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Lyubov' Popova: A Revolutionary Woman Artist

Christina Lodder

The Revolution of October 1917 not only gave Russia a new ideology and administration, but it also provided art with a new role, for it soon made demands on artists to become involved with agitation and propaganda. In April 1918, Lenin inaugurated his Plan for Monumental Propaganda which removed tsarist monuments and sought to replace them with statues that would 'serve the aim of extensive propaganda'.¹ The same decree called for the 'decoration of the cities for May Day and the replacement of all slogans, emblems, street names, crests, etc., with new ones expressing the ideas and feelings of the workers' revolutionary Russia'. Artists were given the task of decorating the existing urban environment in a way that would mask its Tsarist past and create a more socialist city for the revolutionary festivals. With the onset of Civil War, artists also became involved in producing posters and in painting the outsides of agitational trains with stirring motifs. In 1920, as the threat of occupation was diminishing, the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment suggested a more permanently propagandist role for art, declaring 'Art, as a powerful means of agitation and propaganda, must take a visible place in the social as well as the political transformation of the masses.'² Officialdom, therefore, consciously harnessed art to the tasks of communicating the ideas of socialism and of creating a socialist environment. At the same time the Bolshevik authorities were also concerned to foster links between art and industry. Anatolii Lunacharskii in 1919 at the First All-Russian Conference on Art and Production, declared 'If we are really to advance towards socialism, then we must attach more importance to industry than to pure art.'³ These attitudes encouraged the emergence of those ideas which eventually found their expression in Constructivism and the formation of the First Working Group of Constructivists (also known as the Working Group of Constructivists) who committed themselves to using their art to transform the environment. They rejected the idea of making works of art, and instead sought to work in industry, designing

objects for mass production that would further the creation of a socialist society.⁴

Lyubov' Popova was broadly aligned with this group. When she died in 1924, a letter signed by her colleagues, including Vladimir Maiakovskii, Osip Brik, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, emphasised that 'all her work and ideas were closely connected with building a revolutionary proletarian culture'.⁵

Her commitment to the Revolution was first demonstrated in her decorations for the First of May celebrations in Moscow in 1918 and in the posters which she produced for the campaign against illiteracy in 1920. The following year she collaborated with the architect Aleksandr Vesnin and the director Vsevolod Meierkhol'd on the design for a mass festival to take place on Khodyn' Field, Moscow, in honour of the Third International which met for its third congress in Moscow during the summer of 1921 (Plate 1). This 'theatricalized military parade' which unfortunately never took place was to include 'a cast of thousands':

two hundred riders from the cavalry school, two thousand three hundred foot soldiers, sixteen guns, five aeroplanes with searchlights, ten automobile searchlights, several armoured trains, motor cycles, ambulance sections, detachments of the general recruiting school, of the associations for physical culture, the central direction of military training establishments were to take part, as well as various military bands and choirs.

In the first five scenes the various sections of the revolutionaries were to have combined to encircle the capitalist fortress and with the help of artillery corps to surround it with a curtain of smoke. Concealed by this dense screen, the tanks were to have advanced to the attack and stormed the bastions while the flame-throwers were giving out an enormous fireball of changing outline. The silhouette of the illuminated smoke would finally have represented a factory with the watchword of the fight inscribed on the walls: 'What work has created shall belong to the workers.' After a great parade of troops, the gymnastic associations on motor vans were to have the people of the future engaged in throwing the discus and gathering the hay in sheaves. Then a general dance with the motto 'Hammer and Sickle' was to introduce motions representing industrial

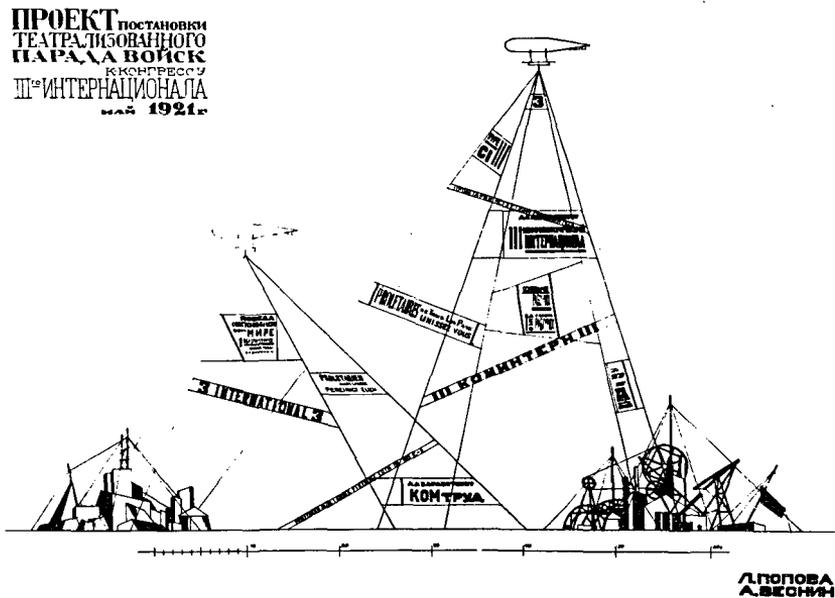


PLATE 1

L. Popova and A. Vesnin, *Project for a theatrical military parade for the Congress of the Third International, The End of Capital, May 1921*, pen and ink on paper, 46 × 62 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. [Photograph courtesy of the Arts Council of Great Britain]

and agricultural work Rhythmic movements ... were to have symbolised the phrase, 'Joy and Strength – the Victory of the Creators' ... they were finally in conjunction with the troops to have been effectively grouped in the 'City of the Future'. The final items of the performance were to have been provided by a display of flying-by aeroplanes with searchlights, fireworks, and a great choral singing accompanied by the orchestras.⁶

In September 1921 in the catalogue of the 5 x 5 = 25 exhibition, Popova made a statement which implied that she had rejected easel painting as the ultimate aim of artistic activity and that henceforth she intended to direct her artistic skills towards more immediately utilitarian objectives. She wrote that the paintings exhibited 'are to be regarded only as series of preparatory experiments towards concrete material constructions'.

This declaration allied Popova with the newly defined concept of Constructivism and its reformulation of the role of the artist within the new Soviet state. By December 1921, Popova made this position explicit in her writings: 'Our new aim is the organisation of the material environment, i.e., of contemporary industrial production, and all active artistic creativity must be directed towards this.'⁷ She elaborated:

The era which humanity has entered is an era of industrial development and therefore the organisation of artistic elements must be applied to the design of the material elements of everyday life, i.e., to industry or to so-called production.

The new industrial production, in which artistic creativity must participate, will differ radically from the traditional aesthetic approach to the object in that primarily attention will be focused not on the artistic decoration of the object (applied art), but on the artistic organisation of the object in accordance with the principles of creating the most utilitarian object

If any of the different types of fine art (i.e., easel painting, drawing, engraving, sculpture, etc.), can still retain some purpose, they will do so only

1. while they remain as the laboratory phase in our search for essential new forms
2. in so far as they serve as supportive projects and schemes

for constructions and utilitarian and industrially manufactured objects that have yet to be realized.⁸

Such activity could only be undertaken effectively through close collaboration with the factories. Unfortunately, after the destruction and dislocation caused by the seven years of almost continuous fighting during the First World War followed by the Civil War, Russian industry was in no state to welcome these would-be designers. In 1921 industrial output was a third of its pre-1914 level.⁹ There was no advanced industrial network geared to the mass manufacture of everyday goods within which the Constructivists could work. Those industries which were still operational required intensive investment and development to counteract seven years of neglect and in this situation were not receptive to Constructivist ideas. When Vladimir Tatlin entered the New Lessner Factory in Petrograd in 1921, he was asked to teach the engineers how to 'draw nicely'.¹⁰ It might have been possible to overcome such incomprehension, but the the shattered state of Soviet industry meant that priority had to be given to reconstruction. The industrial situation meant that the Constructivists had to make an initial compromise with their ideals and postpone the large-scale realisation of their aims until industry had recovered. In the interim, they became involved with training the new type of 'artist-constructor' at the Moscow Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops, the VKhUTEMAS, in evolving prototypes for future production, and in working in ancillary areas of design activity which did not require great capital outlay in terms of machinery. One such area was the textile industry. This had been 'one of the most developed and important industries of pre-revolutionary Russia', comprising 873 factories with over half a million workers in 1913.¹¹ Its productivity had been severely curtailed during the Civil War (almost reaching zero in 1919), and this had caused an acute shortage of cloth that continued to be felt even into the mid 1930s.¹² Although very little patterned fabric was being printed in 1923, by 1924, this area of manufacture was beginning to recover its productivity.¹³

