

# TANGO WITH COWS

BOOK ART OF THE  
RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE, 1910-1917



Between the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, Russia was in spiritual, social, and cultural crisis. The moral devastation of the failed 1905 revolution, the famines of 1911, the rapid influx of modern technologies, and the outbreak of World War I led to disillusionment with urban expansion and a presentiment of apocalypse. Russian avant-garde poets and artists responded to this crisis with mixed emotions. Like the Italian Futurists, they embraced urban entertainment and the speed and cacophony of city life. Yet their anticipation of the future was colored by a fear of the potential destructiveness of urbanism and new technology. This apprehension led them back to their Slavic roots, on which they based their newly invented book art.

This exhibition takes its title from a book and poem by Vasily Kamensky. The absurd image of farm animals dancing the tango evokes the clash between a primarily rural culture and a growing urban life. In addition, it mirrors the nonsensical word combinations that Russian poets explored in their sonic language called *zaum'*—an invented term meaning transrational or “beyond-sense.” Working collaboratively, poets and artists designed pages in which rubber-stamped *zaum'* poetry shared space with archaic and modern scripts, as well as with primitive and abstract imagery. The Russian avant-garde utilized these verbal and visual disruptions to convey humor, parody, and an ambivalence about Russia’s past, present, and future.

—Nancy Perloff with Allison Pultz

## Biographies of Russian Artists and Poets

### David Burliuk (Russian, 1882–1967)



The son of a wealthy bailiff, Burliuk played an important role in the inception of Russian Futurism. In 1907, after studies in Kazan, Munich, and Paris, he settled in Moscow, where he met members of the early avant-garde. From 1912 to 1914, Burliuk devoted his energy to poetry and organized avant-garde publications and exhibitions. He and Mayakovskiy studied at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture until they were expelled in 1914. In 1913 and 1914, Burliuk organized his Futurist Tour of Russia, during which he, his brother Vladimir, Mayakovskiy, and Kamenskiy gave poetry readings and lectured on the Futurist movement. Burliuk fled the Civil War in 1918, arriving in the United States in 1922 by way of Siberia, Japan, and Canada. He died on Long Island.

Vladimir Burliuk, Portrait of David Burliuk, from *A Trap for Judges* (St. Petersburg, 1910) (88-B28424)

### Pavel Filonov (Russian, 1883–1941)



Born in Moscow, Filonov came from a poor family and was orphaned early in life. As a founding member of the St. Petersburg Union of Youth art group in the 1910s, he associated with members of the avant-garde, and from 1914 to 1915, he illustrated Futurist books. During these years, he became an increasingly fanatical and ascetic figure who shunned most alliances and believed the future of modern art lay in Russia. In 1913, he and Iosef Shkolnik designed the decor and costumes for Mayakovskiy’s play *Vladimir Mayakovskiy: A Tragedy*. In 1914, he began to formulate his complex “Ideology of Analytical Art,” which advocated the use of intuition in overcoming the chaos of the world. He died of pneumonia during the Siege of Leningrad in 1941.

Pavel Filonov, Imagery from Velimir Khlebnikov, “Wooden Idols,” *Roaring Parnassus* (Petrograd, 1915) (88-B25483)

### **Natalia Goncharova (Russian, 1881–1962)**



In contrast to the peasant and tradesmen backgrounds of her colleagues, Goncharova was born into a well-educated noble family in a village in the Tula province, south of Moscow. In 1898, she entered the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, where she met her lifelong companion, Larionov. Together they pioneered the Neoprimitivism movement, which drew upon Russian traditions of the religious icon and folk art. She incorporated and sometimes parodied these traditions in the imagery she created for books of prose and poetry by Kruchenykh. Goncharova's secular representations of Orthodox themes in two solo exhibitions were considered pornographic and earned her the title "anti-artist." She and Larionov left Russia for France in 1915 to create designs for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. She died in Paris.

