

Primitivism in Russian Futurist Book Design 1910–14

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In the introduction to his book *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art*, William Rubin notes the relative paucity of scholarly works devoted to “primitivism—the interest of modern artists in tribal art and culture, as revealed in their thought and work.”¹ While considerable attention has been paid to primitivism in early-twentieth-century French and German art in the time since Rubin’s 1984 publication, Western awareness of a parallel trend in Russia remains relatively limited to scholars and specialists. Yet, the primary characteristics that Russian artists’ recognized and revered in primitive art forms played as profound a role in shaping the path of modern art and literature in Russia as they did in the artistic expressions of Western Europe. “Primitive” and “primitivism,” as they are used in this text, are defined as art or an art style that reveals a primacy and purity of expression. There is little or no regard for laws dictated or imposed by nature, science, academic instruction, or convention. In no sense are these terms meant to be derogatory or pejorative, however. Indeed, so-called primitive artists bore with pride the names that their critics called them—barbarians or savages—and they were not offended by accusations that they were “uncivilized.”

The primitivist movement in Russia (1909–14) bridged the period between Symbolism (1904–08) and the styles that most distinguish the early Russian avant-garde—Cubo-Futurism, Alogism, and Rayism (1912–14), and Suprematism (1915–20). Embracing primitivism and Neo-primitivism (the latter was so named by its pro-

ponents in 1913), Russian artists such as Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich, and Olga Rozanova espoused the fundamental aesthetic principles and theories, set the priorities, and developed the courage to abandon naturalism in art in favor of free creation, pure expression, and, ultimately, abstraction.

The present work focuses on the illustrated book as the ideal framework in which to examine primitivism in Russia. Through this medium, artists and writers of the emerging avant-garde achieved one of the most original responses to, and modern adaptations of, primitivism, and realized the primary goals and aesthetic credos set forth in their statements and group manifestos. These artists drew on a wide range of primitive art forms from their own country: Old Russian illuminated manuscripts, miniatures, wood carvings, icons, and hand-painted religious woodcuts; antiquities and works dating from pre-Christianized Russia (particularly those of the Scythians and other Asiatic peoples); folk art, such as *lubki* (popular prints, usually hand-colored), blockbooks, toys, shop signs, distaffs, and embroidery; and the work of “modern” primitives (children, self-taught artists, commercial sign painters, and the nomadic tribes of Siberia and Central Asia).

The book form allowed Russian artists to explore new materials and techniques. Images could be reduced to their essentials, and elements of color could be embraced in their primacy. Collaborations between artists and poets increased the expressive potential of



Fig. 1. Letter V (detail) from *Archangelic Evangelists*. Early 13th-century manuscript. State Historical Museum, Moscow



Fig. 2. “Ladder of St. John,” from a 16th-century manuscript. The Paul M. Fekula Collection

the written word and letter forms. This collective effort challenged the established practices in book design, art, and poetry, and advanced a shared political and ideological platform. Russian art and poetry were revitalized, making them more reflective of the Russian people, their spirit and traditions. Blurring the lines between “high” and “low” art, these books showed an equal reverence for the images of everyday and those of the sacred. These innovative approaches to the concept of the book meant that Russian artists could claim their own achievements, outside of Western influences.

The characteristics most commonly associated with Western primitivism² were already evident in Russian art by 1907–08. Reviews of exhibitions and articles on artistic developments and trends in Russia document an awareness on the part of both artists and their audience of “that *primitivism* to which contemporary painting has come.”³ Works shown in 1908 at the *Wreath-Stephanos* exhibition in Moscow and at the *Contemporary Trends in Art* exhibition in St. Petersburg were noted by critics for their distortion, “‘simplification of form’ taken to ‘absolute naïveté,’”⁴ and the bold and expressive use of bright colors and “nervous brushstrokes.”⁵

Like the Fauves, Cubists, and German Expressionists, Russian artists who embraced primitivism aspired toward “realism” in painting (the depiction of “the essence of objects”) as opposed to “naturalism” (“the outward imitation of their form”).⁶ As the writer Aleksandr Shevchenko explains in his 1913 essay *Neo-Primitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements*: “We can no longer be satisfied with a simple organic copy of nature. We have grown used to seeing it around us altered and improved by the hand of man the creator, and we cannot but demand the same of Art.”⁷

Heightened awareness of contemporary trends and developments in Western art affirmed, encouraged, and further fueled non-naturalistic tendencies. Russian artists themselves cite their introduction to Post-Impressionism as having provided the initial impetus for Russian Neo-primitivism. Western artists whose influences are most clearly seen in early Russian primitivism (1907–09) are Paul Cézanne, Vincent van Gogh, and Paul Gauguin, in whose works, suggested David Burliuk in 1908, could be found “hopes for the rebirth of Russian painting.”⁸ Several years later, Burliuk hailed these three artists’ rediscovery of “works of ‘barbaric’ art (the Egyptians, the Assyrians, Scythians, etc.)” as “the sword that smashed the chains of conventional academism . . . so that in color and design (form) it [art] could move from the darkness of slavery toward the path of bright springtime and freedom.”⁹ By extension, Russian artists also admired French contemporaries in whose works they recognized a furthering of the aesthetic principles espoused by Cézanne, van Gogh, and Gauguin. Most notably, these were Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, and Kees van Dongen, to whose works and writings Russian artists had been introduced through reproductions in art journals, exhibitions, private collections, and independent travel and study abroad.