The artistic bases for Popova's later work in the textile industry were laid not only by her pre-revolutionary artistic experiments, but also during her close involvement with the teaching programmes at the VKhUTEMAS. In 1920 she was responsible for teaching the 'Maximum Revelation of Colour' as a component element of the Basic or Foundation Course at the school.¹⁴ The following year,

together with Aleksandr Vesnin, she taught a variation of this course as 'Colour Construction'.¹⁵ Both artists were active members of the Institute of Artistic Culture, INKhUK, and their syllabus consequently reflected their 'scientific and analytical method of analysing artistic elements' such as colour, volume, space, construction, material, texture and form in relation to the line, plane, and volume.¹⁶ Although these analyses of colour were concerned to establish the artistic bases of design work, they were not directed specifically towards the textile industry, or indeed to any one particular industry. Nevertheless, Popova evidently felt a strong need to establish firm and direct contacts with industrial manufacturers, because in 1922 she proposed that a 'real production workshop' should be set up within the school. She envisaged this as a new experimental studio that would 'enter into direct contact with life, i.e., in reality undertake and execute orders' and would thus fulfil 'the aim of giving the analytical work of the Basic Course a concrete purpose'.¹⁷ Popova did not herself become immediately involved with textile design, but seems to have become interested in clothing design as a result of her work for the theatre, where she first began to consider the problem of a new type of clothing for the new society in artistic and theoretical terms.

Soon after the $5 \times 5 = 25$ exhibition, Popova was invited to design the set for Meierkhol'd's production of Crommelynck's farce *The Magnanimous Cuckold* which opened in Moscow on 15 April 1922 (Plate 2). This production was acclaimed as the first manifestation of Constructivism in the theatre:

In the theatre, Constructivism ... united constructive furnishings (the decor, the props and the costumes) – designed to show if not the objects themselves, at least their models – with the constructive gesture, movement and pantomime (the biomechanics of Vsevolod Meierkhol'd), the actors organised according to rhythms.¹⁸

In this Constructivist micro-environment, Meierkhol'd rejected psychological realism, reducing the actors to Taylorised, mechanical entities who performed their parts with those stylised gestures and acrobatics which formed the basis of biomechanics. In accordance with this impersonal system of acting, Popova transformed the water-mill of the original play into an acting machine – a skeletal apparatus resembling scaffolding, with steps, platforms, revolving

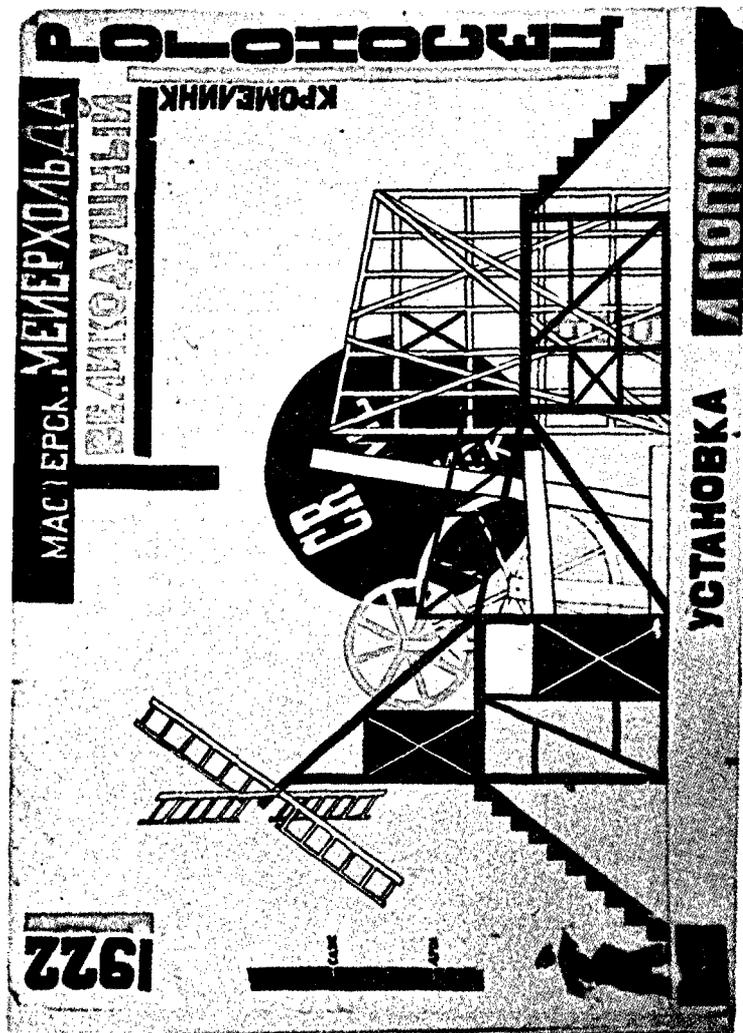


PLATE 2

L. Popova, *Set Design for the Magnanimous Cuckold*, produced by Meierkhol'd in Moscow in 1922. Gouache, ink and paper collage on paper, 37.2 x 23.8 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Gift of George Costakis. Photograph Courtesy of the Arts Council of Great Britain.

doors, and ladders, all of which moved to accommodate and reinforce the dramatic flow of the action.

As part of her work as the designer for the production, Popova devised the costumes. To these she assigned a role that was not primarily decorative, nor even theatrical in the traditional sense of the word. She replaced conventional costumes with working overalls or *prozodezhda*, literally production clothing. She explained that she had approached the costumes as prototypes for industrial working clothes and as functional components of the total Constructivist micro-environment that was created on the stage:

Disregarding the aesthetic principle of the historical, national, psychological or everyday character of clothing, in this particular task I wanted to discover the general principle of *prozodezhda* for the professional work of the actor, in relation to the essential nature of his present professional role.¹⁹

The actors' working clothes were thus viewed as an exercise within the specific context of the theatre which could also have implications for the real environment.

Popova elaborated her ideas and explained her method in a manuscript entitled 'The Costume as an Element of the Material Design',²⁰ which relates specifically to *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. She identified three crucial elements: the ideological, the analytical and the technical, which have obvious parallels with the three principles of *tektonika*, *faktura*, and construction, as defined by the First Working Group of Constructivists. *Tektonika* or the tectonic united the ideological commitment to communism with the appropriate use of industrial material in accordance with production processes and the achievements of abstract art; *faktura* was the working of the material as a whole, and construction denoted the process of structuring the object and co-ordinating the other two aspects.²¹

For Popova, the ideological aspect involved examining 'the costumes as a material element of the theatrical production as a whole, in relation to the other material elements, . . . in relation to the laws of biomechanics, and as the product of the material design of the set according to the utilitarian principle'.²² Such an approach, although expounded in relation to the theatre, reiterates the Constructivists' concern for objects to be appropriate to the new social, political and economic environment. Popova's analytical aspect comprised 'analysing the costume as a plastic object into its constituent elements – its construction, its linear, volumetric

and spatial form, its colour, texture, rhythm and movement'. The technical aspect entailed studying the material and its mode of production.²³

In accordance with her expressed intentions, the costumes were conceived as overalls which were designed to facilitate the acrobatic and mechanistic movements of the actors. Made of completely plain blue material, the overalls were cut as geometric shapes, based on reducing the curvilinear components of the human body to rectilinear elements. A distinction between the sexes was preserved; the men wore trousers, triangular shaped jodhpurs tucked into black boots, while the women wore skirts which jutted out diagonally over the hips, emphasising rather than disguising the forms of the body. The overalls comprised the basic uniform to which other elements were added as necessary. For instance, Actor No.2, the Nursemaid (Plate 3), wore a black apron over her blue dress. Actor No.6, The Burgomaster, had goggles attached to his hat and wore a prototype duffle coat. Actor No.7 had a cape. Such additions, although perhaps not strictly utilitarian in terms of the actor's performance, had a theatrical function in identifying the actors. Yet such additions were minimal and could hardly be called 'decorative'. All of these designs followed the precepts of economy and utility which Popova had laid down in her manuscript. They projected new prototypes for clothing and presented practical solutions to the problem of new everyday working clothes. They illustrate Popova's design process, which was to analyse the function, establish the essential elements of the form and then to explore variations which could be produced through the permutation of these basic components.

