

Constructivism Movement in Art

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At the beginning of the 20th century in Italy and Russia, the Futurist movement in art would challenge all traditional practices and social mores. Italian futurists would view war as a cleansing, peacekeeping, necessary evil. Art would become a weapon of war. Nothing would be safe from the scrutiny of the state. All ill-accepted practices and traditions would be refuted. As Futurists and Dadaists sought to cleanse the world and start over, the pendulum would swing in the opposite direction to a world of unity, understanding and peace. Enter the Constructivists.

The Constructivism movement took place between 1913 and 1940. Russian sculptor Vladimir Tatlin is credited with the first Constructivist Art (*the Tatlin Tower sculpture-Monument to the Third International*) after visiting Paris and discovering the cubist and futurist works of Picasso and Braque. During the period of time between the two World Wars, artists would become social realists whose art reflected the politics of the time. Their new manifesto decreed them researchers and engineers. Art, like construction, reflected the utilitarian tools and materials used by the common man. Glass, steel, plastic and wood were used as real materials in real space for a real approach to what art should be.

After WW1, Russia entered into a new era of cultural transformation. After Futurism's fascists led the world into war, the Constructivists sought to bring the world back into peace and unity. It was during the Bolshevik era from 1917 to 1921 that "the poster played a key role in selling Lenin's vision of total cultural and political transformation to a largely illiterate population and became the centerpiece of the first truly modern propaganda machine."¹

It was in the Realist Manifesto, written by brothers Pevsner and Gabo that outlined some of the key themes of Constructivism. Quoted from that manifesto:

"And we do not measure our work by the yardstick of beauty, we do not weigh it on the scales of tenderness and feeling. The plumb line in hand, the look accurate as a ruler, the mind rigid as a compass, we are building out work as the universe builds.

"This is why, when we represent objects we are tearing up the labels their owners gave them, everything that is accidental and local, leaving them with just their essence and their permanence, to bring out the rhythm of the forces that hide in them."²

Using real objects was consistent with the ideology of respecting the workers and the machines they used. Seeking to unite the masses, art was reduced to the very materials the communist workers were familiar with (i.e., glass, steel and plastic). All the sudden, art for arts sake was not relevant and the artist as engineer was born. The Manifesto goes on:

"4. We disown, in sculpture, mass as a sculptural element. Every engineer knows that the static forces of solids, their material resistance, are not a function of their mass...But you sculptors...always cling to the old prejudice according to which it is impossible to free volume from mass."³

Constructivism elements and themes in art, architecture and sculpture were widely used in the creation of posters to promote the communist agenda. "During the Bolshevik era alone "more than 20 poster a week

¹ internationalposter.com/ru-text.cfm

² *Realist Manifesto*, Pevsner and Gabo, 1920

³ *Realist Manifesto*, Pevsner and Gabo, 1920

were created.”⁴ Several of those themes and elements can be seen in the examples I have included. Most notably:

- Strong solid colors – black, red, yellow predominate
- Strong angles
- Exaggerated perspective
- Abstract ideas and subconscious themes
- Graphic elements not found in nature
- Equal use of positive and negative space.

From a typographical standpoint, we also see the following elements introduced that were beyond the scope of the art, sculpture and architecture of the time. These would include:

- Bold Text
- Vertical, angled and exaggerated perspective on type
- Outlined (clipping path) human figures against solid backgrounds
- Use of military figures and heroes
- Working man and factory
- A call to action
- Industrial themes, machinery, factories
- Order, direction, fear, and intimidation
- Accessible style for the uneducated masses

Ushering in the New economic policy of 1921 to 1927 were the teaming of El Lissitsky, Alexandar Rodchenko and Mayakovsky as advertising constructors for the state run businesses. The strong diagonals and color became the peacetime equivalent of the revolutionary poster.⁵ This also marked a major split to the Constructivist movement in 1920 when Gabo asserted to Tatlin, “Either create functional houses and bridges or create pure art, not both.”⁶

Other notable contributors to this period included in my examples are Dolgorukov, Lavinsky, Starchevsky and Stepanova. Fortunately, “The increasingly inhospitable environment for modern art in Russia and Germany between the wars led many artists and architects to Paris, Britain and eventually the United States.”⁷

With art as the new champion of the people we find many pervasive themes throughout this movement. Most notably the use of military figures and heroes, the workingman and factory, and industrial themes that are accessible to the uneducated. The strength of this movement can be appreciated when we see many of its themes and styles reproduced much later in the 20th century. Propaganda posters from the Chinese Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1968 are important mentions as well as Neville Brody’s Constructivist posters in the 1980s.

Constructivism as an art form originating in Russia has led to major influences on art in the world today. Do we see the influences in artists like Kandinsky and the Bauhaus school to have created works of such magnitude. Would Art Deco from the roaring twenties have evolved in such a way? It seems true that only in times of transitional and radical social change do we ever get to witness true genius at work.

⁴ internationalposter.com/ru-text.cfm

⁵ internationalposter.com/ru-text.cfm

⁶ [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivism_\(art\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructivism_(art))

⁷ grahampotter.com/constructivism