
RESEARCH

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THE ARTISTIC REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA IN VIEW OF THE SOVIET REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT

The Russian Revolution of 1917 has been considered the essential cause of the awakening of the artistic avant-garde of that country for a long time. One hundred years after the revolutionary events on the political and social scenes, we examined the development of the Russian artistic avant-garde prior to 1917, during the events of the October Revolution of that year and thereafter until 1932. We demonstrate that avant-garde ideas were already present and active in Tsarist Russia and that the Revolution of 1917 would only provide a more glaring framework for the proposals of avant-garde artists. In the same way, it will be demonstrated how the new Soviet *status quo* ended up drowning the vanguard vortex and establishing a methodology of action and production in art that would be far from the originality of the avant-garde works prior to 1917.

KEYWORDS:

Art – Avant-garde art – Avant-garde – History of Art – Russian art – Soviet art – Modern art – Soviet revolution – Russian revolution

LA REVOLUCIÓN ARTÍSTICA EN RUSIA ANTE LA REVOLUCIÓN SOVIÉTICA

RESUMEN

La Revolución Rusa de 1917 ha sido considerada la causa esencial del despertar de la vanguardia artística de ese país por mucho tiempo. A cien años de los eventos revolucionarios en la escena política y social, se examina el desarrollo de la vanguardia artística rusa previa a 1917, durante los eventos de la Revolución de Octubre de ese año y con posterioridad a ellos hasta 1932. Se demuestra cómo las

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ideas de vanguardia ya estaban presentes y activas en la Rusia zarista y que la Revolución de 1917 tan sólo otorgaría un marco más reluciente para las propuestas de los artistas de vanguardia. De la misma manera, se demostrará cómo el nuevo *status quo* soviético terminó ahogando el torbellino vanguardista y estableciendo una metodología de acción y producción en el arte que distaría mucho de la originalidad de la vanguardia anterior a 1917.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Arte de vanguardia – Historia del arte – arte ruso – arte soviético – arte moderno – Revolución soviética – Revolución rusa

A REVOLUÇÃO ARTÍSTICA NA RÚSSIA DIANTE DA REVOLUÇÃO SOVIÉTICA

RESUMO

A Revolução Russa de 1917 foi considerada a causa essencial do despertar da vanguarda artística desse país por muito tempo. A cem anos dos eventos revolucionários, o cenário político e social examina o desenvolvimento da vanguarda artística russa prévia a 1917, durante os eventos da Revolução de Outubro deste ano e com posterioridade a eles até 1932. Demonstrem-se como as idéias de vanguarda já estavam presentes e ativas na Rússia czarista e que a Revolução de 1917 somente proporcionaria um marco reluzente para as propostas dos artistas da vanguarda. Da mesma maneira, se demonstrará como o novo status quo soviético terminou afogando o turbilhão vanguardista e estabelecendo uma metodologia de ação e produção na arte distaria muito da originalidade da vanguarda anterior a 1917.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Arte de Vanguarda – História da Arte – Arte Russa – Arte Soviética – Arte Moderna – Revolução Soviética – Revolução Russa.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Perhaps in the twentieth century there was no better source of political propaganda than the Bolshevik Revolution. The world was enthralled by the epic of a handful of workers who had taken one of the planet's most powerful empires, the immense Russia, out of the way. So much so that not even the Menshevik Revolution, that of February 1917, that led to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, was able to compete with the incredible achievements of the Revolution of October of that year that was flying the flag of the soviets.

Arts received the impact of this propaganda that seduced the world. It was repeated with relish that the Soviet Revolution revived the artistic avant-garde in a Russia

soaked with religious and academic tradition in its arts. The revolution would then have been not only political and social, but artistic as well. This, a hundred years after the events of the year 1917, can be described as inaccurate, but also unfair.

Understanding Russian art before and after the Revolution led by Lenin, is usually done from whites and blacks (or perhaps, white and red, to be more in tune with events). However, what really happened on the Russian art scene from 1917 to 1932 could not be truly understood if it were not considered in the first instance that there existed several artistic currents, all of them self-styled "avant-garde", which attempted to respond to the greatest artistic problem of the Revolution: How to artistically represent revolutionary ideals and how to connect the viewer with them through artistic forms?

Who would select the most appropriate answer would not, however, be the audience to which the works were intended. It would be, without more, the Soviet state that would replace the old absolutist state of the czars. This process of purification of the artistic scene is one of the most important in the history of art of the twentieth century, since the new Union of Soviet Socialist Republics would mark the way of a new official style known as Socialist Realism, which would be followed by other regimes like Nazi Germany and the United States of America in the days of the New Deal. This would also find a favorable echo in the proposals of Mexican Muralism derived from the Revolution of 1911².

