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Handicraft Revolution: Ukrainian Avant-Garde Embroidery and Meaning of History

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Handcrafting revolution: Ukrainian avant-garde embroidery and the meanings of history

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Kazimir Malevich
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Abstract

This article investigates the point when craft revival and avant-garde innovations merged to create objects that combined traditional peasant skills with innovative Suprematist compositions. The peasant craft revival in the Ukraine, which has been little studied thus far, aimed to raise the national consciousness of the local population and to preserve the disappearing handicrafts. Several avant-garde women artists, such as Natalia Daydova, Alexandra Exter and Evgenia Pribyl'skaia, headed the craft revival workshops. The Suprematist embroidery created in these workshops was a combination of many layers of historical meaning, from the reduction of formal artistic elements to the technical complexities of the embroidery, wherein one layer was topped by another to create a textured three-dimensional effect. Created during the period between the two revolutions and on the verge of World War I, when Russians and especially Ukrainians were attempting to negotiate and define their national identity, the question arises as to how these objects can illuminate the

artists' and the workers' understanding of that period. How could participation in the workshops and the design work enrich and/or change the experience of the artists and the workers? This article analyses the processes and meanings of craft production and consumption to explain the complex relationship between artists and craftspeople, between handicraft revival and avant-garde practice.

Introduction

One of the effects of the Russian Empire's industrialization was an attempt by the cultural elite to preserve the traditional ways of life of the countryside. In this context, the production of handicrafts was seen as one of the main means of keeping the peasants in the villages where they were rooted originally, as well as a means of creating objects that merged traditional motifs with modern fashions. Starting from the 1880s, the Russian aristocracy established schools and workshops that encouraged local peasants to practice handicrafts, for example, embroidery, woodcarving and lacemaking, along with less artistically inclined work such as woodworking and metalsmithing. In the early twentieth century, craft revival workshops in the Russian Empire became a widespread phenomenon that was supported by both local nobility and centralized governmental organizations. In the Ukraine, the first revival efforts were undertaken by the Poltava Zemstvo[1] organization in the Poltava area in central eastern Ukraine. The revivalist efforts soon spread, and the main centralized body that was in charge of all the craft revival and revitalization activities, the Kiev Kustar Society, was established. Similar to other areas in Russia, the peasant craft revival movement consisted of two intertwined phenomena: private workshops founded by nobility and often led by professionally trained artists and numerous single *kustari*[2] who benefited from assistance in providing the materials, and the selling of the final products of social organizations such as the Poltava Zemstvo and the Kiev Kustar Society.

The case study that will be discussed in this article took place during exceptional circumstances right before and after the Russian Revolution when not only the political order was crumbling but also life as it was known until then. Observers of contemporary crafts will notice many similarities to the state of affairs of contemporary craft communities, where the relationship between designers and makers and the privileging of the former has been and remains at the forefront of the craft debate. This parallels the relationship between workers and artisans of the workshops of the Ukrainian craft revival and the objects they make. In order to succeed, artists and artisans also have to negotiate the market forces to create objects that relate to contemporary life and fashion. This story of the Ukrainian craft revival seeks to demonstrate how the influence of cutting-edge avant-garde art became beneficial for traditional craft production. When discussing craft revival, it is important to note the differences in language used when describing participants of the workshops. For the purposes of clarity, 'artists' in this article will denote those who had a formal or informal artistic education and who practiced art and design outside of the revival workshops. 'Artisans' then are

1. *Zemstvo* in Tsarist Russia was an elective provincial or district assembly established in most provinces of Russia by Alexander II in 1864 as part of his reform policy.

2. *Kustar* (singular) and *Kustari* (plural) are craftspeople who worked in individual or family workshops in the countryside across Russia. The word kustar is used here instead of the English term 'craftsperson' or 'artisan' to signify the slightly different meaning and roles that *kustari* played. Unlike artisans or craftspersons, *kustari* could perform any work from carpentry to making nails, from lacemaking to barrel construction. Thus, the sheer number of these people, who lived in the countryside providing various services to peasants and who remained with no means of earning a living after the peasantry started migrating to the cities, represented a threat to the political situation in Russia and the Ukraine.

craftspeople who worked in the workshops or had small independent craft practices. 'Designers' are artists who designed for workshops and thus took on the role of designers while also being artists. Finally, 'workers' are those who participated in the various craft productions, and thus the term is used interchangeably with the terms 'artisans' and 'craftspeople'.