Natalia Goncharova, *Hermitess*, from Alexei Kruchenykh, Mikhail Larionov, and Natalia Goncharova, *Hermits; Hermitess: Two Poems* (Moscow, 1913) (88-B26127)

### **Vasily Kamensky (Russian, 1884–1961)**



Kamensky was born on a steamboat on the Kama River near the city of Perm, where his father worked as a goldfield inspector. He embarked on a writing career but gave it up after receiving negative reviews. As one of Russia's first aviators, he suffered a nearly fatal crash in Poland, after which David Burliuk persuaded him to return to literature and to join Burliuk and Mayakovsky on their Futurist Tour of Russia, lecturing and giving poetry readings in outrageous attire. Kamensky fled Moscow during World War I, then returned and, in the mid-1920s, became a member of Mayakovsky's Leftist Front of the Arts (LEF). In 1948, three years after both his legs were amputated, he gave his last public address at an event dedicated to Mayakovsky. A stroke left him paralyzed until his death in Moscow.

Vladimir Burliuk, Portrait of Vasily Kamensky, from *A Trap for Judges* (St. Petersburg, 1910) (88-B28424)

### **Velimir Khlebnikov (Russian, 1885–1922)**



Khlebnikov (born Viktor) grew up in an ornithologists's family in a village near the Caspian Sea. He studied mathematics and the natural sciences at the Universities of Kazan' and St. Petersburg, but never graduated. Khlebnikov began publishing poetry in 1908; by 1912 he was a leading member of the Russian Futurists. The "verbal mastery" of his zaum' poetry in *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* astounded the poet and critic Roman Jakobson, who later deemed him "the greatest world poet of our century." In writing *The Tables of Destiny*, his book of prophecy, Khlebnikov used algorithms to map the events of history and to anticipate the future. In 1912, for instance, he uncannily predicted the collapse of an empire in 1917. During the Civil War, he worked on propaganda posters. He died of malnutrition in Santalovo, in the Novgorod province.

Vladimir Burliuk, Portrait of Velimir Khlebnikov, from Khlebnikov, *Creations* (Moscow, 1914) (93-B5424)

### **Alexei Kruchenykh (Russian, 1886–1969)**



Kruchenykh was born to a peasant family in the Kherson province of Ukraine. After graduating from the Odessa School of Art in 1906, he studied painting independently and taught graphic art in secondary schools. When he moved to Moscow, Kruchenykh shifted from painting to poetry. In 1912, David Burliuk introduced him to Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov, and his subsequent collaborations with poets and visual artists achieved a revolution in book art. During the Civil War, Kruchenykh worked in railway construction in the Caucasus and founded the Futurist society 41° in Tiflis (now Tbilisi). He joined Mayakovsky's LEF in Moscow in 1923. After the Communist Party denounced Futurism in Soviet literature, Kruchenykh ceased writing zaum' and became an archivist. He died in Moscow.

Nikolai Kulbin, Portrait of Alexei Kruchenykh, from Kruchenykh, *Exploidity* (St. Petersburg, 1913) (85-B4921)

## Mikhail Larionov (Russian, 1881–1964)



Larionov was born in Tiraspol, on the southwestern border of Ukraine. His father was a medical assistant at a nearby military hospital. Larionov moved to Moscow in 1891, and in 1898 he entered the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, where he met his lifelong companion, Goncharova. He quickly became a leading avant-gardist and pioneered a Neoprimitivist style characterized by humorous and parodic treatments of sacred and popular imagery. In 1910, he organized the exhibition group Jack of Diamonds, from which he broke away to form the Donkey's Tail and Target groups (1912–1913). In 1912, he formulated his theory of nonobjective art, which he called Rayism. Larionov served in the military in 1910 and again in 1914, when he was wounded. He and Goncharova left Russia in 1915 to design sets for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*. They eventually settled in Paris, where they died.

Mikhail Larionov, *Figure making sound*, from Velemir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh, *Worldbackwards* (Moscow, 1912) (88-B27486)

## Kazimir Malevich (Russian, 1878–1935)



Malevich was born in a Ukrainian village near Kiev, where his father worked in a sugar beet factory. His formal education consisted of intermittent studies at the Kiev School of Art and the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. He first met Larionov's circle in 1910, when he contributed post-Impressionist works to the Jack of Diamonds exhibition. From 1912 to 1914, his prints for

Russian Futurist books experimented with Neoprimitivism, Cubist planes, and Futurist lines-of-force. With the showing of his Suprematist painting *Black Square at 0.10: Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting* in Petrograd in 1915, Malevich became the first modern artist to move into the realm of pure geometric abstraction. He decorated his coffin with a black square and circle before he died.

