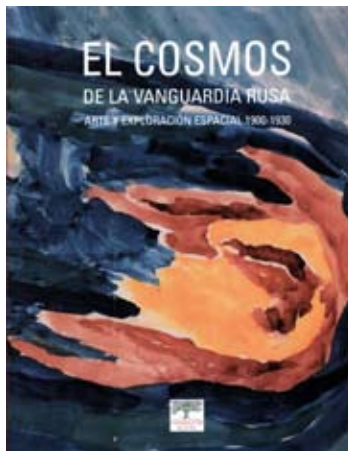


Catalogue Reviews



THE COSMOS OF THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE: Art and Space Exploration, 1900-1930
John E. Bowlt, Nicoletta Misler, Maria Tsantsanoglou, Editors
State Museum of Contemporary Art Costakis Collection,
Thessaloniki £30.65 / 35€ / \$48.32
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EL COSMOS DE LA VANGUARDIA RUSA
Arte y Exploración Espacial 1900-1930
John E. Bowlt, Nicoletta Misler, Maria Tsantsanoglou, Editors
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“In the 1910s and 1920s the popular press ran countless articles on space, space flight, extra-terrestrial life, physical trajectories, eclipses and so on, stimulated, no doubt, by the intermittent triumphs of the first Russian airplane builders, pilots and aerodynamicists”, write the curators of this exhibition, John E. Bowlt, Nicoletta Misler and Maria Tsantsanoglou. That a consequent fascination with the high frontier fired the imaginations of Russian Avant-Garde artists is confirmed by the diverse exhibits selected for these two exhibitions.

Directly related to flight are works such as Vladimir Tatlin’s *Letatlin*, while Solomon Nikritin, among others, depicted flying machines such as balloons and dirigible airships. There is also the reconstruction of Friedrich Tsander’s, “Airplane-Rocket” – and, of course, there are paintings of pilots by Alexei Morgunov and Kazimir Malevich. Gustav Klutskis’s structures are inspired by machines for accessing outer space, Mikhail Plaskin’s paintings represent planetary siting instruments, and there are Nikritin’s drawings of observation instruments such as telescopes pointed at a celestial body, complemented by depictions of cosmic phenomena such as an eclipse. Aleksandr Rodchenko also used eclipse phenomena but now as underlying structures for his *Concentration of Colour* series of 1918, and Kazimir Malevich took the eclipse as the source for his

backdrops for *Victory Over the Sun* of 1913. (See P. Railing and C. Wallis, “Journey in Space-Time in the Vehicle of Destiny” in A. Kruchenykh, *Victory Over the Sun*. Translated by Evgeny Steiner, Editor, P. Railing. Artists.Bookworks, 2009.) Artists such as Ivan Kudriashev represented comets, but none of Rodchenko’s comet paintings are included in the exhibitions. Then there are imaginations of vehicles for space travel such as those by Georgii Kritikov, or of space cities by Klutskis in his series of the *Dynamic City*, later renamed *Project for a City of the Future*.

These are direct artistic responses to the technological aspects of cosmic phenomena and travel to outer space. The other side of the exhibition captures ways in which the human being would experience outer space, whether abstractly as in Nikritin’s *Spirals*, or figuratively as in Konstantin Yuon’s *People of the Future*, winged human beings flying over a landscape, or in the symbolist cloudscapes and paintings of enlivened nature by the Amaravella spiritualist painters.

Both of these aspects are found in the more recent visionary works of Francisco Infante on display, but on another note, the exhibition included a number of posters of the 1920s and 1930s advertising science fiction films whose action took place in airships or on Mars.

Although basically the same exhibition drawn from the Costakis Collection in the State Museum for Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, the Botin Foundation venue was augmented by a number of works from museums in Russia. Thus were added Natalia Goncharova's "Space" paintings of the 1950s, and a rare painting by Mikhail Plaskin, for example. Also in *El Cosmos* were a number of Suprematist drawings and paintings by Kazimir Malevich from Swiss collections as well as Black Circle from the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

The catalogue articles address the two poles of the exhibition. All manner of inventions to explore space and to enter outer space are tracked in "Engines of the Russian Cosmos" by John E. Bowl, Nicoletta Misler and Maria Tsantsanoglou, the curators and the editors of the catalogue. The early history of space exploration is developed on aspects of the 1927 Moscow First International Exhibition of Projects and Models of Interplanetary Apparatuses, Mechanisms, Devices and Historical Materials. The curators' text, together with those of Jim Dimitroff, "Bridge-Builders to the Russian Cosmos: Vasili Kamensky and Igor Sikorsky", and Mike Grutman, "The Road to Space", provide excellent introductions to the sciences and the fascination with flying in early 20th century Russia, with some references to the airplane in the work of Rodchenko and Olga Rozanova, for example, in the article by Dimitroff.

The realm of human consciousness of the cosmos is introduced in the curators' article to be demonstrated in the work of several groups of artists, including the little-known Amaravella painters of the 1920s in "The Universe According Amaravella: Birth and Death of a Meteorite" by Adele Di Ruocco. Ekaterina Bobrinskaia, "On the Threshold of the Cosmos: The Instinct of Lightness and Cosmic Consciousness", develops the theme of cosmic consciousness with an emphasis on how it is found in Russian literature, and draws especially on the psychology of flying and falling in the more recent writings of Gaston Bachelard. She also introduces aspects of Theosophical literature, although this would have been fundamental in Russia as it enjoyed wide popularity from the end of the 19th century. It is the Futurist and Suprematist imagination of the transformation of consciousness that is the subject of Angeliki Charistou's, "Universal Troop of Sun Catchers", a transformation that peaks with Aleksei Kruchenykh's *Victory Over the Sun* and will lead to the idea of a Suprematist city and Malevich's *Arkhitktons*, with Aleksandra Shatskikh giving a picture of "The Suprematist Cosmism of Kazimir Malevich" in her development of his Suprematist painting.