The social commitment evidenced in more "realistic" artistic forms would face the social commitment evidenced in the surpassing of the reality and the transcendence towards universal ideals that demonstrated the abstract artistic forms. The struggle between both tendencies is interesting, but vital to understand the artistic future of the next 100 years. The first of these meetings is the one that catalyzes the Soviet Revolution. It will not, however, be the only one. It will be, on the other hand, the most strident, the most publicized and the best spread worldwide. Some consider it the decisive episode of twentieth-century art. On this, perhaps Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso have a thing or two to say. Modernity in them, on the other hand, is undeniable. Abstract or not, its essence is equally modern.

2. DISSICUSION

2.1 The revolution before the revolution and in the revolution

By 1900, the Russian society had a prosperous artistic activity. The so-called folk art, full of folklorism and coloring was well rooted and was tremendously prolific. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Brotherhood of the Itinerants³ had practiced a realistic painting with an important social burden, which remained in force (with its ups and downs) at the time of the Bolshevik triumph.

² The problem of the Mexican Muralism will not be deal with here. In itself, it is enormously complex and deserves exclusive and dedicated attention.

³ Known as *Peredvizhniki*.

But in addition, the so-called *World of Art*⁴, aligned with the avant-garde trends of the West and inspired by the homonymous magazine that would serve as de facto manifest, introduced a refreshing air to the Russian artistic scene in the first decade of the twentieth century. The group was formed in 1898 by some students including Alexander Benois, Konstantin Somov, Dmitry Filosofov, Léon Bakst and Eugene Lansere. Its cosmopolitan vision influenced the development of artistic individualism in Russia, and was also an aesthetic reaction against what was promoted by the Itinerant group. *Art Nouveau* became to the *Art World* the spearhead to shake off the prevailing aesthetics.

On the other hand, another group of self-styled Russian artistic avant-garde, one of the most active and ardent of Europe since the first decade of the last century had managed to position itself in the innovative artistic furor. By 1908, for example, the "art of the future" was already being spoken in the Russian press a year before Filippo Marinetti coined the term "Futurism" in Italy. This "art of the future" referred to the works of original artists such as Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, David Burliuk and Alexandra Exter. Several out of these artists had been in Western Europe and were well aware of avant-garde ideas; Thus, Larionov and Goncharova, for example, had already been in Paris (Douglas, 1975).

The very successful tours of the Russian Ballet aroused great interest in the West for the culture of that country, so ideas cannot be thought to have flowed in only one direction. Those who visited Russia in the years prior to 1917 would be impressed by the interest in traditional icons from a modern perspective and, above all, by the extraordinary passion in the artistic theorization that would lead to abstraction. Henri Matisse and Umberto Boccioni spent time in Russia and would leave as many ideas as they took back.

In the spring of 1908, an exhibition entitled "Modern Trends" was held in St. Petersburg; Exter and Burliuk would be among the exhibitors. It would be striking that interest in the representation of moods was the main focus of the works included in the exhibition. On the other hand, *The Golden Fleece*, probably the most prestigious art journals in all of Russia, was for the first decade of the twentieth century an assiduous sponsor of the ideas of Fauvism and in 1908 and 1909 would include works by Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh, Pierre Bonnard and Maurice Denis at the exhibitions it organized with great success.

The Golden Fleece contributed to the dissemination of a new understanding of art, one that emphasized the personal vision, the "I" of the artist.

The work as an equivalent of sensations, reproduction of emotional and spiritual states through its plastic equivalents, subjective deformation, the primacy of the creative process in search of meaning, were concepts already discussed in 1908 and 1909 and they entered directly and naturally in the ideas of Russian futurism (Douglas, 1975, p. 230).

⁴ Or also, *Mir Iskusstva*.

Details such as these and the evidence of the progress of the Russian symbolist literary school make it remarkable that the avant-garde artistic society in that country was ready for the most daring formulations in the conception of art. In fact, it made them. The Lissitzky, one of the most celebrated Russian artists, declared in 1922 that the October Revolution itself in art originated long before 1917 (Birnholz, 1972-1973).

It is to be emphasized that the Russian artistic avant-garde prior to October 1917 was widely diverse. The works of Vassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Tatlin, Antoine Pevsner, Alexander Rodchenko and Kazimir Malevich, for example, differed greatly among them in their ideas. The number of expository events held from 1905 to 1917 testifies to the very active Russian artistic life and the confrontations that were taking place in this way in the forms and ideas. Only the numerous exhibitions of the Muscovite Community of Artists, in which Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Aristarkh Lentulov, Malevich and many others were always present, certify to us that the Russian art of avant-garde competed with that produced in Paris, for example. The exhibitions of the Karo-Bube (Diamond Sota) group, also in Moscow, are an example of the Russian artistic dynamics of the years before the October Revolution of 1917. This group was formed in 1909 and held exhibitions in the Winter of the years 1910-1917 (Weiss, 1985), looking for approaches to the so-called Cezannism, Post-Impressionism in general, Fauvism and Expressionism.