As Shevchenko explains in *Neo-Primitivism*,

“The word *neoprimitivism* on the one hand testifies to our point of departure, and on the other—with its prefix, *neo*—reminds us also of its involvement in the painterly traditions of our age.”¹⁰ Like Matisse and Picasso, Russians such as Larionov, Goncharova, and Malevich based their work on a synthesis of the principles found in primitive art forms and Post-Impressionist paintings.

Of the primitive art forms that were of greatest interest to their Western counterparts, those for which Russian artists shared an enthusiasm include Japanese and Chinese woodcuts, Persian and Indian miniatures and manuscripts, Egyptian and Byzantine art, children’s drawings, and decorated ritual objects. In his essay “Principles of the New Art” (1912), Vladimir Markov notes: “The ancient peoples and the East did not know our scientific rationality. These were children whose feelings and imagination dominated logic . . . naïve, uncorrupted children who intuitively penetrated the world of beauty and who could not be bribed by realism or by scientific investigations into nature.”¹¹

While Russian artists were familiar with, and had access to, many of the same foreign art forms as their European contemporaries,¹² works to which Russian artists were most drawn and are most reflected in their own art are those that they encountered outside the walls of collections and institutions, in the villages and cities of Russia, Ukraine, and Central Asia. As Evgenii Kovtun notes, Russian artists “had on their very own doorstep an active deposit of peasant art from which their art drew direct stimulus. There was no need to sail to Tahiti, as Gauguin had done; an artist need only head for Viatka or Tula province in order to come across remote, sometimes even archaic, traditions of popular art.”¹³

In 1912, when Aleksei Kruchenykh introduced the practice of using handwritten texts for *Old-Time Love* (p. 66) and *A Game in Hell* (p. 70), he was motivated by more than merely the desire to perpetuate the assault on accepted trends and traditional aesthetics of book design that had been launched with the pages printed on wallpaper in *A Trap for Judges* (1910; p. 63) and the sackcloth covers of *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste: In Defense of Free Art, Verse, Prose, Essays* (1912; p. 63). Recognizing the expressive potential of handwritten words and letters, and the attention paid to the visual form of the text in traditional Russian art, Kruchenykh and others devoted themselves to restoring the importance assigned to the written word found in ancient texts, ideographic writing, and hieroglyphics, and urged “wordwrights” “to entrust their children to an artist, not a typesetter.”¹⁴ As the collective introduction to *A Trap for Judges II* (1913; p. 63) proclaims, “We began to endow words with content on the basis of their graphic and *phonic characteristics*,”¹⁵ and in doing so, recaptured the cohesion of text and imagery found in traditional forms of the past.

Artists and authors recognized religious manuscripts as works in which “the life of letters” is well understood, noting the love with which “the illuminations [and] the letters are embellished.”¹⁶ Using words such as *Trebnikh* (Missal) or *Izbornik* (Verse) in their book titles,

Futurists referred to religious texts, thereby creating a link between their works and manuscripts.¹⁷ The link is further established by the use of archaic lettering and handwritten transcriptions in books such as *Exploidy* by Kruchenykh (1913; pp. 72, 73), and *!* by Vladimir Maya-kovsky (1913; p. 89). In Pavel Filonov's transcription of two poems in Velimir Khlebnikov's *A Selection of Poems with an Afterword by the Wordsmith: 1907–1914* (1914; p. 90), the ornamentation and anthropomorphism of letters present a particularly rich example of a modern adaptation of the traditional treatment of text in manuscripts (see fig. 1). Here the arrangement of text and illustrations also resembles Old Russian manuscripts.¹⁸

Rozanova and Goncharova also adopted manuscript-like layouts in their respective editions of *A Game in Hell* (pp. 70, 80, 81), such as that of the early-sixteenth-century example shown here (fig. 2). Rozanova's devils show a similar correspondence to those in the manuscript; in Goncharova's edition, the vertical, narrowly compressed, single-figure portraits suggest a parody of her own monumental series of paintings titled *Evangelists*,¹⁹ and reveal additional connections to icons and miniatures.

Futurist artists' interpretations of religious images and sacred subjects were often out of favor with the general public and the authorities, and occasionally, unacceptable. A depiction of St. George by Vladimir Burliuk in the anthology *Roaring Parnassus* (1914; p. 71) played a central part in the book's confiscation and censorship, perceived by the Petersburg Commission on Printing Affairs as a clear "desecration of a sacred image, and an obscene affront to holy subjects and sanctity."²⁰ In addition to the artist's trademark dislocation of the subject's eye, Vladimir's publication of the image in the company of his brother David's three-breasted nude women and pelvic-centric "sacks of lard" (as Burliuk himself referred to them)²¹ added an extra element of offense. Similar subversions of sacred images and art forms were created by Sergei Podgaevskii in *Futurist Sergei Podgaevskii's Easter Egg*,²² in which the artist's illustration "Resurrection" is an abstract, petroglyph-like potato cut (1914; p. 79), and in Khlebnikov's collection of verse, in which Filonov's tribute to the Old Russian manuscript tradition becomes slightly less orthodox, considering that the figure to whom the poem is devoted, Perun, the God of Lightning and Thunder, is the chief deity of Russian paganism.