It was certainly the mission of the Futurist poets to propose new ways of thinking – and they were also inspired by Ouspensky – and a Suprematist universe was imagined by Malevich, El Lissitzky, and their Vitebsk students as the

realisation of a revitalised consciousness that was formed by a higher consciousness, a consciousness of space and time. Through concrete works of art, Suprematism inspired the mind and trained the mind, especially in the works of El Lissitzky. This is where the real substance of art and science meet in cosmic consciousness. To this should be added that the VKhUTEMAS work of students investigating light – Kliment Redko, Solomon Nikritin, Alexander Tyshler, S. Luchishkin, Mikhail Plaskin and Ivan Kudriashev – were major contributors to artistic depictions of space through the exploration of light and cosmic light phenomena. Although several of the painters were included in the exhibitions, as were two of their teachers, Aleksandr Rodchanko and Ivan Kliun, this one and only path to the cosmos, both in fact and in mind, was not considered in the catalogue articles.

It is the wide-ranging introduction to scientific enquiries and inventions of the early 20th century that make an important contribution to the art history of the Russian avant-gardes. They create the context of what artists were discovering in their own time, made even more susceptible to it by the corollary, new world views being presented by Theosophical and other spiritual writers.

The works were chosen to demonstrate a selection of ways in which artists were responding to this scientific context which, by the way, were among the reasons that art became abstract in early 20th century Russia.

Patricia Railing

Venues

Marcelino Botin Foundation, Santander, Spain

24 June-19 September 2010

State Museum of Contemporary Art – Costakis Collection,
Thessaloniki, Greece

11 December 2010-27 March 2011



KANDINSKY AND THE HARMONY OF SILENCE *Painting with White Border*

Elsa Smithgall, Editor

The Phillips Collection, Washington D.C. and the

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, N.Y.

Yale University Press 2011 / £28 / € - = / \$45

135 pp Many col. illus.

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The Phillips Collection in Washington D. C. holds Kandinsky's 1913 *Sketch I for Painting with White Border*, while the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York holds the final version, *Painting with White Border*, completed in May 1913.

This provided the two museums with an opportunity to explore two kinds of investigations and comparisons of the paintings. The first is art historical and the second is scientific, an article on the former opening the catalogue and one on the second closing it. Between these texts is a collection of drawings, watercolours and paintings by Kandinsky that record stages of the artist's creative process (or later reflections on it), and includes *Sketch II for Painting with White Border*, lent by the Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. There are also works that are related iconographically to *Painting with White Border* and an additional section, "Comparative Works" closes this pictorial essay.

The art historical text, "Undreamt Possibilities", is by Phillips Collection curator, Elsa Smithgall, who presents the context of the generation of *Painting with White Border* as it was indicated by Kandinsky himself: it is "Moscow". The various stages from drawings to watercolours to oil sketches reveal the many moments in working out the relationship between the artist's feeling-reaction to something – the three-horse sled, the troika, gliding along the city's streets, the Moscow skyline, the colours, the awareness of an aura of St. George, the city's patron saint – and their translation into three lines, into hill-like shapes, into the thrust of a lance-like line through the composition, and so on. Times of day, from twilight to daylight, are also part of Kandinsky's experiences of Moscow. Smithgall has integrated iconography and artistic metamorphosis in this subtle and insightful article.

The scientific essay entitled, "Side by Side: The Technical Investigation of *Sketch I for Painting with White Border* and *Painting with White Border*", is by Elizabeth Steele, Gillian McMillan, Narayan Khandekar, and Erin Mysak of the Phillips Collection, the Guggenheim Museum, and Harvard University.

Described as being a "collaborative research project" between conservators and curators, the four scientists outline the various procedures in their analysis of the two paintings.

The study begins with a description of what is found on the back of the canvas – Kandinsky's title "Moscow" with his signature and the date "(1913)" on Sketch 1 – followed by "direct observation" of the front of the two paintings using raking light, a view from the side to capture the nature of the relief of pigment application. Infrared imaging reveals the composition of the ground while X-rays penetrate to the under layers. These instruments expose Kandinsky's working methods and how he shifted, technically, from a composition in twilight to one in daylight – from a dark ground to a light ground.

The authors discuss the pigments found in eleven samples taken from the two paintings, the information also provided in two Tables for easy reference. What is revealed is the extreme richness of Kandinsky's palette and how he exploited a full range of pigments from saturated colours to light and dark.

However interesting, this article is but a brief introduction to the much wider study of Kandinsky's use of pigments and their combinations. To this must be added the interpretation the art historian can give it. Because Kandinsky used colours as visual expressions of feelings, so his choice of pigments would have been influenced by their own inner content. He would not have used a "heavy" pigment to express a feeling of lightness.

So although the meaning to be drawn from the scientific findings is yet to be investigated, the exhibition and its catalogue about Kandinsky's *Painting with White Border* are contributing to a new trend in art historical research and exhibitions: the interaction between the art historian and the scientist to reveal the pictorial and the ways of achieving it.

Patricia Railing

KANDINSKY AND THE HARMONY OF SILENCE:

Painting with White Border

The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

11 June-4 September 2011

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

21 October 2011-15 January 2012