

The Museum of Modern Art

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THE FIRST MAJOR EXHIBITION OF WORKS BY THE STENBERG BROTHERS OPENS AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IN JUNE

**The Largest Graphic Design Retrospective Ever Organized
at MoMA Features 100 Works from the 1920s and 1930s**

***Stenberg Brothers: Constructing a Revolution in Soviet Design*
June 10–September 2, 1997**

The first retrospective of the works of Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982) and Georgii Stenberg (1900–1933), prominent designers and colorful figures of the Russian avant-garde, opens at The Museum of Modern Art on June 10, 1997. Including approximately 100 works—many never before seen outside Russia—*Stenberg Brothers: Constructing a Revolution in Soviet Design* is the largest graphic design retrospective the Museum has ever organized. The exhibition, which is on view through September 2, 1997, introduces the work the Stenbergs produced in a remarkable variety of mediums during their prolific partnership.

Organized by Christopher Mount, Assistant Curator, Department of Architecture and Design, the exhibition comprises 65 movie and propaganda posters, studies for the posters, magazines and journals, designs for theatrical sets and costumes, and a small selection of the Stenbergs' early Constructivist paintings, drawings, and sculptures.

The Stenbergs were born in Moscow to a Swedish immigrant father and a Russian mother, and were teenagers when the Revolution of 1917 occurred. Like many of the artists of the Bolshevik period, soon after the Revolution the Stenbergs abandoned the fine arts in favor of the functional arts. By the early 1920s they were working collaboratively on their most significant accomplishment, the advertising posters they designed for the newly

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burgeoning cinema in Soviet Russia, which they continued to produce until Georgii's death. "These works merged two of the most important agitational tools available to the new Communist regime: the cinema and the graphic arts," writes Mr. Mount in his essay in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition. "When combined, they created a revolutionary new art form."

Although these works were created to promote films to the general public, they are extremely sophisticated, representing an uncommon synthesis of many of the philosophical, formal, and theoretical elements of the Russian avant-garde. The brothers' intimate knowledge of contemporary film theory, Suprematist painting, Constructivism, and theater, as well as their skill in the graphic arts, was essential to the genesis of the posters.

Many of the formal innovations the Stenbergs employed were borrowed directly from the visual character of the cinema. Rather than simply illustrating the star in a narrative scene, the brothers rethought the notion of film advertising. Whether promoting a psychological thriller, a Buster Keaton comedy, or a Soviet propaganda film, the posters employ collage to suggest the overall mood and narrative of the film.

Characterized by extraordinary compositional dynamism, inventiveness, and originality, the posters are radical even by today's standards. The Stenbergs were keenly aware of the function of such elements as implied movement, expressive typography, scale juxtapositions, and severe color contrasts, all of which they pioneered in their designs. As Vladimir wrote, "we employ everything that can make a busy passerby stop in their tracks."

The brothers developed a projection system to manipulate the film stills from which they worked, allowing them to imitate the technique of photomontage with drawn images. As Mr. Mount writes, "Their facile manipulation of pictorial space seems remarkably prescient in

light of the infinite mutability of the photographic image made possible by the desktop computer only in the last ten years.”

The Stenbergs also designed innovative announcements, stage sets, and costumes for the Moscow theater, including productions of “The Hairy Ape” and “Desire Under the Elms” by Eugene O’Neill, Bertolt Brecht’s “The Threepenny Opera,” and Charles-Alexandre Lecocq’s “Day and Night.” Intended to deemphasize the actors, the costumes are colorful and extremely graphic and the sets feature mechanical elements and multileveled stages reflecting Constructivist concepts the Stenbergs helped develop and popularize.

After Georgii’s untimely death in 1933, which was allegedly orchestrated by the KGB, Vladimir continued to work as a designer. He was imprisoned for eighteen months during Stalin’s regime, and later served as Chief of Design for Red Square, a prestigious post, until 1964. He died in Moscow in 1982.

The exhibition was organized by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, with the cooperation of the Ruki Matsumoto Collection, Tokyo, and is made possible by a generous grant from Laboratory All Fashion Art Co., Ltd.

Publication

Stenberg Brothers: Constructing a Revolution in Soviet Design, a 96-page catalogue published by The Museum of Modern Art, accompanies the exhibition. It contains 65 color and 12 black-and-white illustrations. Distributed in the U.S. and Canada by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York, and overseas by Thames and Hudson, Ltd., London, the book is available in The MoMA Book Store for \$19.95 (paperbound).

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No. 24

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