

ARTISTS IN REVOLUTION: PORTRAITS OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE, 1905–1925. By *Robert C. Williams*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977. x, 242 pp. Illus. \$15.00.

Artists in Revolution explores the “intersection of innovative and revolutionary art” in Russia between 1905 and 1925 through a series of biographical studies of outstanding figures in the arts. In considering the careers of Anatolii Lunacharskii, Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, D. Moor, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vladimir Tatlin, and Sergei Eisenstein, the author attempts to identify a “moment of innovation” in the life of each artist and to investigate the social and psychological factors which contributed to his break with the past. Throughout the book, Williams focuses on two themes which tie the various studies together into what he terms a collective biography: the desire for personal immortality, or victory over death, and the transition of generations within the avant-garde—that is, the generation of “aesthetes” who had reached maturity by the time of the 1905 Revolution, the Futurist generation, whose emergence into adulthood occurred between 1905 and 1917, and finally the Constructivist generation, which “constituted a kind of youth movement in early Soviet Russia.”

At the outset, Williams lists various factors which governed the lives of the individuals included in this study: “their provincial background, their education, Western influences, patronage, and generational change” (p. 9). For Williams the provincial, and frequently non-Russian, origins of his Futurist and Constructivist subjects played a significant role in determining their radicalism. In this context, avant-garde Western art was adopted as a means for young artists to challenge the art establishments of St. Petersburg and Moscow. A number of authors before Williams have attempted to formulate the relationship between the artistic avant-garde and political radicalism in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Regarding the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Valkenier has dissected some of the mythology surrounding the *Peredvishniki* in her *Russian Realist Art* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977). Surveys of early twentieth-century art have invariably recognized the utopian aspects of the Russian avant-garde and the latent affinity between artistic and political revolution, seen, for example, in Malevich’s demand: “Let us seize the world from the hands of nature and build a new world belonging to man himself.” Various metaphors have been devised to express the fragile link between avant-garde and revolution. Renato Poggioli, whom Williams quotes in the introduction to *Artists in Revolution*, states a now widely accepted view that Russian Futurism in poetry and the visual arts “prophesied the coming revolution and joined hands with it.”

Yet, as Williams points out, a considerable number of avant-garde artists—Goncharova and Larionov are two notable examples—were not involved in the Revolutions of 1905 or 1917. Another current existed simultaneously, an art of revolutionary commitment, ranging from the satirical journals of 1905 to the agitational theater and films of the 1920s. The nature and degree of contact between these two groups could, of course, be endlessly debated. Williams reveals his position on the opening page of his book by referring to the Russian avant-garde as “born out of the Revolution of 1905.” He goes on to state that the events of 1905 and 1917 “facilitated, but did not initiate, the importing of innovative elements in Western art by those Russian artists whose provincial (and often non-Russian) background pushed them toward European modernism and Russian political involvement as a means to personal artistic success.”

The desire of artists and intellectuals for a kind of “revolutionary immortality” is argued in connection with Lunacharskii, Mayakovsky, and other figures. Williams explores the philosophical background of this concept and also the personal events which fostered a desire to overcome the limitations of mortality. This discussion may shed light on Malevich’s identification of the Suprematist square as a “living, royal

infant." According to one source cited by Williams, Malevich declared himself (at a public lecture connected with the "0.10" exhibition) to be the embodiment of a messianic vision: "I am the royal infant . . . tens of thousands of years have prepared my birth" (p. 123).

In any book of this scope, disagreements about specific areas are bound to occur. Williams's constant stress on the artists' need for success and public recognition as a motive for artistic innovation will jar the sensibilities of readers trained in art history. Also, for historians of Russian art, the degree of emphasis to be placed on "Western influences" is always a delicate question. Williams stands firmly on the side of those who regard a constant fertilization of the Russian art world by Western ideas as the key to progress and innovation. At times *Artists in Revolution* seems to exaggerate the backwardness of Russian art at the turn of the century or to overdramatize the conflict of existing trends with Western innovation. For example, the so-called left wing of the *Mir iskusstva* group is described as "more Europeanized" than the older generation of Alexandre Benois and Sergei Diaghilev (p. 60). On the whole, it is extremely difficult to see Dobuzhinskii as more Western or, indeed, more "innovative" in style than the original members of the *Mir iskusstva* group, although his work for satirical journals after the 1905 Revolution does place him in a left-wing camp politically.

Artists in Revolution presents a rich collection of information, including material on once popular but now little known intellectual sources, such as Claude Bragdon's *Primer of Higher Space* and its impact—albeit indirect—on Malevich. What emerges most strongly from Williams's arguments is the degree to which revolution fulfilled a personal need for various artists—most notably for Mayakovsky, who is certainly the central figure of this book and the best illustration of the author's thesis. Williams's book poses the question of artists in revolution with a strongly personal emphasis which is bound to inspire debate among specialists in the various fields it touches.

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RUSSIAN FUTURISM, URBANISM, AND ELENA GURO. By *Kjeld Bjørnager Jensen*. Århus, Denmark: Arkona, 1977. iv, 204 pp. Paper.

The very title of this book indicates a peculiar historical perspective: apart from the works of Mayakovsky, Russian Futurism is not noteworthy for its urbanism, and Elena Guro is known as an author who was dedicated to nature. If Russian urbanism were Jensen's main concern, as it appears to be, then his centerpiece should have been Mayakovsky, not Guro. By his own count, only four pieces by Guro exploit the city theme, and three of those were relatively early works. In any case, he offers a survey history of Russian urbanism in which Guro is presented as a transitional figure between the Symbolists—Briusov, Belyi, and Blok—and her fellow Futurists. Jensen distinguishes Guro, whom he calls an impressionist, from the other Futurists, whom he considers expressionistic. His extensive analysis of her three urbanistic prose pieces (in *Sharmanka*) suggests a sadomasochistic motivation for her increasing hostility to the city. Yet he draws convincing parallels between Guro's "tragic" view of the city and the early Mayakovsky, while also showing what might be owed to Briusov or Marinetti. Furthermore, he expounds the notion that the minor poets of "The Mezzanine of Poetry" (headed by Vadim Shershenevich) were the chief exponents of urbanism among the Futurists. No mention is made of the appearance of the city in the works of the Acmeists or, subsequently, in the tavern poetry of Esenin. The book includes a useful bibliography.

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