In 1915, in Saint Petersburg, the father of Suprematism, the aforementioned Malevich, exhibited his unique work *Square Black on white background*. "The square, impossible to find in nature, was the basic suprematist element: the fecundator of all suprematist forms. The square was a rejection of the world of appearances and the prior art "(Stangos, 1989, p. 117). It was simply a form charged with meaning in the beautiful paradox of absence of every object. It was the overt boldness of a vanguard that did not need any political revolution to spark.

Before Malevich's great gesture expressed in his *Black Square* of wishing to approach the unexplainable mystery of the universe, Kandinsky had published in München his work *Of the Spiritual in Art* (1910), bringing it with him upon his return to Russia in 1914. In this work, Kandinsky not only shows his talent as a theoretician, but also offers the lyrical and transcendent harmony that will unite more than a few Russian artists from then on, although the forms in which they emerge are very different.

And it is that artistic diversity was the common currency, incessant search was the constant and passionate creativity was the flag of all the trends that sought to stand out. But in spite of their differences, they all had a unique attitude: one way or another, they believed in the profound influence that art could have on individual and social development, that is, on the social role of art (Berger 1970). Upon its arrival, then, the Revolution would have created, from the point of view of these artists, a golden opportunity to participate meaningfully in the construction of a new way of life. The artistic avant-garde, in short, would have been enhanced by the Revolution, but it would not have been created by it.

Thus, the momentum created by the Revolution was to these avant-garde artists a sort of heroic epoch in which they assumed a messianic attitude, which propitiated the construction of a new way of life, which would promote the progress of man. Malevich, for example, saw Suprematism as a guide for the people derived from Hegelian ideas about the Absolute (Baljeu, 1965). Ideas such as those that placed art before social and political changes would soon make noise in government offices and enjoy no freedom beyond 1932. The mission of the arts would not be free.

Looking at the panorama, we note that in art, in the most ardent moments of the Revolution, the most surprising fact is the ease with which the most progressive artists made the transition from one culture to another (Higgins, 1970). In fact, the Russian avant-garde prior to 1917 shows an astonishingly fluid development in ideas from 1913 onwards.

It may even be said that in terms of formal ideas and radical ruptures, the Revolution might never have happened in art if we thought about what it implied for the political scene. In other words, no artistic revolution took place in Tsarist Russia in 1917, none which had not already taken place in the previous 20 years. The avant-garde had already taken root on Russian soil when the Bolsheviks entered that famous October scene.

2.2 The revolution in the arts after 1917

As we can already guess and contrary to what is usually thought, art in Russia did not suffer a crisis in 1917 because of the October Revolution. So much so that to distinguish Russian art as pre and post revolutionary is, perhaps, an artificial differentiation. That 1917 is a cataclysmic year for Russian politics, it does not mean that it is equally for the arts. However, 1932 will be so, as we will see later.

Formerly famous for his landscapes, in 1921, the painter Konstantin Yuon presented his work *New Planet* to the public. A crowd of small people gesticulating actively and contemplating the emergence of a giant red sphere could be seen on the canvas. It was as if the changes that were provoked by then in Russia had a planetary scale. The paradox is that it was complicated in those early years to define with certainty what the new role of the artist in this new world should be, beyond what they could believe.

Many things seemed the same as before the Revolution. The artists grouped themselves into associations, published ardent manifestos, organized exhibitions, but after the Revolution, the atmosphere around them seemed to give them a new role. The state now had new strategies, new ways of stimulating (and punishing) different expressions. It was becoming a great patron and sponsor of great exhibitions. Previously, the Russian State had not paid much attention to artistic matters. The Tsar Nicholas II had contributed little to artistic activities although he certainly came to sponsor some, but never on his own initiative, but after extensive requests.

There is no doubt, however, that the Russian avant-garde had been enthusiastic about the October Revolution. The construction of socialist society was then more than a possibility. "It was time to test the effectiveness of art as a factor of social transformation and avant-garde artist undertook that enterprise, assuming the leading role in the direction of cultural politics and artistic teaching" (Martínez Muñoz, 2001).

Originally, after 1917, most artists of the Russian avant-garde sincerely wanted to serve the Revolution. They wanted to do it with their own tools, their own original works and according to their particular notions. To associate was, for example, a way to share ideals, methodologies and visions, but never to annul their individualities.

