is an integral part of twentieth-century art.