Popova's subsequent experiments in clothing and textile design were conducted in closer contact with industry. When she devised the set and costumes for Sergei Tre'tiakov's play *The Earth in Turmoil* in 1923, instead of providing an artistic reinterpretation of the machine as she had in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, she based the structure of the set directly on a gantry crane, adding a few extra devices, and using mass produced items for props and contemporary military uniforms for costumes. This may reflect the contemporary agitational nature of the play, but it may also represent a compromise with existing industrial models and a deviation both from Constructivist principles and from her own elucidation of the 'analytical aspect' of the design process.²⁴

It seems that the new pragmatism, evident in *The Earth in*

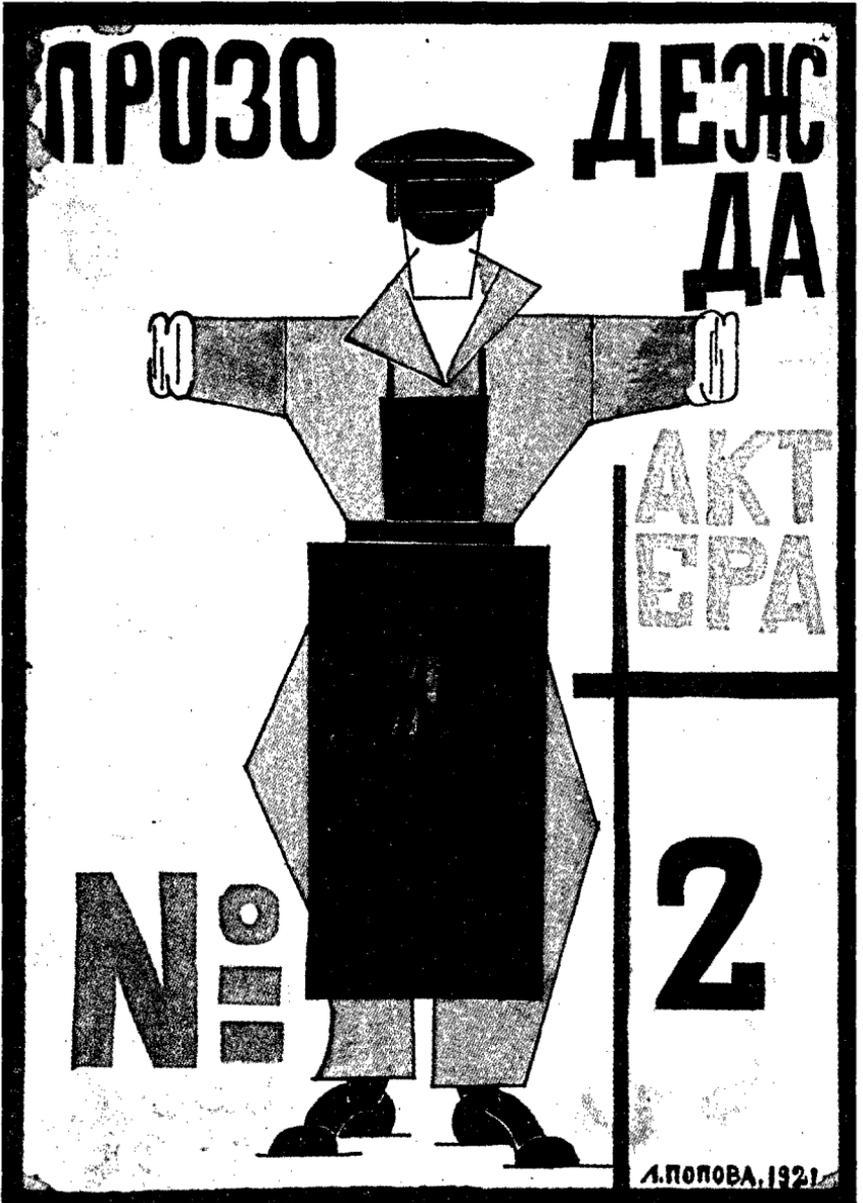


PLATE 3

Costume Design for Actor No.2 (The Nursmaid) in *The Magnanimous Cuckold* 1921. Watercolour, gouache, and pencil on paper, 33 × 23cm. Private collection, Sweden.

Turmoil, reflected a change in Constructivism itself which led to certain Constructivists, among them Popova, becoming involved with the textile and clothing industry. It has been argued that this involvement represented a retreat from idealism, because textile design was a decorative task, concerned with traditional concepts of ornament and with embellishing the environment in a conventional way with new motifs, rather than with totally re-organising it on new principles. Textile design did not postulate a new role for the artist and was only a relatively superficial and insignificant element in the overall task of re-structuring the whole environment on Constructivist lines. Nevertheless, the textile industry, unlike others, was inviting artists to participate in mass production, a stance that may have been stimulated by the shortage of skilled personnel, the disruption of contacts with Paris (the former source of textile 'samples') and the need to establish a vital domestic industry.²⁵ Aleksandr Arkhangel'skii, who became director of the First State Textile Printing Works in Moscow in June 1923, published his invitation to artists to work in his factory in the summer of 1923, along with Professor Viktorov who assisted in the negotiations.²⁶ Such an invitation was not entirely unexpected, because earlier that year, in March, a paper at INKhUK concerning conditions in the textile industry had stressed the need for good designs and for revitalising this aspect of textile manufacture by encouraging artists to work actively in the factory.²⁷ Not surprisingly, perhaps, Stepanova and Popova grasped the chance to work in the Printing Works because it was an opportunity to become involved with real mass production. As LEF observed: 'Unfortunately, our industry is still far from being ready to welcome the input of our creative power. For the time being young artist-producers must try their strength wherever they can.'²⁸

It was probably sometime in the second half of 1923, that at the invitation of the director, Popova and Stepanova started work at the First Textile Printing Works in Moscow (formerly, the Tsindel' or Zindel Works).²⁹ The large number of designs which Popova managed to produce between then and her death in May 1924 has encouraged the idea that she started working at the factory much earlier.³⁰ Contemporary evidence, however, suggests late 1923. In Popova's obituary, Tugendkhol'd gave the date as autumn 1923 and all the textile designs exhibited in Popova's posthumous exhibition were dated 1924.³¹ Certainly, in January 1924 when Stepanova

reported to INKhUK about work at the factory, she did not give the impression that she and Popova had been working there long.³²

The venture was successful because the designer's role in the textile industry was already an established aspect of industrial production and it was not necessary to re-organise the structure of the factory or its processes to accommodate the Constructivists. For their part, too, the artists were fully committed to the experiment. David Arkin reported Popova saying that 'nothing gave her greater satisfaction than seeing a dress made with material bearing her design'.³³ The artists undoubtedly shared Brik's views:

A cotton print is as much a product of artistic culture as a painting, and there is no basis for drawing a dividing line between them. Moreover ... the conviction is growing that painting is dying, that it is inseparably linked with the forms of the capitalist system and its cultural ideology, and that textile design has become the focus of creative concern – that the textile print and work on the textile print is the height of artistic work.³⁴

These artists did not want to apply their art in the traditional way to the production of textile prints because they considered that applied art 'was the product of the isolation of the artist from production'.³⁵ Instead, they wanted to fuse the formal and the utilitarian by taking into account political and social criteria, the industrial aspect, and the nature of the material. Therefore, although the new designers could be easily assimilated within the existing factory structure, their design approach was a complete innovation for the industry. In accordance with the machine aesthetic which the Constructivists embraced, the abstract and geometric nature of their previous artistic experimentation, and the mechanical nature of mass production, both Popova and Stepanova considered that the replacement of traditional floral and plant patterns with geometrically based designs was an essential aspect of the rationalisation of textile production, and ultimately of clothing design. In January 1924 Stepanova outlined their tasks as:

the eradication of the firmly embedded ideal regarding the high artistic value of the hand drawn design as the imitation ... of painting;

the fight against naturalistic design in favour of the geometricisation of form, and