A good example of this is the *Shapers of New Art*⁵, an association founded by Kazimir Malevich in 1919 which operated in the city of Vítebsk, at the personal invitation of Marc Chagall. Malevich would write a manifesto for this grouping that would propose to take the ideals of Suprematism to the Russian society (and the world), working of the hand of the Soviet government. Among other things they intended:

... the organization of design works for new types of structures and requirements, and their implementation; the formulation of a new architecture; development of new ornaments (textiles, printed textiles, castings and other products); designs of monumental decorations to beautify villages during national holidays; designs for interior and exterior decoration and painting of environments, and their implementation; creation of furniture and objects of daily use; creation of a contemporary type of book and other developments in the area of printing (Malevich quoted by Zhadova, 1982, p. 86).

In the 1920s it was remarkable that the pre-revolutionary Russian artistic avant-garde had been tremendously influential, but the artistic avant-garde that seemed to prevail at the time was very different. The avant-garde leading the scene in the immediate post-revolution era was against the pre-revolutionary avant-garde, the crisis of this first Russian avant-garde was evident and did not need any external enemy to stir up its contradictions.

A good way to understand this is by observing how avant-garde artists who sought above all a universal language and preached only this new vision of theirs that took them along the path of abstraction were quickly surrounded and isolated. Their yearnings were considered unnecessary by another group of avant-garde artists who believed that art was not only to deal with abstract matters but to be useful.

The latter gave rise to the birth of the concept of *industrial art*. In a way, it was only a recreation of the modernist utopia, which sought to transform the world through the creation of properly embellished everyday elements. Everything from clothing to kitchen utensils had to be modern and progressive. This, we may suppose, helped to justify the existence of the arts in the post-revolutionary era of the 1920s.

⁵ UNOVIS: Utverđíteli nóvogo iskusstva

The new avant-garde would be thrown to this into a (desperate?) attempt to survive. The suprematist and constructivist factories of porcelain, clothing, books, posters, etc. would arise. Among the most outstanding artists in these activities we can mention Varvara Stepanova, Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin and El Lissitzky. The constructions, clothing and utensils of these constructivists were very practical and perfectly useful for the here and now.

However, much of what other followers of Malevich and Suprematism did was not for the man of the present, but for that of the future: the new man. The painter Vasily Rojdestvensky would say that "construction is the modern requirement of organization and the reasonable use of matter. Art is mathematical. The constructive way is the art of tomorrow "(quoted by Kurz Muñoz, 1991, p. 146).

Other groups with avant-garde momentum were the *Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia*⁶ (AARR), created in 1922 in Moscow and the *Society of Easel Painters*⁷ (SPC), founded in 1925 in the same city. The former was the largest of the artistic groupings of the 1920s thanks to its ideology frankly aligned with that of the newly created USSR.

AARR was motivated by a speech by Pavel Radimov, the leader of the well-known *Brotherhood of the Itinerants*, at the close of the last exhibition of this group formed in the nineteenth century. The speech was entitled "On the reflection of daily life in art" and placed the emphasis on retaking the realism of itinerants with the purpose of recreating the daily life of the Red Army, workers, peasants, revolutionary activists and heroes of the workers with whom the masses can connect.

This proposal would be harshly attacked by the rest of the avant-garde artists who supported the revolution, but in itself AARR assumed itself as the true avant-garde. The truth is that from 1922, the *Brotherhood of the Itinerants* had practically merged with AARR, attracting also artists who despised the pre-revolutionary avant-garde. As a result this group would grow vertiginously and the following year would already have more than 300 members and several branches in different parts of the country.

Nevertheless, by 1925 AARR began to divide, creating several groups from different secessions. It is worth mentioning that, in terms of artistic principles, AARR stated that it subscribes to the realism and simplicity that can be understood by the masses. To its members, art should be accessible to the majority (illiterate) as well as to party leaders, many of whom were not distinguished by their artistic education or aesthetic taste.

Thus, AARR put all its efforts in the creation of works that could not be rejected because of their complexity. For this reason, the first major component of its works

⁶ Assotsiatsia Khudozhnikov Revolutsionnoi Rossii.

This group of artists were daily identified with a band on their arm that had the famous black square of Malevich.

⁷ Obschestvo Stankovistov

was absolute realism, and the second was the selection of the theme, which had to lean toward social order and revolutionary ideology. This way, the product was reduced to works that reflected the daily life of the masses, the revolution and the workers. Artists who were members of AARR, artists such as Isaac Brodsky, Boris Yoganson, Yevgeny Katzman, Yuri Repin and Alexander Grigoriev, saw themselves as skilled workers, whose duty it was to contribute to the revolution.

Painting in factories, army barracks or any other day-to-day place was preferred by the artists of this group who claimed to paint "from the natural ". They also joined scientific expeditions, fields of construction and sown fields to achieve their purpose. They did not conceive the possibility of an "art for art" against which they acted unobtrusively, rejecting the so-called formalism in the arts. Their battles paid off in 1932, when the state took control of artistic freedom and established Socialist Realism as the only possibility for art in the USSR.