Another source to which books such as Goncharova's *A Game in Hell* show clear reference are blockbooks of the nineteenth century—illustrated stories cheaply printed on a single sheet of paper, then folded into book form. Blockbooks are an extension of *lubki*, or popular prints, both of which are generally considered to be "low" art. Aesthetic elements of *lubki* that are most evident in book illustrations include: the inseparability and arrangement of text and image on the page; flattened or inverse perspective and non-scientific proportions; an economy of means defined by simplicity of drawing, flowing lines, and a lack of superfluous detail; and a bold, non-naturalistic, unbounded use of color.

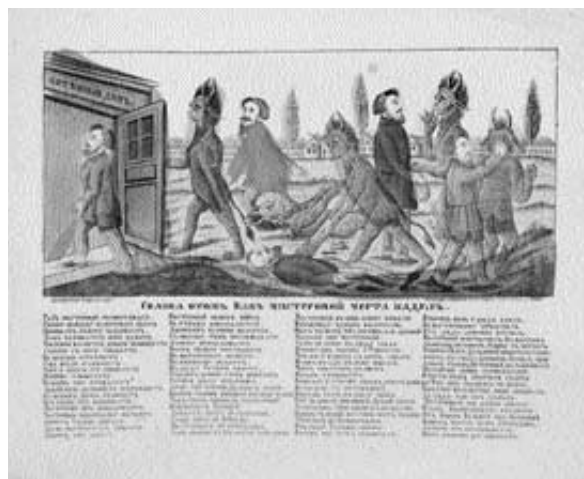


Fig. 3. *The Tale of How the Workman Fooled the Devil*. Moscow, 1882. Lithograph with watercolor and gouache additions, 6 ¹⁵/₁₆ x 14 ⁹/₁₆" (17.7 x 37 cm). The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

Lubki depict subjects ranging from saints and apostles to historical battles and heroes and images of everyday village life. Relying heavily upon folk epic, satire, puns, and anecdotes, the *lubok* is recognized for the degree to which it "'retains its primitive character and . . . ancient crudeness of taste,' in contrast to the Western orientation of professional Russian art to which Peter the Great had directed it."²³ It was precisely the vulgarity, sincerity, and popular spirit of these models to which Futurists were drawn, while artists against whom they were reacting, those associated with the World of Art, "tended to 'aestheticize' popular culture, remove 'vulgarity,' and streamline it for consumption by an elegant, educated, and sophisticated clientele."²⁴

In some instances, artists presented their own interpretations of popular *lubki*, such as Ivan Puni's childlike rendering of "Susanna and the Elders"²⁵ for *Roaring Parnassus* and Rozanova and Malevich's edition of *A Game in Hell* (p. 80), a poem that Kruchenykh admits having conceived of as "an ironic, *lubok*-inspired, parody of the archaic devil"²⁶ (fig. 3). The text in Futurist books also mirrors that of *lubki*, in which misspellings and manual corrections, such as superscript and subscript letter insertions and crossed-out words, add an extra degree of crudeness, purity, and non-refinement.

Hand-painted copies are among the most distinctive, cherished, and celebrated examples of Russian Futurist book design, and offer the clearest connection to the *lubok*. In *Neo-Primitivism*, Shevchenko identifies the "running color, i. e., color passing beyond the contour of an object," found in Old Believers' *lubki* and Russian icons as exemplary representations of movement and vitality.²⁷

Rozanova's hand-painted editions stand out as especially dynamic, innovative achievements. In her hand-colored copies of *A Little Duck's Nest . . . of Bad Words* by Kruchenykh (1913; pp. 76, 77), Rozanova "imitates no one and tackles problems which no one before her had confronted. . . . She gives the illustrations,



Fig. 4. Shaman's drum. 19th century. Leather, wood, and metal, 22½" (56 cm) diam. Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St. Petersburg



Fig. 5. Recumbent deer with bird-headed antler tines. Scythian. 5th century B.C. Gold. From Ak-Mechet, Crimea. Rendering by Lynn-Marie Kara. Original in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg



Fig. 6. Poletop in the shape of a bird's head with superimposed imagery and hanging bells. 6th century B.C. Bronze. Rendering by Lynn-Marie Kara. Original in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg

or rather the color treatment of the book, a particular role. . . . Not only the illustrations but the pages of text, too, are colored. . . . Rozanova looks for the inner, emotional interaction between color and word. . . . The 'action' of color invading the figurative fabric of the verse reconstructs the whole book 'organism' along new lines."²⁸ Rozanova further exploits color to achieve an even greater cohesion of text and illustration in *Te li le* (1914; pp. 84, 85), one of the crowning achievements of Russian Futurist book design, with its paradigmatic synthesis of painting and poetry.