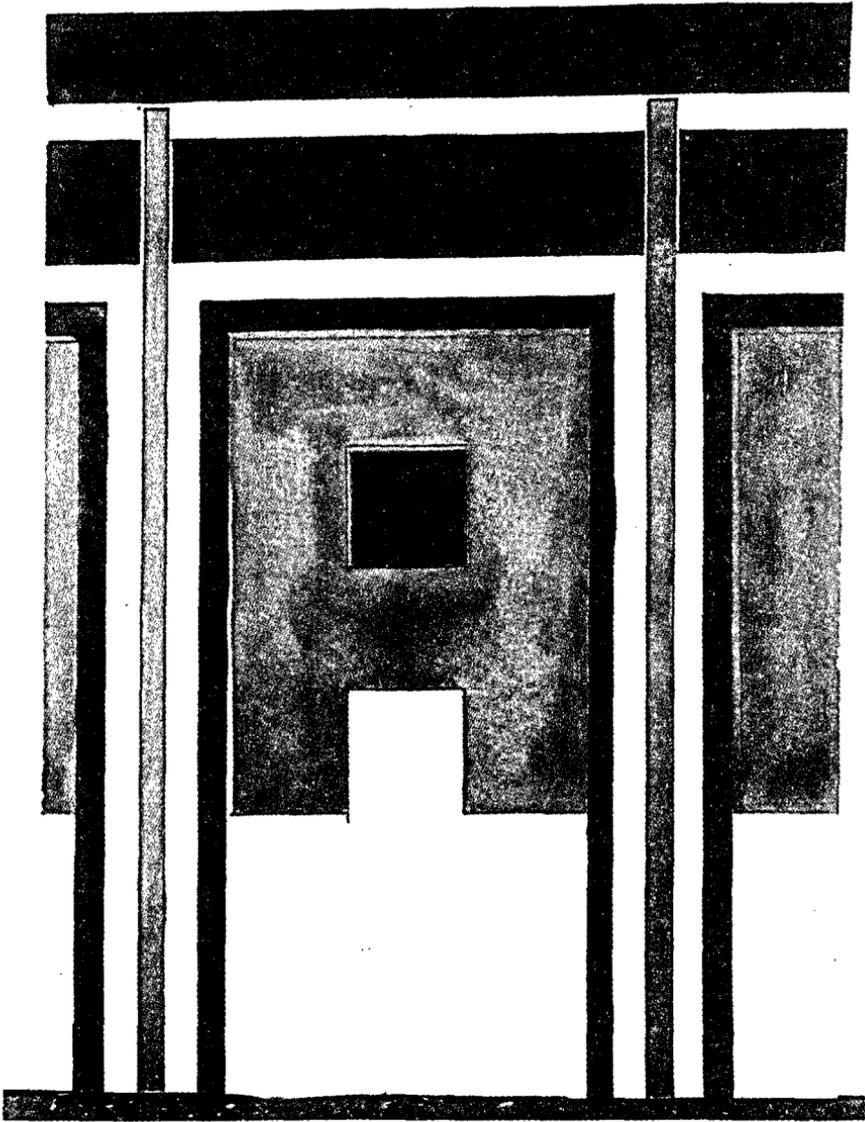


PLATE 4

Textile Design, c.1924. Pen and ink watercolour, 35.5 × 31cm. Private collection.

propagandising the industrial tasks of the Constructivists.³⁶

Consequently, Popova's textile designs were based on the forms of Euclidean geometry – the circle, the triangle and the rectangle. Each design exploited the potential of one or two such forms in combination with an equally restricted colour range of one or two colours plus black and white. The two-dimensional design was reduced to its basic elements and a strict economy of artistic means was observed. Although the fundamental components were simple, the resulting patterns were often very complex, built up of repetitions, developments, and permutations of the simplest and most easily reproducible shapes. In one design (Plate 4), only the colour blue is used in combination with white and black, so limiting the printing to two colour blocks and making the design inexpensive to produce, thus ensuring that the aesthetic principle of economy was also reflected in production costs. This design developed from the repetition of rectangles and squares in blue and black at various scales, held within a rectangular border.³⁷ Other designs evolved from the permutations of a single shape. Using a sequence of larger and smaller overlapping and free floating circles, but employing several colours (that is, blue, pink, yellow and red), Popova created a very delicate and spatially resonant design (Plate 5).

Another design was based on the format of diagonal black lines linking four red circles to create a central black diamond (Plate 6). Each circle is surrounded by a white space and a red circular border, like a target, making the inner red circle appear to oscillate. By alternating the black lines, each central black diamond is surrounded by an asymmetrical arrangement of two white lines and two black, again introducing spatial tensions. The dynamism thus created is intensified by the use of white which separates the elements and emphasises the dynamic qualities of the relationships between the forms. Undoubtedly, when printed, this would have created a dramatic swathe of fabric. Equally compelling is a design developed from curved and rectilinear triangles (Plate 7). Against a grid of dog's tooth pattern, movement is introduced by three rows of triangles (the larger of which face one way and the smaller the other) suggesting movement in alternate directions. The conflicting movements within each row as well as between different rows conveys a vibrancy that is strengthened by the contrasting colours. In some designs (such as Plate 8), the combinations of forms and

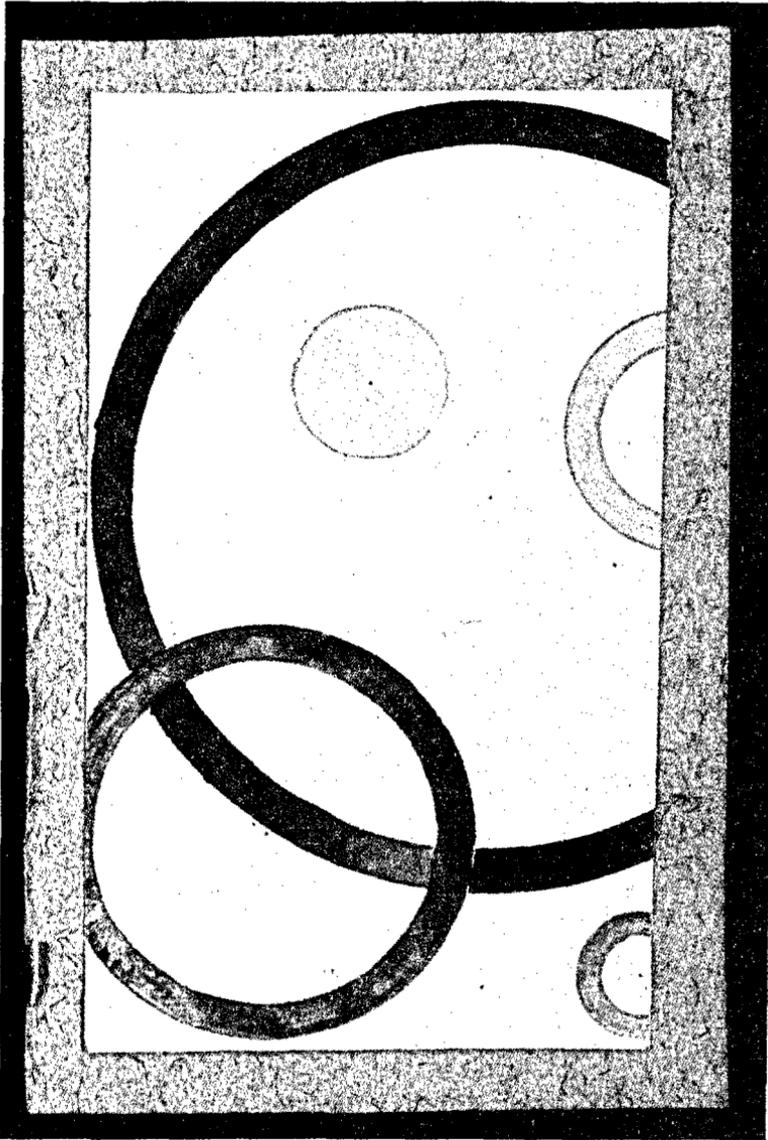


PLATE 5

Textile Design, c.1924. Watercolour and pencil, 7 × 12.5cm. Private collection.