The second of these groups, SPC, was formed by artists like Alexander Deyneka, Alexander Tysher, Yuri Pimenov, Pyotr Williams and Alexander Labas, among others. They united around the discourse about the nature of art, its purpose and its place in society, as well as about the artist's role. While the constructivists focused on the industrial arena away from the easel painting, this grouping did the opposite.

The artists of SPC wanted their art to reflect the different aspects of the reality of Soviet society. The document that shows their purpose and rights indicates that the activity of this society must be expressed through the organization of periodic exhibitions, which will include the following objectives (Foster et al., 2006: 260):

1. Aspire to absolute professionalism in the objective painting of easel, drawing and sculpture, hand in hand with the process of formal achievements in recent years.
2. Strive for a complete painting.
3. Maintain a revolutionary and contemporary clarity in choosing topics.
4. Give up lack of details as exposing a masked tendency to dilettancy.
5. Renounce pseudo-cezannismo, as destroyer of the form, the drawing and the color.
6. Renounce non-objectivism as a manifestation of irresponsibility in art.
7. Give up abstraction and roaming on the subject.
8. Orient the artistic youth.

9. Attract non-Russian masters of painting, drawing and sculpture to participate in SPC exhibitions.

In 1929, SPC issued a manifesto in which it could be read: "In the era of building socialism, active artistic forces must be one if the factors of cultural revolution in the areas of reform and design of new life intend to create the new socialist culture (RussianAvantgarde, 2006)." Their avant-garde conviction was remarkable. But in spite of the name of this group, little was the painting of easel that they made. Rather they dedicated themselves to the creation of monumental painting, poster production, picture books and magazines, as well as design for theatrical productions. By 1928 sensitive differences existed among its members, but the group continued to exist until 1932 when the state decided to unify all independent associations into one official.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning some individualities that stand out for their positions. Such is the case of Pavel Filonov, who made substantial contributions to the avant-garde that brought the innovative momentum prior to the October Revolution. Filonov had worked closely with Malevich and with the celebrated poet and playwright Vladimir Mayakovsky, he stood out for his demonstration of ironical artistic principles that led him to literally starve to death rather than sell his works to private collectors.

With Maikovski, Filonov would create truly innovative scenographies that would go beyond the characteristics of Symbolist and Expressionist art. His work does not have the harmony of colors that we can find in other artists, but in his own words he emphasized in his works "the fallacy in any argument that could support the existence or possibility of the existence of the so-called 'pure art' of 'art for art' as an end in itself "(Filonov cited by Bowlt, 1975, p. 283). This singular and unjustly little-known artist regarded his art as "universal flourishing" which was nothing more than "the last stage of socialism and the emancipation of the individual" (ibid.).

For his part, Kandinsky, a more experienced artist for 1917, who brought with him not only his passage through the Russian symbolism of the turn of the century but also created with Franz Marc, in Germany, a group of avant-garde with clear objectives Der Blaue Reiter (1912), did not aspire that the Russia of the October Revolution would bring the gift of new ways for his art. The path was for him more than marked. He knew, perhaps better than any other Russian artist, where he wanted to go with his work.

Although Kandinsky actually painted little through his passage by the revolutionary Russia, he did dedicate great efforts in the academic and museum areas. Nevertheless, his was considered an art too individualistic and bourgeois, a reason why when receiving the invitation of Walter Gropius in 1921 to participate like a teacher in the newly created Bauhaus, in Germany, Kandinsky did not think it twice.

The Soviet Revolution was not the right setting for his artistic ideas and he had clearly perceived it. He would say from this experience in his native Russia that

The sun melts all Moscow until a single point that, like a crazy tuba, begins to vibrate the whole heart and all the soul. But no, this red uniformity is not the most beautiful time. It is only the final chord of a symphony that carries every color to the zenith of life which, like the fortissimo of a great orchestra, is forced to sound, worse still, is the only thing allowed to sound in that city (quoted by Dutching, 2007, p. 7).

To add to this, Ivan Vladimirov's name, probably written in small letters in the annals of the art of the first Soviet post-revolutionary stage, must be added to give us a face of the artistic scene of this moment that we have rarely seen. Vladimirov is not located on the side of the transcendent avant-garde of Malevich and company, nor in the social avant-garde derived from the Brotherhood of the Itinerants. Neither is he located in the middle, but in that strange place of the observer foreign to what happens. Perhaps more like a photojournalist than an artist. Vladimirov was not only a prominent member of the Imperial *Society of Russian Watercolorists*, he was also one of the most prolific illustrators of imperial Russia's battle scenes during the Russo-Japanese War, the Balkan War and the early years of World War I (Harrington, 1988). His works are not distinguished by his innovative artistic quality, but by his eye for the record of scenes that history will thank later.