In their essay "Poetic Principles," Nikolai and David Burliuk note: "In the transition from *iconographic* to *symbolic* to phonetic script we lost the *skeleton* of the language and ended up with verbal rickets. Only a deep-rooted good taste saved our copyists and painters, who embellished capital letters and inscriptions on signboards. *Often, only barbarism can save art.*"²⁹ Painted shop signs, directed at a population defined by "total (with no exaggeration) illiteracy," were considered by artists like David Burliuk to be works in which "the people's genius for painting found its only realization" with "no analogies" in Western culture.³⁰ These signs appealed to Russian Futurists for many of the same reasons that *lubki* did. Both offered a boldness of color and easily recognizable and often amusing iconography; there was a naïveté to the renderings and an imaginative relationship of text to illustration.

Artists also found inspiration in the work of children. For the cover of Elena Guro's posthumously published *Baby Camels of the Sky* (1914; p. 71), Mikhail Matiushin used a drawing by Guro's seven-year-old niece.³¹ Kruchenykh listed Zina V., a fourteen-year-old girl, as his co-author for *Piglets* (1913; p. 74); he also compiled and published a collection entitled *Actual Stories and Drawings by Children* (1914; p. 71). Il'ia Rogovin's illustrated transcription of Khlebnikov's poem "About Dostoevsky" in *Worldbackwards* (1912; pp. 68, 69), and drawings by David Burliuk, Mayakovsky, and Puni for *Roaring Parnassus* (1914; p. 71) and *Missal of the Three: A Collection of Poems and Drawings* show a clear affinity for children's art. Deliberate attempts to achieve "infantile" truth and purity were made by using a variety of unsophisticated printing methods, including a child's handheld type set,³² and printing texts replete with crossed-out words, manual corrections, misspellings, backward letters, and arbitrary capitalization.³³

Shamanic rituals and decorated objects of nomadic peoples scattered across Siberia and Central Asia provided Futurist artists with an indigenous repository of "tribal" art. The Dashkov Ethnographic Collection in Moscow was an exceptional repository of shamanic costumes, ritual objects, and documentary materials,³⁴ and shamanic dances were performed at the Union of Youth in St. Petersburg and at the Polytechnic Museum in Moscow in 1911.³⁵ Khlebnikov's "Shaman and Venus," first published in *A Trap for Judges II*, and poems by Kruchenykh influenced by shamanic chants find visual parallels in illustrations by Nikolai Kul'bin for *Exploidy* (1913; pp. 72, 73), and Larionov for

Worldbackwards (1912; pp. 68, 69) and *Half-Alive* (1913; p. 83). These drawings suggest that their artists have borrowed symbols and stylistic devices from ritual-related art and decorated objects, most notably shamanic drums (fig. 4), and horse sticks, which are central ceremonial implements in making spiritual journeys to other worlds.³⁶

Whereas primitivism in early-twentieth-century Western art manifested itself predominantly in the conventional art forms of painting, sculpture, and prints, primitivism in Russia extended nearly simultaneously into poetry and literature. The aim of Russian artists to free art from the restrictions of naturalism and common sense, and to create distinctly Russian art forms was paralleled in poetry by the efforts and aspirations of Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov. Just as Goncharova, Larionov, Rozanova, and the Burliuks seized upon the simplicity, innocence, and purity of *lubki*, icons, manuscripts, and Russian folklore, poets, too, turned to these forms, as well as to ritual language and prayers of Russian religious sectarians.

These poets and other writers sought a renewal of language from its very roots, and proclaimed their inalienable right to word creation, in "an attempt to give back to the word and image the primordial purity and immediacy they had lost. What had once been a poetic image, with time had become transformed into a verbal cliché, depleted from overuse and stripped of emotional impulses."³⁷ Their pursuit of a primeval Russian language led them to expand the scope of their retrospection to antiquity, mythology, and prehistory. As Anna Lawton notes, "Their search for the 'word as such'" propelled the Russian Futurists on a "voyage backward to a prehistoric age, where words sprouted like fragrant flowers in the virgin human soul, . . . where the word in its pristine purity created myth; and where the human being, in a prelogical state of mind, through the word discovered the universe."³⁸

In his poem "The Burial Mound of Sviatogur" (1908), Khlebnikov posed the question: "Will we forever remain mockingbirds, imitating Western songs?"³⁹ He advocated purging the Russian language of Western words, and finding replacements for them in the vocabularies of other Slavic peoples.⁴⁰ In a letter to Kruchenykh dated August 13, 1913, he wrote: "For me, the important thing is to remember that the elements of poetry are elemental forces. . . . The life of Pushkin's time and circle thought and spoke a foreign tongue, translating into Russian. As a result lots of words are missing. Others languish in the captivity of Slavic dialects."⁴¹

Kruchenykh shared Khlebnikov's dismay about the languid state of Russian language and poetry. It was precisely the desire to recover the primordialness of Russian and the elemental forces of poetry that led to Kruchenykh's landmark poem "*Dyr bul shchyl*," composed entirely of unknown words and formed from sounds unique to the Russian language.⁴² First published in *Pomade* (1913; p. 67), the poem was hailed by Kruchenykh for possessing "more of the Russian national spirit than in all of Pushkin."⁴³

In their denunciation and renouncement of Western trends and culture, Russian Futurists saw parallels between themselves and legendary figures and peoples from their country's glorious, barbaric past: Stenka [Stepan] Razin, "a renegade Cossack," who, in 1670, "summoned the masses to seize their freedom, take the land, destroy the nobility and establish self-government,"⁴⁴ and was executed for acts against the Church and for fostering a revival of paganism; and, most notably, the Scythians, indefatigable warriors on horseback cited by Herodotus for their intolerant rejection of foreign practices and beliefs.⁴⁵