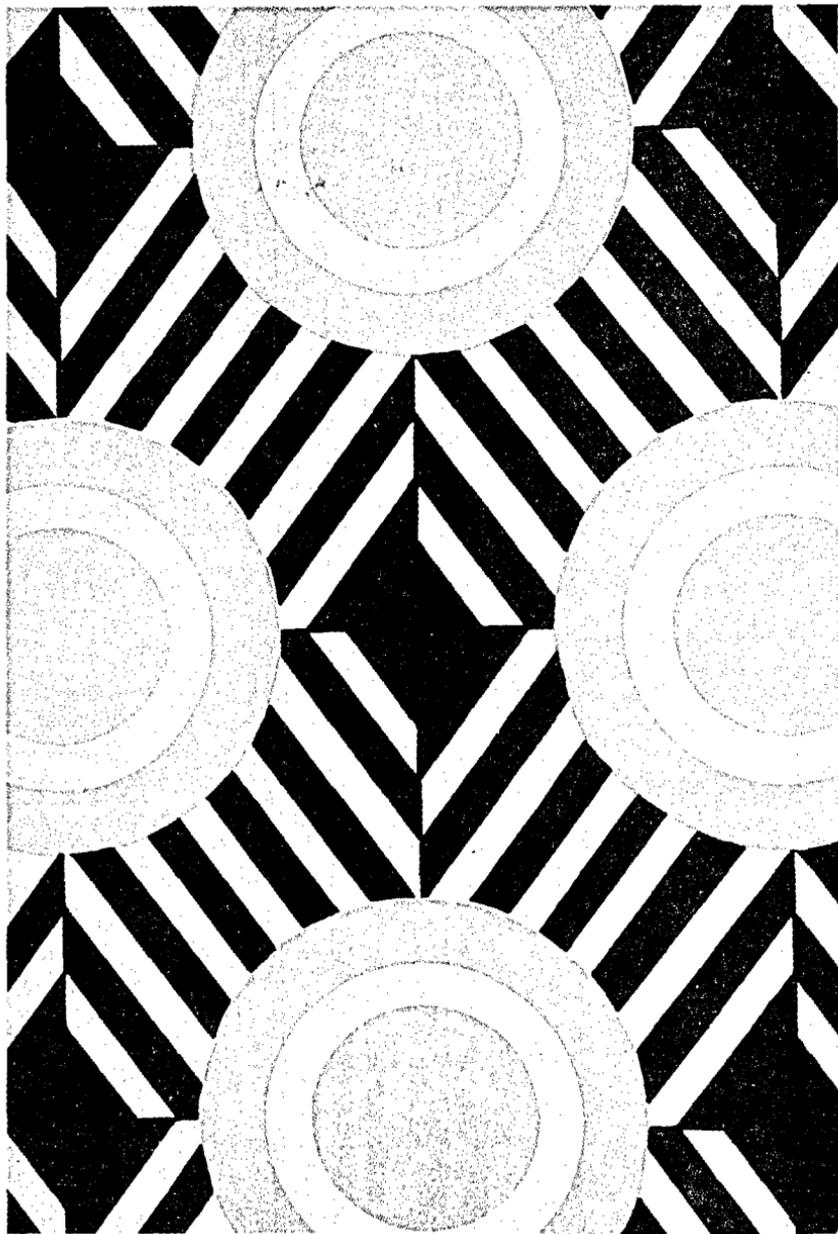


PLATE 6

L. Popova, *Textile Design*, 1924. Reproduced in *LEF*, No. 2, 1924.

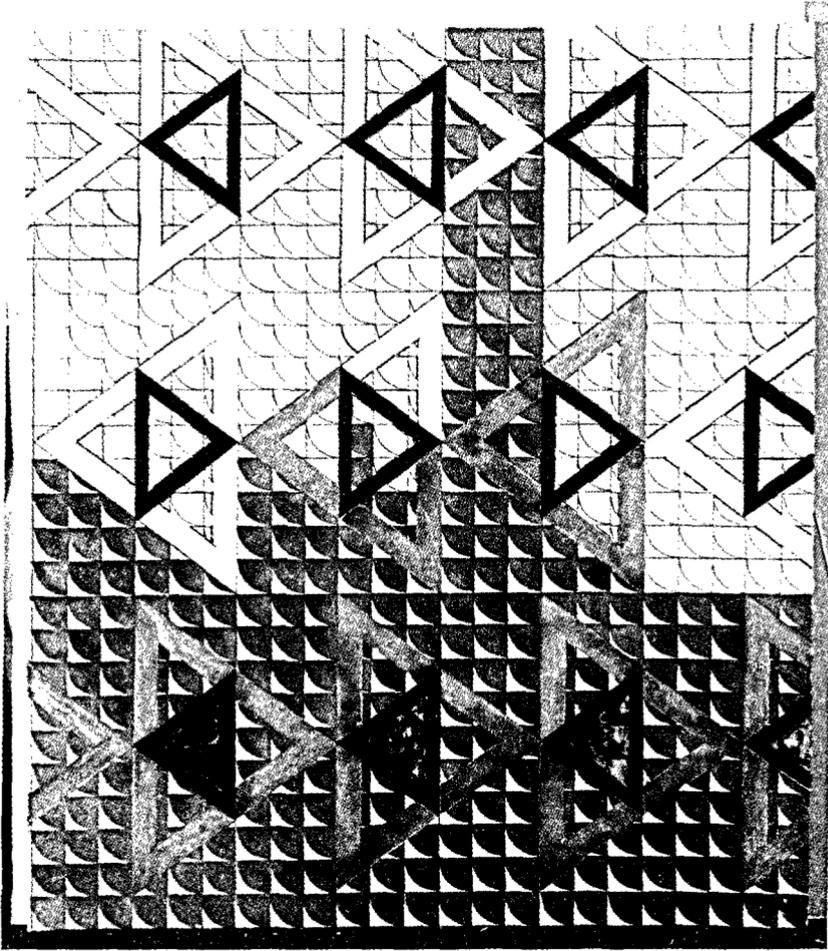


PLATE 7

Textile Design, c.1924. Pen and ink and watercolour 35.5 × 31 cm. Private collection.

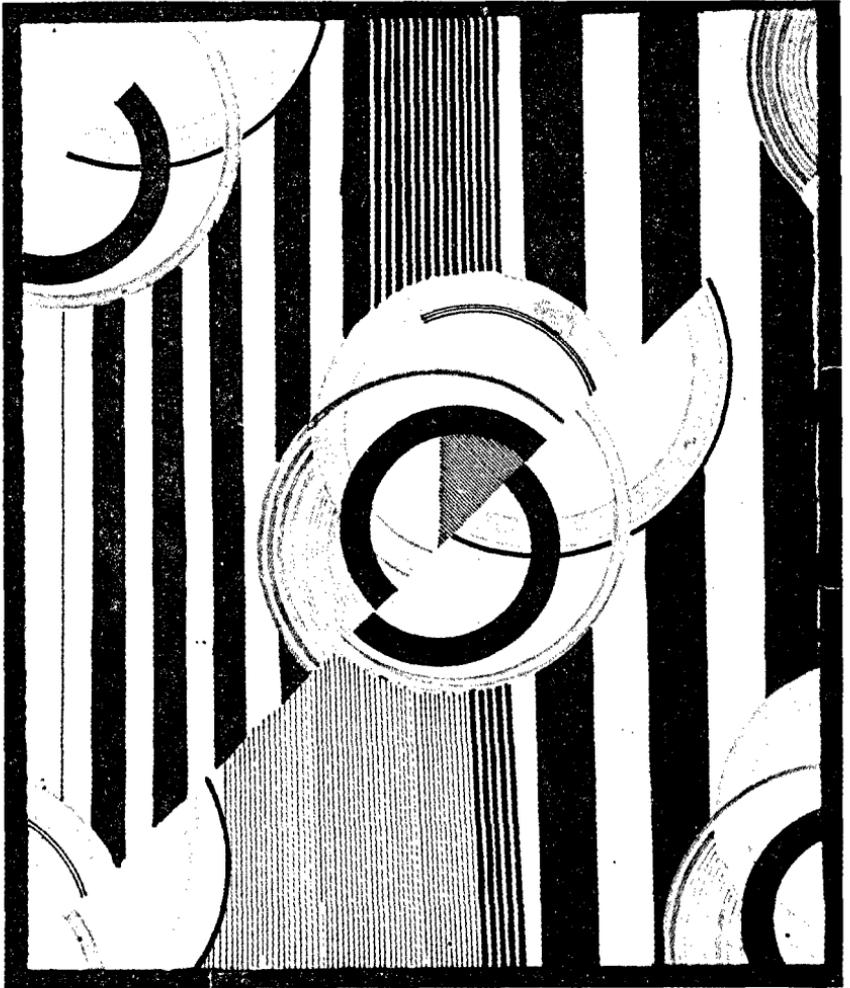


PLATE 8

Textile Design, c.1924. Pencil and coloured inks on paper, 23.4 × 19.1cm. Private collection.



PLATE 9

Cover for 6 engravings c.1916-17, 35 × 27.6cm. Private collection.

colours appear even more complex and here Popova introduced a shift in the pattern, a *sdivig* or dislocation. The design is an asymmetrical composition comprising yellow, pink and black circles (of varying thicknesses) set against vertical black lines of various widths. The contrasting rhythms of these circular and linear elements and the drama of the interplay between them is intensified and the whole is endowed with an even greater sensation of movement by the diagonal break in the pattern. In some drawings, the pattern is created by interlocking forms as in an embroidery pattern based on intercutting the forms of the circle and the square.³⁸ In one instance, Popova departed from the use of abstract forms alone and produced a design based on the patriotic motif of a small blue hammer crossing an orange sickle.³⁹ But this was exceptional.