From the dismemberment of a horse in the street by a group of hungry people to the looting and devastation of the Winter Palace, to the confiscation of goods to peasants and the flight of the merchants from the big cities, everything was recorded by the watercolors of Vladimirov. This artist openly created heroic scenes from the Civil War unleashed in 1918, but simultaneously and secretly Vladimirov used his brushes to record the excesses committed by Leon Trotsky and his Red Army.

It was the ugly face of the Revolution that the world should not know and that only after the mid-twentieth century began to come to the light. Why Vladimirov made these watercolors with the worst of the Soviet Revolution is not clear, but it cannot be denied that the horrors of this historical event that we too often overlook are a window.

Although the judgment of horror is in our gaze today and Vladimirov does not seem to judge those excesses, it is nevertheless true that he never showed such works publicly and behind it there must have been a not very revolutionary reason.

In addition, it is important to mention the state-of-the-art editorial contributions that allowed for a wider and better dissemination of the revolutionary artistic ideas of the most active groups prior to the October Revolution. For 1920, the newspaper (in preparation from the first months of 1918) *Fine Arts* is published, directed by David

Shterenberg and also designer of its cover of cubist style. *Fine Arts* could not hide the interference of Malevich and Kandinsky in its pages and today it is considered one of the highest standard publications in Europe in that decade. Paper shortage in those early years after 1917, launched the artists to experiment with publications made entirely by hand. An album of linotypes was prepared by Liubov Popova and another by Alexander Rodchenko; While Varvara Stepanova experimented with the integration of words and images in the publication of her poem *Gaust Chaba* (1919). All of the aforementioned also collaborated in the production of hand-decorated catalogs (Compton, 1992). From these activities will emerge a remarkable graphic movement headed by the own Rodchenko, Popova and Stepanova. Extraordinary promotional posters of the films of the moment, as well as covers of books are today shows of the immense talent and disruptive sense that these talented artists possessed.

But without mentioning LEF (or Left Front in the Arts) any panorama on the art immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution would not be complete. Vladimir Mayakovsky was the leader of this unique group of artists. Already with avant-garde experience from the first years of the second decade of the twentieth century, Maiakovski had written the Russian futuristic manifesto in 1913, entitled *A slap in the face of the public*.

This time he met with Sergei Tretyakov, Osip Brik, the filmmaker Sergei Einsestein, the painters Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Liubov Popova and El Lissitzky. From the group, the publication of the homonymous journal from 1923 to 1925 must be rescued, as well as the effort dedicated to "the ideal of the construction of the 'total work of art', fusion of all the arts into a single unit lit up by the spirit of The Revolution "(Martínez Muñoz, 2001, p. 88).

In any case, each artist or each group of them sought a place in the construction of that new society they longed for. And although it is very probable that each one had an idea of this in his head, it cannot be said that his proposals lacked interest. The famous monument to the III International designed by Tatlin, for example, highlights the extraordinary capacity of this artist to conceive a new type of monument, fully aware of its own modernity and outside the traditional norm of nineteenth-century monuments.

Tatlin had understood that the type of traditional monument was destined mainly to an individual and that was inadmissible in the communist society. Events, popular movements in general should be the center of monumental creation. The truth is that, in the project of Tatlin

the monument was to measure more than 400 [meters high]. It would consist of two cylinders and a glass pyramid rotating with different speed. In the interior of these forms of glass, large writing rooms, meeting rooms, concerts, exhibitions,

etc. It would also have total thermal insulation, which would enable a great saving of heating in winter and the possibility of the most ardent debates in summer. These forms would be surrounded by a large iron spiral that would shoot upwards (Kurz Muñoz, 1991, p. 145).

But not only on monuments live a revolution. Everyday objects moved to a prominent place provided by a young government eager for propaganda of all kinds. Porcelain utility pieces are a good example of this. Although not all of them were framed in a direct propaganda line, almost all had a commemorative meaning or were linked to the Russian timeless traditions (fairy tales, rural life, etc.), as well as pieces more aligned with the forms promoted by Suprematism or Constructivism.

However, regardless of their motifs or formal appearance, all the pieces produced in the State Porcelain Factory (Lomosov), during the first 10 years after 1917 were - one way or another - intended to be used for propagandistic purposes. "This porcelain represented a new state, a new era, a new people and the Soviet government, eager for foreign currency, sent hundreds of pieces abroad to be exhibited and sold" (Lobanov-Rostovsky 1992, p. 623).