Kazimir Malevich, *Arithmetic*, from Alexei Kruchenykh, *Let's Grumble* (St. Petersburg, 1913) (88-B26245)

## Vladimir Mayakovsky (Russian, 1893–1930)



Mayakovsky, the great poet of the Revolution, was born in a small Georgian town, where his father worked as a forest ranger. He arrived in Moscow at the age of thirteen and was jailed as a revolutionary two years later. After meeting Burliuk at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, he joined Burliuk's

Hylaea group and began writing poetry. In 1913, he played the autobiographical role of poet, prophet, and martyr in his play *Vladimir Mayakovskiy: A Tragedy*, and dressed in outlandish costumes with the Burliuks and Kamensky during their Futurist Tour of Russia. Mayakovsky met his muse, Lily Brik, in 1915 and began a love affair that lasted until 1928. With Lily's husband, the literary critic Osip Brik, he founded LEF. Mayakovsky committed suicide in his apartment in February 1930. More than one hundred and fifty thousand people thronged the Moscow streets to attend his funeral.

David Burliuk, *Portrait of the character Vladimir Mayakovsky*, from Mayakovsky, *Vladimir Mayakovskiy: A Tragedy* (Moscow, 1914) (88-B27107)

## Olga Rozanova (Russian, 1886–1918)



Rozanova was born in the small town of Melenki in Vladimir province. Her father was a police officer, and her mother was the daughter of an Orthodox priest. She went to Moscow in 1904 to study painting at several private art schools, including the Bolshakov Art School. In 1911, she moved to St. Petersburg, where she became a central figure in the Union of Youth art group. In 1913, Rozanova began a collaboration on Futurist book design with Kruchenykh, whom she married. She moved to Moscow in 1915 to work in fashion and textile design, joined Malevich's Supremus group, and developed a theory of color-painting (*tsvetopis'*). She contributed to Kruchenykh's *Exhibition of Moscow Futurists* in Tiflis and died shortly thereafter from diphtheria in Moscow.

Olga Rozanova, *Explosion*, from Alexei Kruchenykh, *Explodity* (St. Petersburg, 1913) (85-B4921)

Olga Rozanova, *Explosion*, from Alexei Kruchenykh, *Explodity* (St. Petersburg, 1913) (85-B4921)

## **Related Events at the Getty Center**

### **PERFORMANCE**

#### **Exploidity: An Evening of Transrational Sound Poetry**

February 4, 2009

Reception and Gallery Viewing: 5:00–6:45 p.m.,  
Getty Research Institute Exhibition Gallery

Performance: 7:00–8:45 p.m., Museum Lecture Hall

Performances by Christian Bök, Steve McCaffery, and Oleg Minin of Russian Futurist zaum' ("beyondsense") poetry and of contemporary sound poetry, with an introduction by Gerald Janecek.

### **SYMPOSIUM**

#### **The Book as Such in the Russian Avant-Garde**

February 5, 2009, 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Museum Lecture Hall

This one-day symposium brings together scholars and artists in fields from art history to literature to explore the Russian avant-garde's revolution of the book. Talks and a roundtable address the deliberately crude materials, the newly invented zaum' language, and the verbal and visual tensions between parodic humor and apocalypse, the primitive and the urban, the sacred and the profane. Speakers will consider the influence of the Russian avant-garde on visual poetry and the aesthetics of book production in the later decades of the twentieth century.

Admission to these events is free. Separate reservations are required. Please make a reservation by visiting [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu) or calling (310) 440-7300.

### **Russian Books Online**

To look inside some of the Russian avant-garde books featured in this exhibition, please visit the Getty Research Institute's Digitized Library Collections at [www.getty.edu](http://www.getty.edu).



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Cover image: Mikhail Larionov,  
Portrait of Akhmet, from Velimir  
Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh,  
*Worldbackwards* (Moscow, 1912)