In their manipulation of geometric form and primary colour, Popova's textile and clothing designs bear a clear relationship to her earlier paintings and especially to the clarity of composition found in her Suprematist inspired canvases such as *Painterly Architectonics of 1916-17* (State Tretyakov Gallery, gift of George Costakis) where she created an economical and emphatically two-dimensional composition with red, black and grey forms floating on a white ground. The limited colour range of this work prefigures the pragmatic, practical and economic approach to colour which appears in the textiles. At the same time, the superimposed forms in this work and in her design for the cover of S. P. Bobrov's book *Delta* (1917-18) and her collection of six engravings (Plate 9), have affinities with the minimal overlaying of form and the bold outlines of the textile and dress designs. All of these share an interest in exploring the spatial ambiguities created by manipulating form and colour. Popova's consistent interest in the potential of spatial construction is epitomised by the dynamic interplay of intersecting planes in a work like *Painterly Architectonics of c.1921* (Plate 10). Yet, perhaps more significant than any visual similarity is the presence of the same fundamental rigour of exploration which produced these works with their investigation of plane, line, space and volume. Explaining her work of 1920-21, Popova wrote:

From the analysis of volume and space of an object (Cubism), to the organisation of elements, not as a means of representation, but as a self-contained structure (whether colour and plane, or colour and space). The significance of each element (line, plane, volume, colour, and material), of the expressive means



PLATE 10

L. Popova, *Painterly Architektonics*, c.1921, gouache on board, 33.5 × 26cm. Private collection.

is derived from the concrete work with a given material which defines the function of the object (whether for use or pleasure).⁴⁰

In the textile designs, where she was once again manipulating colour on the two-dimensional plane (although now within the constraints of an industrial process), Popova further simplified her vocabulary and attached it firmly to Euclidean geometry. At the same time it is possible that in her textile work she may have drawn on the practical design experience of other Constructivists, in particular on the kind of experimentation in manipulating standard elements in conjunction with a limited colour range that is seen in Klutskis's agitational stands of 1922.⁴¹ Clearly, these stands were intended to be constructed from wood and metal in three dimensions, nevertheless his fundamental method of establishing permutations of standardised components has clear affinities with Popova's approach.

Not surprisingly, a similar stance was adopted by Stepanova in her textile designs of this period. These also depend for their effectiveness on exploring intricate inter-relationships of precise geometric forms and a few colours. Stepanova produced several prints comprising overlapping circles, including at least one consisting entirely of lines drawn with a compass (Plate 11). This has been attributed to her husband, Rodchenko, but a photograph taken by Rodchenko of Stepanova drawing this design suggests that she may have been the author.⁴²

Perhaps inevitably, the innovative qualities of such designs evoked opposition. Stepanova recorded in a notebook that the artistic committee at the Printing Works initially rejected the geometric designs out of hand as 'mathematics', not art, and only gradually became less aggressively critical, simply complaining that the designs lacked emotion and that the artists should 'cover Constructivism with a haze of fantasy'.⁴³ Writing in 1928 the critic David Aranovich indicated that the opposition encountered had influenced the appearance of the final prints.

The sketches by L. S. Popova and especially by Stepanova ... were realized only after they were extensively reworked by the factory art production team Moreover, this 'reworking' was so extensive that the colouring specified in the sketches was changed completely, while the actual design was kept intact in relatively few cases.⁴⁴

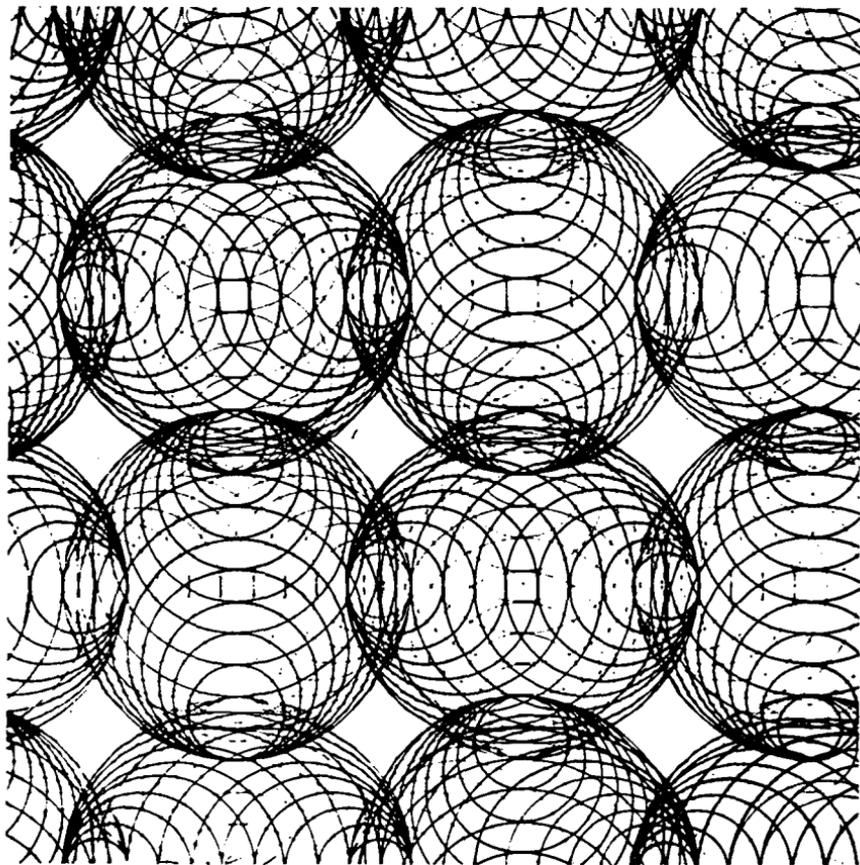


PLATE 11

V. Stepanova, *Textile Design*, c.1924. Ink on paper, 29 × 29 cm. Private collection.

Adaskina contests this view, arguing that despite some difficulties with the dyers and certain compromises, those fabric samples that have survived (in the State Tret'iakov Gallery Moscow, The First State Textile Printing Works, and private collections) 'show an almost complete correspondence' with the artists' designs.⁴⁵

Clearly, the venture had been fraught with practical difficulties. Reporting on the experience in 1924 Stepanova criticised the current structure for the following reasons:

1. the isolation of the drawing department from the production and marketing organs of the factory
2. the work of the artistic atelier is divorced from the production [process]
3. the dominance of consumer taste [and] fashion.⁴⁶

Apart from stressing the need to eradicate traditional approaches to textile design and promote 'geometricised form',⁴⁷ Stepanova also outlined a precise Constructivist strategy for reform of the shortcomings of the industry:

1. To fight against handicraft in the work of the artist. To strive towards organically fusing the artist with [actual] production. To eliminate the old approach to the consumer.
2. To establish links with fashion journals, with fashion ateliers and tailors.
3. To raise consumer taste. To bring the consumer into the active fight for rational cloth and clothing.⁴⁸

Moreover, in accordance with Constructivist principles, Stepanova and Popova envisaged their work as being far more than simply the design of fabrics, They wanted to be involved with the organisational and technical aspects of the manufacturing process, and with the marketing of the final products.⁴⁹ They presented these demands in the form of a memo to the factory management:

1. To participate in the work of the production organs, to work closely with or to direct the artistic side of things, with the right to vote on production plans and models, design acquisition, and recruiting colleagues for artistic work.
2. To participate in the chemistry laboratory as observers of the colouration process
3. To produce designs for block printed fabrics, at our request or suggestion.

4. To establish contact with the sewing workshops, fashion ateliers and journals.
5. To undertake agitational work for the factory through the press and magazine advertisements. At the same time we may also contribute designs for store windows.⁵⁰

Undoubtedly such demands encountered a certain degree of opposition and there is certainly no evidence that they were met. Perhaps because these artists were hampered from implementing their ideas to the degree that they wished, their work has been condemned for not progressing beyond the stage of applied art. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that they considered the structure or type of fabric for which their designs were intended. In 1931 Fedorov-Davydov wrote:

Even the works of A. Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Popova of 1924 did not extend beyond the stage of applied art, because despite their abstract qualities, they did not progress beyond the simple design of the surface of the textile ... Rodchenko, Stepanova, Popova could not realize their ideas further. They tried, not always correctly, to raise the question of clothing as a whole and thought that their drawings in some way would be suitable for the costumes they devised. These costumes were not realized.⁵¹

In their initial prototypes for the new working clothing, *prozodezhda*, exemplified by Stepanova's designs for sports clothing, Rodchenko's working suit, and Popova's actors' overalls, both Stepanova and Popova had used unpatterned cloth. This may have been the result of mere expediency, no other cloth being available, but more probably it was the result of deliberate intention. A patterned fabric might have obscured the cut and the stitching of the design with distracting decorative details. Plain cloth had the advantage of clearly expressing the structure of the garment.