In general, the avant-garde artists who enthusiastically welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution came to regard themselves as true prophets. History has shown us that, on a regular basis, when an artist comes to regard himself as a prophet or a messiah, the result is often extremist. This, without further ado, became evident in the art and statements of Russian artists after the Revolution. On the one hand, Malevich's obsession with creating the purest manifestation of Suprematism led him to eliminate all the "ballast" of his paintings until he emerged in his paradigmatic work *White on White*. And, on the other hand, Tatlin's desire to create an art of real utility in his time culminated in the flying machine Letatlin, in which utility was idealized to the point of making it absolutely useless.

This created a problem for the Revolution itself and its objectives, to which the most avant-garde and therefore more revolutionary art would not really contribute much in political terms. Russia was at that time a country of deep-rooted traditions, its enormous geographic extension and the majority dedication of its population to work in the field did not make it apt to receive the message of the works of artists like Malevich and Tatlin, for example.

The seemingly cryptic discourse of those works that tended to abstraction or simply embraced it completely left little or no room for the pressing need of the new Soviet state to generate as much favorable political propaganda as possible. The truth is that if Malevich felt that the necessary research in the arts should be done without external contamination, Tatlin thought that art had an inescapable duty to society and, therefore, should not turn its back to it. Thus, beyond the abstract of its results, what was really problematic for the new state was its irreducible diversity.

2.3. The artistic revolution from the state

We have seen how, in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution of 1917, art had a pre-eminent place on the scene of the sudden changes promoted from the political point of view. It was considered that art should "become a spiritual weapon of the masses, an organ of self-awareness of the people" (Kurz Muñoz, 1991: 93). But the most difficult obstacle was the people themselves. Transforming the masses was not a task for the art of a Malevich or El Lissitzky, for it could not only revolve around the masses, but should be primarily for them.

In 1922, an exhibition was organized in Moscow to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the triumph of the October Revolution. It included an important sample of works by the Itinerant group that captivated a good part of the Communist Party and the visiting public. Automatically, the Itinerants regained their fickle popularity and by 1924 the change of attitude on the part of the governmental instances towards the most progressive avant-garde was already evident.

That year another exhibition entitled *Exhibition of Discussion* would be organized. Deliberately, the works of the Itinerants and other more abstract trends were placed so that the public could compare them. The result was logical: the uneducated public in artistic matters was overwhelmingly inclined to favor more realistic works (Sjeklocha and Mead, 1967).

Already in 1925, the Communist Party made "a call to artists to collaborate with the Soviet power in the creation of socialist art" (Kurz Muñoz, 1991, p. 93)⁸. Although, it does not choose yet any aesthetic program in particular or a specific artistic style, it was logical that the call pointed to an art with more dose of realism so that it was more understandable by the majority. Malevich himself seems to have acknowledged the message and by the late 1920s we can see him perform some works that flirt with figuration again after that option was already closed for him to conceive his masterful *White on white*. In fact, his 1933 self-portrait seems to be the final claudication to his suprematist ideals.

In the early years of the Revolution, that avant-garde art, more closely associated with the irreverent currents of the West, had been considered in Russia as the art of the Left. But we should not be confused, for this initial enthusiasm on the part of the political revolution for the revolution of the artistic avant-garde was essentially due to the rejection of the art academies, more related to the traditional Russian aristocracy and bourgeoisie.

⁸ Juan Alberto Kurz Muñoz, *Art in Russia. The Soviet era*, Institute of History of Russian and Soviet Art, Valencia, 1991, p. 93

It is not surprising that, in those years of the initial thrust of the Revolution, measures of "sanitation" were not made to wait and academies and schools of art were closed. Within the Bolshevik political leadership, "most intellectuals thought seriously that if they represented a worker with a red flag, that was already avant-garde art" (Kurz Muñoz, 1991, p. 142).

It is logical that soon the art of the avant-garde prior to the Revolution became unpopular in the high governmental spheres. Individualism, freedom in forms, constant experimentation, began to be more of a nuisance than an equivalent visual conception of revolutionary ideals. In overcoming the difficulties posed by the Civil War that would follow the October Revolution of 1917, the Soviet authorities - already firmly established - planned to dominate all spheres of life. Art was in those plans.

The initial enthusiasm for the advanced ideas of the artistic avant-garde began to decline. Anatoli Lunasharski, appointed by Lenin in 1918 to be Commissioner for Education and Culture, was at first quite tolerant of avant-garde tendencies. He considered it wise to be prudent and not create unnecessary enmity until power was fully consolidated. Artists such as Tatlin, Kandinsky, Pevsner and Malevich were invited to occupy important positions in the cultural scene. But that ideal situation of creative freedom for all would not be eternal.

Kandinsky was able to intuit what was coming when in 1920 the program he proposed for the Institute of Artistic Culture of Moscow was unanimously rejected. He quickly redirected his efforts to migrate the following year to Bauhaus in Germany. But Malevich, for example, invited by Chagall to the School of Art of Vitebsk, ended up dismissing his host and declaring him a degenerate artist. Chagall would eventually migrate to Western Europe, where he would freely develop his work.