In 1913 the Burliuks and their associates (Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky, Kruchenykh, and Benedikt Livshits) adopted the name Gileia for their circle. In classical history Gileia is the setting of some of the deeds of Hercules and is the name by which the ancient Greeks referred to Chernianka, an area in the Ukraine near Kherson, the Dnieper River, and the Black Sea, inhabited by Scythians in the time of antiquity and by the Burliuk family from 1907 to 1914. Larionov, Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, and Livshits all visited the Burliuks during this time, and in Livshits's opinion, it is Gileia that provided "the intersection of those co-ordinates which brought forth the movement in Russian poetry and painting called Futurism."⁴⁶

The Burliuks' home was surrounded by vast expanses of the steppes and Scythian burial mounds, ongoing excavations of which enabled the Burliuks and their guests to view Scythian art forms *in situ*, as well as in the archaeological museum of Kherson. Livshits recalls that the Burliuks worked in their studio surrounded by "Scythian jugs of bristling brushes, planes and palette-knives and brass Turkestan vessels of unknown use."⁴⁷ Since the year of their move to Chernianka in 1907, Vladimir and the Burliuks' father were involved in activities related to the study of Scythian culture.⁴⁸

The references to Scythian art, most prominent in the drawings of the Burliuks, range from the superficial and iconographic to profoundly sophisticated and informed adaptations of the central principles and devices of Scythian expression. In some instances, the illustrations are presented in the form of Scythian artifacts themselves. In drawings by Vladimir Burliuk for *Works, 1906–1908* (1914) and other publications of the period, the artist decorated the borders with a row of holes, which give the images the appearance of decorative plaques, similar to those the Scythians affixed to their clothing or their bow and arrow quivers and other objects (see fig. 5).

The depiction of forms and figures with different orientations is one of the most common devices used by Scythian artists to portray movement, a distinctive and fundamental principle of Scythian art.⁴⁹ Just as the example in fig. 5 reveals new subjects as it is rotated and viewed at different angles, the Burliuks' illustrations employ a similar lack of fixed orientation: animals and other figures are depicted upside down, at ninety-degree rotations, and running in various directions along the borders of an image.



Fig. 7. DAVID BURLIUK AND VLADIMIR BURLIUK. "Peasant and Horses," *The Croaked Moon* by David Burliuk, Nikolai Burliuk, Velimir Khlebnikov, et al. 1913. Lithograph by D. Burliuk, 7 ¹/₁₆ x 5 ¹⁵/₁₆" (19.5 x 15.1 cm). Ed.: 1,000. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation

The isolation of the animal and the depiction of only its most essential parts are other devices adopted by the Burliuks from Scythian art (see fig. 6).⁵⁰ In "Peasant and Horses" (fig. 7), an illustration for *The Croaked Moon* (1913; p. 64), David Burliuk combines the principle of rotation with the Scythians' tendency to place disparate images in dense arrangements. A drawing by Vladimir for *Milk of Mares* (1914; fig. 8), whose title itself refers to one of the most distinguishing features of Scythian culture,⁵¹ shows that he possesses not only an understanding of the prominence of the bird motif in Scythian imagery, but also an awareness of this tendency toward isolation.

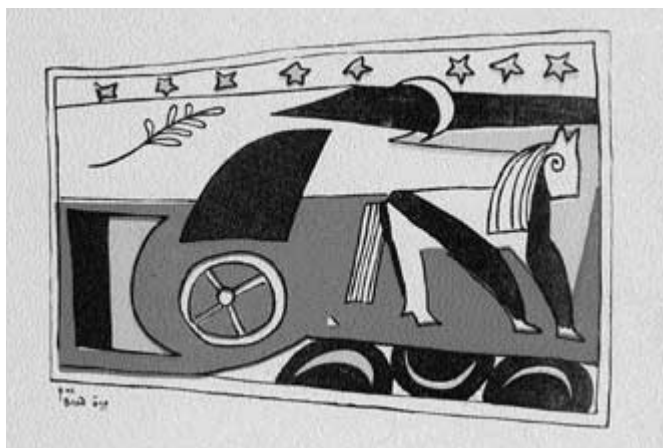
Transformation and evolution represented by the emergence of one form or figure from another are Scythian principles that the Burliuks transferred to their own works. In an illustration by David for the *First Journal of the Russian Futurists* (1914), a human face emerges from a horse's rump. In another illustration by Vladimir for the same journal (fig. 9), he adapts the Scythian practice of using one form or figure as a container for others; in this instance, when the image is turned ninety degrees clockwise, the chariotlike form becomes the eye and beak of a bird of prey. The horse's ears are transformed into the head of another animal, shown in profile.