The concern that the printed textile should not disguise, but rather enhance the structure of the dress, led Popova and Stepanova to combine the two processes and design the two components, the dress and the cloth, together so that they would complement each other.⁵² In Popova's designs (Plates 12 and 13), the pattern emphasises the dress's functional and structural elements. In the orange flannelette ensemble, the striped material stresses the pockets, the sleeves, the neckline and the skirt. Equally in the short-

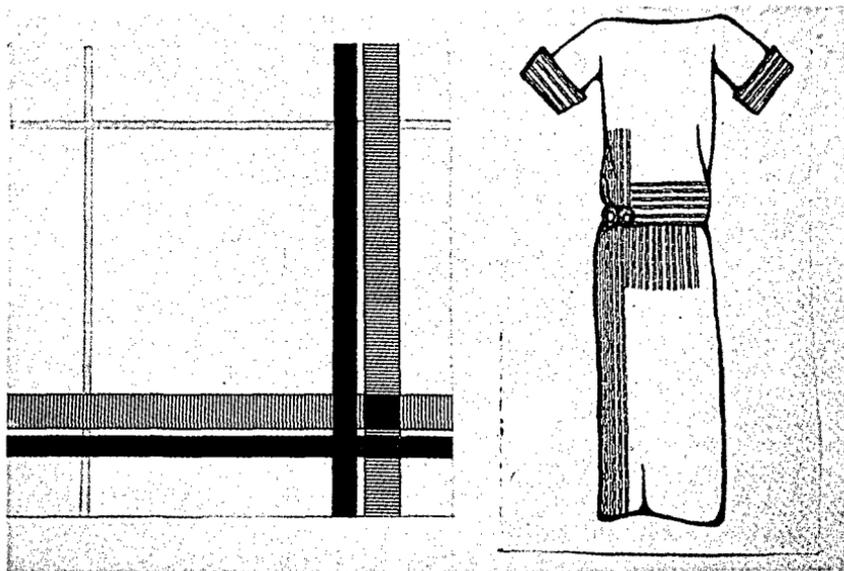


PLATE 12

L. Popova, *Textile and Dress Design*, 1924. Pencil and watercolour on paper, 61 × 28 cm. Photograph Courtesy/Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne.

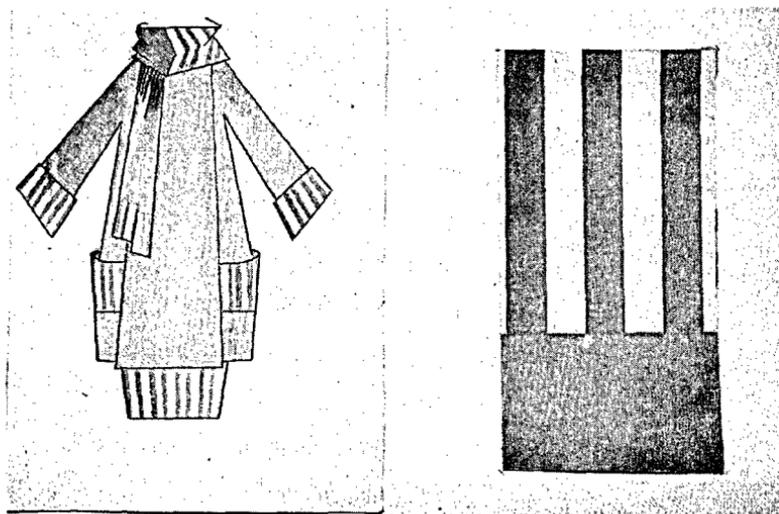


PLATE 13

L. Popova, *Textile and Dress Design*, 1924. Pencil and inks on paper, 72.5 × 34 cm. Private collections.

sleeved dress, Popova combines vertical and horizontal stripes to highlight the sleeves and the waist, while the vertical stripes emphasise the length of the garment and counteract any broadening effect that the horizontal stripes might have. These two items are typical of Popova's designs of this period in their structural simplicity and the way that structure is integrated with a decorative element to add interest to the design. The shift, in particular, refers back to the minimal structure of Popova's theatrical *prozodezhda*, although, in contrast to those overalls, it does have a conscious elegance. Relatively simple and practical, these designs utilised cheap materials that were readily available, such as flanelette. On the other hand, some of Popova's dress designs are deliberately and flamboyantly impractical and in the use of frills and bows seem a far cry from the austerity of *prozodezhda* (Plate 14). In introducing such frippery and devising ensembles with large hats, Popova was evidently returning to a traditional concept of elegance and fashion which derived its inspiration from Paris and haute couture, rather than from the Revolution and the industrial and proletarian imperatives of the new socialist society. As the students of the VKhUTEMAS declared, alluding to Popova in a satirical poem attacking their teachers, 'wrapper dresses are a bourgeois enterprise'.⁵³

Yet it was precisely such frivolity and traditional concepts of fashion and beauty that were in demand during the mid-1920s, when small private enterprises could flourish under the New Economic Policy. It is perhaps not surprising that after the spartan years of the Civil War, the re-emergence of small entrepreneurs and capitalist social elements with money to spend should have been reflected in textile and dress design which is so sensitive to, and financially dependent upon, consumer demand. Popova and Stepanova had produced textile designs which were uncompromising demonstrations of their aesthetic credo, but the designs that became popular during the 1920s were more figurative, employing Soviet, industrial and agricultural symbols in repeat patterns that were very similar to the organisation of the motifs in the traditional flower fabrics produced for the peasantry.⁵⁴ Popova's dress designs had, to a certain degree, taken account of the material shortages confronting the consumer and the production constraints operating in the textile industry, but the practicability and appeal of her solutions did not always match those of other designers like Nadezhda Lamanova. A famous couturier before the Revolution, Lamanova adapted more easily to the new class of customer. She



PLATE 14

L. Popova, *Dress Design Using Photomontage*, 1924. Private collection.

now utilised more traditional concepts of clothing within a framework closely tied to the new economy and the detailed technical restrictions governing the clothing industry.

In an early do-it-yourself book entitled *Art into Life*, of 1925, Lamanova presented the average Soviet housewife, struggling with a depleted wardrobe and a drastic scarcity of materials, with matter-of-fact ways in which to use any materials to hand. Her designs included one which used old embroidered towels (a traditionally important ingredient in the peasant trousseau) to create a dress simple in structure and outline which incorporated a distinctive design motif. Another solution suggested how an old army blanket could be used to make an overcoat, and another demonstrated how a dress could be sewn from shawls.⁵⁵ These designs, although ingenious, did not deviate radically from more accepted fashions. For the more wealthy section of the population and for the petty-bourgeois who had come to flourish under NEP, there was the Atelier of Fashion, where Aleksandra Ekster and Vera Mukhina were the chief designers. Ekster, while creating some clothes for mass production, also devised some extremely elaborate costumes using decorative motifs derived from the art of Japan, Egypt and the eighteenth century.⁵⁶

Such designs compromised wholeheartedly with consumer demand. They appealed to that public which begged the avant-garde to 'cover Constructivism with a haze of fantasy'⁵⁷ which would make its rigour and boldness more acceptable. This haze has effectively obscured the innovative and far-reaching nature of the Constructivists' clothing experiments. Typically, Popova's were not fanciful enough for the Nepman consumer and not practical enough to be the everyday wear for working people. Yet they pleased design critics and one, writing in 1927, was able to give wholehearted praise to Popova's 'simple and powerful' designs and claim: 'In the past the rich wore luxurious fabrics. Popova in our day, and in our opinion, has clothed the proletariat more beautifully.'⁵⁸

NOTES

This article was initially written in 1987 for a book of essays devoted to various aspects of the Russian Revolution. Unfortunately, this volume was never published.