With the departure from Russia of Vassily Kandinsky and Marc Chagall, the momentum of the avant-garde art prior to the Revolution can be concluded. Although some notable attempts persisted, as we have seen in LEF and other groups, everything would have to lead to the Central Committee Resolution of the Communist Party on the Transformation of the Artistic and Literary Organizations of April 23, 1932.

It was a fact that the revolutionary exaltation of the years following 1917 on the part of the artists of the avant-garde was singular. Their euphoria made them consider that they had initiated what the policy had just completed and that in their hands was the re-creation of Russian art. Josep Stalin would show them how wrong they were. From his point of view, it was impossible to rule over something that moves and transforms quickly and on its own. It was best that art acquired uniform

characteristics. That way, animosities would end, competitions would disappear and it would be easier to control the art.

Socialist Realism entered the scene to reign. The aforementioned resolution of 1932 stated:

Socialist realism demands from the artist a true representation, historically concrete and faithful to the reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the true and historically concrete nature of this artistic representation of reality must be combined with the duty of ideological transformation and education of the masses within the spirit of socialism. (Quoted by Aznar Soler, p. 2010, 228).

In this Resolution it was clearly stated what the monolithic doctrine of Socialist Realism would be and how the Party would definitely control artistic production. It was further specified that any unofficial artistic group should be dissolved to be replaced by the artists' union.

Maximo Gorky, who had just returned to the USSR personally invited by Stalin, presiding over the First Congress of Soviet Writers (August 1934), gave his approval to the principle of realism in form and socialism in content that was sought to be imposed. But in this same Congress, Andrei Zhdanov was, however, much clearer and more convincing in terms of Stalin's wishes for artistic creation. In his speech, Zhdanov called artists and writers to be soul-mongers (Aznar Soler, 2010, p. 228).

In the same sense, any artistic expression that did not contribute to the mill of the Soviet state should be rejected. Thus, the art critic Aleksei Fedorov-Davidov will categorically reject abstractionism, calling it reactionary and bourgeois. Moreover, to him "abstractionism is anti-human and hostile to all that is truly human. It is the enemy of realism and the enemy of socialist art and, in general, of all progressive and advanced art "(Kurz Muñoz, 1991, p. 138).

3. CONCLUSIONS

However, the solution to the problem that we raised at the beginning of this text regarding *how to represent revolutionary ideals artistically and how to connect the viewer with them through artistic forms* was one of Exclusion and of dictates. The state appropriated the right to indicate the path that art should follow. But imposing socialist Realism as an aesthetic dogma translated into the drowning of Russian artistic creativity, at least of that creativity that fueled frantically great changes in the arts since the beginning of the twentieth century.

This imposed solution involved execrating much of the imagination and innovation proper to any revolutionary process, which is clearly contradictory. However, when a revolution is institutionalized, it ceases to be a revolution to become official. The Soviet one was no exception and this is evident. By becoming institutional, the Soviet

revolution had to appeal to every available resource to remain in power, to impose a vision that should be unique, under penalty of losing pre-eminence, preference and legitimacy. The true revolutionary spirit was sacrificed to preserve the Revolution.

This intrusion of the Soviet government on the artistic terrain was warned as wrong by Leon Trotsky in stating that "art must find its own way ... The methods of Marxism are not its methods ... The field of art is not one of those in which the party is called to command "(quoted by Deutscher, 1975: 216). André Malraux, who had attended the Congress of Soviet Writers as a guest, had also dared to warn that art is not a submission but a conquest of the feelings and means to express them (AA.VV., 1976).

But Alexander Zamoshkin will insist: "Any artist who does not follow the example of Soviet art is an enemy of socialism" (quoted by Aznar Soler, 2010: 232). The example to follow was then, of course, that Socialist Realism that was declared official by the State. It has been emphasized that this was never an imposed style, but a methodology. In any case, the codification of reality actually changed very little during the first part of the Stalinist period, which would give the impression of monotony and repetition of formulas.

In fact, at the outbreak of World War II, the Soviet visual arts acquired a dynamism imposed by the war itself that would produce interesting results. There is even talk of a nostalgic return in the postwar period to the heroic deed associated with the Revolution, which again would have triumphed before the adversary, this time, fascism (Bowlit, 1976: 172)⁹. However, the art of the 1930s was not for the USSR one of avant-garde creativity and innovation, but rather a conservative one. Far from it were the incendiary avant-garde ideas that shook the Russian scene from the early years of the twentieth century. The Revolution had put an end to revolution in art.

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⁹ John E. Bowlit, *Russian Art, 1875-1975: A Collection of Essays*, University of Texas, Austin, 1976, p. 172

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