Other artists were inspired by the structural and aesthetic properties of stone statues that stood atop Scythian burial mounds in the Ukraine. The true origins and purposes of these statues remain unknown, thereby presenting ideal models for artists and poets seeking subject matter without fixed meanings or concrete associations.⁵² "Stone maidens," found in the fields of Eurasia and Siberia and in the ethnographic museums of



Fig. 8. DAVID BURLIUK AND VLADIMIR BURLIUK. *Milk of Mares: Drawings, Verse, Prose* by David Burliuk, Nikolai Burliuk, Vasili Kamenskii, et al. 1914. Lithograph by V. Burliuk, 7 ¹/₁₆ x 4 ¹⁵/₁₆" (19.5 x 12.5 cm). Ed.: 400. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation

Fig. 9. DAVID BURLIUK, VLADIMIR BURLIUK, ALEXANDRA EXTER, AND VASILII KAMENSKII. *Futurists: First Journal of the Russian Futurists*. 1914. Lithograph (detail) by V. Burliuk, 9 7/8 x 7 1/4" (25.1 x 18.5 cm). Ed.: unknown. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation



St. Petersburg and Moscow, also served as models (fig. 10). These maidens, prominent subjects in Goncharova's early Neo-primitive paintings, also appear in the artist's illustrations for *Gardeners over the Vines* (1913; p. 87) and in *Worldbackwards*. Larionov borrowed aesthetic and structural elements from archaic sculptural forms for his drawings as well. His totemlike illustrations for *Half-Alive* and *Pomade* resemble wooden and stone idols from a range of prehistoric periods, discovered in archaeological excavations in Russia and the Ukraine in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century.⁵³

The variety of primitive forms and images to which Russian Futurists were drawn, despite their apparent differences in temporal origin or outward appearance, share two fundamental distinctions: stylistically, all are examples of pure, direct expression of the spirit and inner soul, unimpeded by academicism, scientific knowledge, or common sense; and thematically, all are images that in themselves, or in their renderings by modern artists, defy the conventions, accepted trends, and established norms of the traditional *livre d'artiste*. Although the forms were familiar to the educated observer as well as to the general public, the Futurists threw a new light on them by placing them in unconventional contexts and thus suggesting uncommon interpretations.⁵⁴

While rooted in tradition, Russian Futurists were not mired in it; national art forms merely provided Russian Futurists with a point of departure toward undiscovered and unexploited creative experiments. The novelty, dynamism, and monumentality of tradition-inspired achievements made by Rozanova and others within the medium of the illustrated book are perhaps best evidenced by the fact that *A Little Duck's Nest* and *Te li le*—both with clear and deliberate references to traditional art forms—were included in the *International Futurist Free Exhibition* at the Sprovieri Gallery in Rome in 1914⁵⁵ by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the founder of Italian Futurism, a devoted champion of modern technology and the epitome of anti-traditionalism.



Fig. 10. Idol from an excavation near Dolmatov and Akulinino, Moscow region. N.d. Stone, height approx. 12" (30.5 cm). State Historical Museum, Moscow

As Kruchenykh recalls in his memoirs, "With the wrapping and wallpaper of our first anthologies, books and declarations, we launched an attack on the extravagant tastelessness of the bourgeois[ie's] *verges* and gilded bindings, stuffed with the diseased pearls and drunken lilies of gentle little boys."⁵⁶ With pages of poor-quality paper of various sizes, weights, and colors, and text printed by lithographed handwriting, handheld type, and rubber stamps, Futurist collaborations further expressed the anti-academicism and anti-conventionalism of their creators, and issued a direct challenge to the exaggerated elegance, lavish illustrations, and premium papers of the traditional *livre d'artiste*. The book became another means by which artists and poets reclaimed art and literature from their esteemed positions and blurred the lines between "high" and "low" by re-interpreting, and expanding upon, the iconography and aesthetic principles of popular, indigenous art forms.

The extent to which Russian Futurists explored primitivism within the medium of the illustrated book, and the degree to which Futurist book design is indebted to primitivism are unparalleled among Western contemporaries of the same period. The celebration of the primacy of the primary artistic elements (color, texture, and form), the spirituality and experience of the creative process, and the tradition-inspired innovation that Russian Futurist artists and writers realized in their first five years of book design held significant implications for publications in subsequent years. Elements of traditional Russian art forms, particularly *lubki*, prevail in works of Judaica, children's books, and printed propaganda of the post-revolutionary years. Even certain books published in the 1920s and 1930s reflect the chief characteristics and creative spirit of early Futurist publications.