1. A. Lunacharskii, 'Monumental'naia agitatsiia', *Plamia*, No.11 (1918). For the text of this decree see 'O sniatii pamiatnikov vozdvignutykh v chest' tsarei i ikh slug i vyrabotke proektov pamiatnikov Rossiiskoi sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii', *Pravda*, 13 April 1918. This is reproduced in *Sobranie uzakonenii i rasporiazhenii rabochego i krest'ianskogo pravitel'stva*, No.31 (1918), p.391.
2. *Narodnyi kommissariat po proveshcheniiu 1917 – oktiabr' 1920. Kratkii otchet* (Moscow, 1920).
3. *Pervaia vserossiiskaia konferentsiia po khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti, avgust 1919* (Moscow, 1920), p.63. Cited by John Bowlt in 'From Pictures to Textile Prints', *Soviet Union*, Vol.3, No.2 (1976), p.311.
4. For more details concerning this group see Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1983), pp.94ff.
5. Printed in *Vecherniia Moskva*, 26 May 1924.
6. R. Fuelop-Miller, *The Mind and Face of Bolshevism: An Examination of Cultural Life in Soviet Russia* (London, 1927), pp.145, 148–9.
7. L. Popova, untitled manuscript, cited by A. Adaskina in 'Liubov' Popova. Put' stanovleniia khudozhnika-konstruktora', *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika*, No.11 (1978), p.19.
8. L. Popova, 'K risunkam', ms, signed and dated December 1921, private archive, Moscow. This excerpt is based on John Bowlt's translation of a typescript of the same text reproduced in *Women Artists of the Russian Avant-Garde 1910–1930* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1979), p.68.
9. A. Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p.68.
10. Bowlt, 'From Pictures', p.311, n.4. He cites as his source for this information D. Arkin, 'Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo i material'naia kul'tura', *Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo* (Moscow, 1921), pp.17–18. See also 'V INKhUKe: Khudozhnik i proizvodstvo', *Vestnik iskusstv*, No.5 (1922), p.26 and L. Zhadova (ed.), *Tatlin* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), p.152, n.34.
11. See T.K. Strizhenova and I.A. Alpatova. 'Khudozhestvennaia promyshlennost': Tekstil' in V.P. Tolstoi, *Sovetskoe dekorativnoe iskusstvo 1917–1945* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1984), p.135.
12. See Strizhenova and Alpatova, 'Tekstil', p.135.
13. By 1924 there were only 115 factories, but 4,250,000 spindles and 235,000 workers. See *Russia: The Official Report of the British Trades Union Delegation to Russia and Caucasia Nov. and Dec., 1924* (London, 1925), p.200.
14. *Distsipliny VKhUTEMASa* (Moscow, 1920); and 'Zapis' besedy s G. D. Chichagovoi', ms, private archive, Moscow.
15. L. Popova and V. Vesnin, 'Distsiplina No.1', ms, TsGALI, fond 681, op. 2, ed. khr. 46, list 26.
16. Ibid.
17. L. Popova, 'Zaiavlenie v napravlenie VKhUTEMASa', 1922, ms., private archive, Moscow.
18. N. Chuzhak, 'Pod znakom zhiznestroeniia', *LEF*, No.1 (1923), p.32.
19. L. Popova, 'Vstuplenie k diskussii INKhUKA o "Velikodusnom rogonostse"', 27 April 1922, ms, private archive, Moscow.
20. L. Popova, 'Kostium kak element material'nogo oformleniia', c. 1922, ms, private archive, Moscow.

21. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, pp.94ff.
22. Popova, 'Kostium kak element material'nogo oformleniia'.
23. *Ibid.*
24. See E. Rakitina, 'Liubov' Popova. Iskusstvo i manifesty', *Khudozhnik, stsena, ekran* (Moscow, 1975), pp.152-63.
25. N. Adaskina, 'Constructivist fabrics and Dress Design', *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, No.5 (Summer 1987), p.149.
26. See N. Adaskina, 'Constructivist Fabrics and Dress Design', *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, No.5 (Summer 1987), p.149.
27. TsGAOR, fond 5721, op. 1, ed.khr. 1, list23-4, cited by Strizhenova and Alpatova, 'Tekstil', p.137. The invitation by Arkhangel'skii and Viktorov in *Pravda* expressed the same idea (*ibid.*, p.137).
28. *LEF*, No.4 (1923), p.50.
29. O. Brik, 'Ot kartiny k sittsu', *LEF*, No.2 (6) (1924), p.34.
30. John Bowlt, for instance, gives the end of 1922 as the date when Popova entered the factory (see Bowlt, 'From Pictures to Textile Prints', p.315). Strizhenova's date of 1921 is even earlier (T. Strizhenova, *Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiuma* (Moscow, 1972), p.95). Other authorities state that Popova worked at the factory for a year (L. Zhadova, 'Liubov' Popova', *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika*, No.11 (1967), p.26). See also E. Murina 'Tkani Liubov' Popovoi', *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo*, No.8 (1967), pp.24-7; and Adaskina, 'Liubov' Popova'.
31. See Ya. Tugendkol'd, 'Pamiati L. Popovoi', *Khudozhnik i zritel'*, Nos.6-7 (1924), p.77; and *Katalog posmertnoi vystavki khudozhnika konstruktora L.S. Popovoi* (Moscow, 1924), p.12.
32. V. Stepanova, 'O polozhenii i zadachakh khudozhnika-konstruktivista v sittsenabivnoi promyshlennosti v sviazi s rabotami na sittsenabivnoi fabrike', ms, private archive, Moscow. See also TsGAOR, fond 5721, op. 1, ed. khr. 1, list 7, cited in Strizhenova and Alpatova, 'Tekstil', p.137, n.5.
Stepanova delivered this paper at a meeting of INKhUK on 5 January 1924 (see 'Protokol zasedaniia INKhUKA. 5 Yanvaria 1924', ms. private archive, Moscow).
33. D. Arkin, 'L'artiste et l'industrie', *L'Art decoratif et industriel de l'URSS* (Moscow, 1925), p.46.
34. Brik, 'Ot kartiny k sittsu', p.27.
35. *Ibid.*, p.34.
36. Stepanova, 'O polozhenii'.
37. This design is not dissimilar to one in the Costakis Collection. See Angelica Rudenstine, *Russian Avant-Garde Art: The George Costakis Collection* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1983), No.917.
38. See Rudenstine, *Russian Avant-Garde Art*, No.918.
39. This is reproduced in black and white in V.P. Tolstoi, *Sovetskoe dekorativnoe iskusstvo 1917-1945* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1984), between pp.159 and 160.
40. L. Popova, 'Raboty 20-21gg.', dated December 1922, ms, private archive, Moscow.
41. See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, plates XIII, 5. 20-21.; and Rudenstine, *Russian Avant-Garde Art*, Nos.359-69.
42. Rodchenko's photograph showing Stepanova drawing this design is illustrated in D. Elliott (ed.), *Art into Production: Soviet Textiles, Fashion and Ceramics 1917-1935*, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, 1984, p.89. The design itself is attributed to Rodchenko in both monographs on Rodchenko produced by Soviet scholars using the Stepanova and Rodchenko archive. See G. Karginov, *Rodchenko* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), p.173; and S.O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), p.112. A very similar work using lines drawn with a compass was reproduced in *LEF* No.2 (1924), as by Rodchenko (reproduced in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.146). The evidence suggests three

- possibilities: the wrong authorship was given in 1924 and these designs are by Stepanova; both artists used this manner of creating designs; or they actually collaborated on these designs, and should therefore be given joint authorship.
43. V. Stepanova, Notebook in the Rodchenko Stepanova Archive, Moscow, cited in Strizhenova and Alpatova, 'Tekstil', p.138.
 44. D. Aranovich, 'Iskusstvo v tkani', *Iskusstvo odevat'sia*, Leningrad, No.1 (1928), p.11. Translated in Adaskina, 'Constructivist Fabrics', p.149.
 45. Adaskina, 'Constructivist Fabrics', p.149.
 46. Stepanova, 'O polozhenii'; also TsGAOR, fond 5721, op. 1, ed. khr. 1, list 7, cited in Strizhenova and Alpatova, 'Tekstil', p.137, n.5.
 47. Ibid. Also cited in Strizhenova, *Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiuma*, p.97.
 48. Stepanova, 'O polozhenii'; also TsGAOR, fond 5721, op. 1, ed. khr. 1, list 7, cited in Strizhenova and Alpatova, 'Tekstil', p.137, n.5.
 49. A. Lavrentiev (ed. John Bowlit), *Varvara Stepanova: A Constructivist Life* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), p.81.
 50. Quoted by A. Lavrentiev, 'Poezia graficheskogo dizaina v tvorchestve Varvary Stepanovoi', *Tekhnicheskaiia estetika*, No.5 (1980), p.25; and Lavrentiev, *Varvara Stepanova*, p.81. In the latter, Lavrentiev has added an explanation to point 3:

[Stepanova is referring to the artist's ability to request changes in range of goods produced and her right to propose the release of experimental and industrial designs specifically geared to factory production].
 51. A. Fedorov-Davydov, 'Iskusstvo tekstilia', *Izofront. Klassovaia bor'ba na fronte prostranstvennykh iskusstv. Sbornik statei ob'edineniia 'Oktiabr'* (Moscow, Leningrad, 1931), p.72.
 52. This approach to the integration of fabric and clothing design is demonstrated in Stepanova's textile design course at the VKhUTEMAS, see V. Stepanova, 'Prospectus for a Course on Artistic Composition for the Textile Faculty at VKhUTEMAS' (ed. Elliott), *Art into Production*, pp.88-90. This text is also included as an appendix in Lavrentiev, *Varvara Stepanova*.
 53. Untitled poem, ms, private archive, Moscow.
 54. For fairly extensive illustrations of the ways in which industrial and Soviet symbols were used in the elaboration of textile design see I. Iasinskaia, *Soviet Textile Design of the Revolutionary Period* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1983), and Elliott, *Art into production*.
 55. *Iskusstvo v bytu* (Moscow, 1925).
 56. See Strizhenova, *Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiuma*, pp.28ff.
 57. Quoted by Strizhenova, *Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiuma*, p.100.
 58. Zaikov, *Na khlopchatobumazhnoi fabrike* (Moscow, 1927), p.121.