NOTES

- 1 William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," in Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), p. 1.
- 2 For more on primitivism in Western Europe, see Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, enl. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1986); Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gillian Perry, *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974); and Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).
- 3 Sergei Makovsky, "Golubaia Roza," *Stranitsy khudozhestvennoi kritiki*, St. Petersburg [1909], book 2, p. 147, quoted in John E. Bowlt, "Neo-primitivism and Russian Painting," *The Burlington Magazine* 116, no. 852 (Mar. 1974): 134.
- 4 Dubl'-Ve, "Vystavka sovremennykh techenii v iskusstve," *Petersburgskii listok*, April 26, 1908, p. 2; quoted in Boris M. Kalaushin, ed., *Burliuk, tsvet i rifma* (St. Petersburg: Apollon, 1995), p. 63.
- 5 A. Timofeev, "Venok," *Rul'* 8 (January 18, 1908), p. 28, quoted in Kalaushin, ed., *Burliuk*, p. 651.
- 6 Aleksandr Shevchenko, *Neo-primitivizm. Ego teoriia, ego vozmozhnosti, ego dostizheniia* (Moscow: Izd. avtora, 1913), pp. 21–22; Eng. trans. in John E. Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*, 2nd ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1988), p. 50. Similar ideas are expressed by Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger in *Du Cubisme* (Paris: E. Figuière, 1912), which appeared in Russian translation in 1913, and by Vasily Kandinsky, in "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" (1911), reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 87.
- 7 Shevchenko, *Neo-primitivizm*, p. 8.
- 8 David Burliuk, preface to *Venok* exhibition catalogue, November 1908, in Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art*, p. 11.
- 9 D[avid] Burliuk, "The 'Savages' of Russia," in Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds., *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* (Munich: R. Piper Verlag, 1912); documentary ed., Klaus Lenkheit, ed. (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 79.
- 10 Shevchenko, *Neo-primitivizm*, p. 13.
- 11 Vladimir Markov, "Printsipy novogo iskusstva" [first part], *Soiuz molodezhi* 1 (Apr. 1912): 8; Eng. trans. in Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art*, p. 27.
- 12 Through private collections and ethnographic and archaeological museums in Moscow and St. Petersburg, Russian artists knew art forms from a multitude of cultures from around the world. The collection of Peter the Great in St. Petersburg and the Dashkov Ethnographic Collection of the Rumiantsev Museum in Moscow had tens of thousands of objects and artworks acquired through expeditions and donations. The sketchbooks of Olga Rozanova document her visits to these collections: "[There are drawings of] Scythian stone statues, . . . Tungusian shamans, wooden Enisei and North American idols, fragments of Buddhist icons, and Egyptian motifs, all provided with meticulous explanatory notes" (Nina Gurianova, *Exploring Color: Olga Rozanova and the Early Russian Avant-Garde, 1910–1918* (Amsterdam: G & B Arts International, 2000), p. 19.
- 13 Evgenii Kovtun, "Experiments in Book Design by Russian Artists," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 5 (summer 1987): 51.
- 14 A. Kruchenykh and V. Khlebnikov, "Bukva kak takovaiia" ["The Letter as Such"], 1913, in A. Kruchenykh, ed., *Neizdannyi Khlebnikov* (Moscow: Izd. gruppy družei Khlebnikova, 1930), vol. 18, p. 7.
- 15 D. Burliuk, E. Guro, N. Burliuk, V. Mayakovsky, K. Nizen, V. Khlebnikov, B. Livshits, and A. Kruchenykh, untitled manifesto, *A Trap for Judges II* (St. Petersburg: Zhuravl', 1913), n.p.
- 16 N. and D. Burliuk, "Poeticheskii nachala," *Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov*, no. 12 (1914): 82.
- 17 The reference to the *Izbornik Sviatoslava* of 1073 is noted by A. E. Parnis in his essay, "O metamorfozakh, olenia, i voina. K probleme dialoga Khlebnikova i Filonova," in Parnis, ed., *Mir Velimira Khlebnikova: Stati issledovaniia 1911–1998* (Moscow: Iazyk russkoi kultury, 2000), p. 645.
- 18 See examples in G. I. Vzdornov, *Iskusstvo knigi v Drevnei Rusi: Rukopisnaia kniga Severo-Vostochnoi Rusi XII-nachala XV vekov* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1980), cat. no. 108 and others.
- 19 N. I. Khardzhiev, "Pamiati Natalii Goncharovoi (1881–1962) i Mikhaila Larionova (1881–1964)," *Iskusstvo knigi* 5 (1968), reprinted in Khardzhiev, *Stati ob avangarde*, edited by V. Rakitin and A. Sarabianov (Moscow: Arkhiv russkogo avangarda, 1997), vol. 1, p. 220.
- 20 Notes of the January 31, 1914, session of the Petersburg Commission on Printing Affairs (quoted in G[leb] Iu. Ershov, "Knizhnaia grafika P. N. Filonova," *Russkaia i zarubezhnaia grafika v fondakh Gosudarstvennoi Publichnoi biblioteki im. M. E. Saltykova-Shchedrina: sbornik nauchnykh tudov*, comp. and edited by E. V. Barkhatova [Leningrad: Gosudarstvennaia Publichnaia biblioteka imeni M. E. Saltykova-Shchedrina, 1991], p. 65).
- 21 Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Nash vykhod. K istorii russkogo futurizma*, edited by R. Duganov (Moscow: RA, 1996), p. 84.
- 22 Also commonly translated as *Jottings of the Futurist Sergei Podgaevskii*, the translation used here was suggested in conversation with Nina Gurianova, who recognized the word *pysanka* as the Ukrainian word for Easter egg, and which is entirely logical in view of the book's thematic content and visual elements.

- 23 I. Snegirev, "O prostonarodnykh izobrazheniakh," *Trudy Obshchestva Liubitelei Rossiiskoi slavenosti pri Moskovskom Universitete*, chap. 4 (Moscow, 1824), p. 126; quoted in Alla Sytova, *The Lubok: Russian Folk Pictures 17th to 19th Century* (Leningrad: Aurora, c. 1984), p. 10.
- 24 John E. Bowlit, "A Brazen Can-Can in the Temple of Art: The Russian Avant-Garde and Popular Culture," in Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, eds., *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High and Low* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 136.
- 25 Several variants of a *lubok* of the same name are in *Russkiiia narodnyia kartinki. Sobral i opisal D. A. Rovinskii. Posmertnyi trud. pechatan pod nabludeniem N. P. Sovko* (St. Petersburg: Izd. P. Golike, 1900), cat. nos. 841–43.
- 26 Kruchenykh, *Nash vykhod*, p. 50.
- 27 Shevchenko, *Neoprimitivizm*, pp. 25–26; Eng. trans. in Bowlit, ed., *Russian Art*, p. 52.
- 28 Kovtun, "Experiments in Book Design," pp. 53–54.
- 29 N. and D. Burluik, "Poeticheskiia nachala," p. 82; Eng. trans. in Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 83.
- 30 David Burluik, "On Cottage-Craft in Art," *Moscow Gazette*, February 25, 1913; reprinted in Alla Povelikhina and Yeygeny Kovtun, *Russian Printed Shop Signs and Avant-Garde Artists* (Leningrad: Aurora, 1991), p. 186.
- 31 Mikhail Matiushin, "Russkie kubofuturisty. Vospominaniia Mikhaila Matiushina," in Khardzhiev, *Stati ob avangarde*, vol. 1, p. 159.
- 32 Vladimir Poliakov, *Knigi russkikh kubofuturizma* (Moscow: Gileia, 1998), p. 243.
- 33 The interest of Russian Futurist artists and poets in children's art is discussed at length in Gleb Pospelov, "Larionov and Children's Drawings," and Yuri Molok, "Children's Drawing in Russian Futurism," in Jonathan Fineberg, ed., *Discovering Child Art: Essays on Childhood, Primitivism, and Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- 34 See *Piatidesiatiletie Rumianskago Muzeia v Moskve, 1862–1912* (Moscow, 1913), p. 174.
- 35 Anthony Parton, *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 102.
- 36 For a discussion of the influence of these rituals and objects on Kandinsky's art, see Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 77. Anthony Parton draws a direct connection between Buryat mythology and iconography and Larionov's book graphics, noting that Larionov himself owned an original Buryat drawing (see Parton, *Mikhail Larionov*, pp. 96–112).
- 37 Kovtun, "Experiments in Book Design," p. 47.
- 38 Lawton and Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism*, p. 18.
- 39 Velimir Khlebnikov, "The Burial Mound of Sviatogur" in Charlotte Douglas, ed., *Collected Works of Velimir Khlebnikov, Vol. I: Letters and Theoretical Writings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 233.
- 40 See Khlebnikov's letter to Kruchenykh, early 1913, reprinted in *ibid.*, p. 73.
- 41 Cited in *ibid.*, p. 82.
- 42 A. Kruchenykh, unpublished writing, 1959, quoted in N. I. Khardzhiev, "Sud'ba Kruchenykh," *Svantevit: Dansk Tidkrift for Slavistik*, 1975; reprinted in Khardzhiev, *Stati ob avangarde*, vol. 1, p. 301.
- 43 A. Kruchenykh and V. Khlebnikov, *Slovo kak takovoe* (Moscow, 1913), p. 9.
- 44 Frank M. Bartholomew, "The Russian Utopia," in E. D. S. Sullivan, ed., *The Utopian Vision: Seven Essays on the Quincentennial of Sir Thomas More* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1983), p. 74.
- 45 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt. Rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1996), book IV, p. 239.
- 46 Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer* [1933], trans. by John E. Bowlit (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1977), pp. 58–59.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 48 Between 1907 and 1911 David and Vladimir Burluik took part in excavating nearly fifty tombs in the Crimea (Katherine S. Dreier, *Burluik* [New York: The Société Anonyme, 1944], pp. 49–50). See also Ekaterina Bobrinskaia, "Skifstvo'v russkoi kulture nachala XX veka i skifskaiia tema u russkikh futuristov," in Bobrinskaia, *Rannii russkii avangard v kontekste filosofskoi i khudozhestvennoi kultury rubezha vekov: ocherki* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi institut iskusstvovedeniia, 1999), p. 200, n. 129.
- 49 Ellen Reeder, "Scythian Art," in Reeder, ed., *Scythian Gold: Treasures from Ancient Ukraine* (Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1999), p. 43.
- 50 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 51 Herodotus, *The Histories*, book IV, p. 217.
- 52 In this regard, the appeal that Scythian statues held for the Russian avant-garde is similar to the impact that African art had on the French Cubists. See Jack Flam, "Matisse and the Fauves," in Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, p. 212.
- 53 See *Avant les Scythes; prehistoire de l'art en U.R.S.S.* (Paris: Editions de la réunion des musées nationaux, 1979) for examples of prehistoric figures and petroglyphs found in Odessa and surrounding areas between 1900 and 1910 whose forms resemble Larionov's.
- 54 Aleksei Kruchenykh, "Novye puti slova," reprinted in Vladimir Markov, ed., *Manifesty i programmy russkikh futuristov* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1967), p. 72.
- 55 See "Esposizione Libera Futurista Internazionale," in Donald E. Gordon, *Modern Art Exhibitions, 1900–1916* (Munich: Prestel, 1974), vol. 2, p. 813.
- 56 Kruchenykh, *Nash vykhod*, p. 94.