Ukaranian avant-garde and formation of national identity

One of the key factors in the Ukrainian craft revival was that some of the members of the nobility in the Ukraine and the professional artists who led the workshops were also affiliated with cultural avant-garde circles. For example, Alexandra Exter, one of the leading artistic connections between French and Ukrainian modernism, worked in the Verbovka peasant revival workshop and designed numerous abstract compositions that were embroidered by the peasants. The process of the merging of traditional techniques and innovative design culminated when a large group of Russian and Ukrainian artists mounted an exhibition of decorative art. The show, which opened on 15 November 1915 at the Gallery Lemersier in Moscow, exhibited Suprematist art side-by-side with more traditional designs created in the Ukrainian craft revitalization workshops: the most daring colour and line experimentation embroidered on fabric. Thus, the exhibition succinctly showcased the modernization of craft production from traditional motives to abstract compositions. More so than any other medium, craft allowed for blurring of old and new and for impregnating tradition with innovation.

Between 1910 and 1917, professional and amateur artists developed decidedly abstract embroidery styles (Figure 1). Some of these compositions, created by now well-known leaders of the Ukrainian and Russian avant-garde such as Ivan Puni, Kazimir Malevich and Olga Rozanova, were non-representational, Suprematist compositions that together with these artists' works on canvas and graphic compositions proclaimed at least on the surface a break with the past and a desire to create art for the future. Yet this total break with the past was not as simple and straightforward as some artists imagined. Paradoxically, while trying to finish with the old, these artists were still interested in the pre-industrial, traditional arts and techniques.

The generation of Russian artists that grew up in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century experienced firsthand what Benjamin terms the 'crisis of perception' (1973: 132). Leslie aptly discusses the pace and emotions that came with the increasing modernization of life:

> The techno-frenzy of the First World War was made possible by the nineteenth-century technological advance, and that war marks for Benjamin a re-editing of experience. From factory to battlefield the experience of shock, physical and psychic, constitutes the norm. […] The division of labour completes a mechanical measure of labour time, the voided, homogeneous time of manufactures.
>
> (1998: 7)

Figure 1: Alexandra Exter, Women Theatre Bag*, Silk Embroidery, Verbovka, 1915, © Russian Museum Peterburg.*

Kazimir Malevich, remembering his childhood encounters with the factory system in which his father worked, described a remarkably similar scenario:

> The area of the factory was like some kind of fortification, where people worked day and night. These people were tamed by the calling of the factory bells. In the factories people were chained to the machine or an apparatus sometimes twelve hours, in the smoke, in the gas pollution ….
>
> (1988: 7)

Along with recalling the negative connotations of factories, Malevich also remembered the work and the life of peasants who were free to wake up and go to bed with the sun, who in winters could weave and sew: 'Young women sewed and embroidered, sang songs, danced; young men played on violins' (1988: 25). Naturally, young budding artist Malevich identified with the peasantry, for whom 'the hand – so crucial for the *Handwerker* (artisan or craftsman) – is made redundant by technological advance' (Leslie 1998: 7). In the case of craft production under scrutiny, the hand becomes doubly important since it is the handiwork of sketching and embroidery that creates the final product. Malevich also remembers that his mother liked to embroider and make *merezhka* (drawn needlework).[3] He learned this art from her, as well as sewing and crocheting. Other avant-garde artists had similar familial circumstances; no wonder then that along with the images of peasants on the canvases, the artists also turned to craft production.

In the context of the pre- and post-revolution Russian Empire and especially the Ukraine, craft and design objects became the vessels of the new ideology. The goal of the creators was to change and integrate reality to create a different present. As Angelica Völker argues, unlike William Morris, Henry van de Velde or Varvara Stepanova, Alexandre Rodchenko 'saw a way towards an ideal human condition in abolishing art in its autonomous, aloof form and making it part and parcel of life' (Noever 1991: 23). By around 1921, many of the avant-garde artists who remained in the Soviet Union 'gave up painting and dedicated themselves exclusively to "production art"' (Noever 1991: 25). Yet, this proved to be mostly a theoretical aspiration even in the democratic Soviet Union of the 1920s. Stepanova, for example, lamented the small role that artists could play in the textile industry. According to her, artists could only work 'in the sphere of decoration, applying decorative patterns to existing materials'; they were never involved in 'developing new dyeing methods and new fabric textures, or in inventing new textile materials' (Noever 1991). To underscore the connection between artist and craftsperson, Stepanova comes to the somewhat unexpected conclusion that in spite of being involved in highly industrialized production processes, 'he still has all the hallmarks of the craftsman'. Thus, the artist's involvement in the industrial production is somewhat redundant, and he is 'of little importance for the textile industry' (Noever 1991: 25). While Stepanova reflected

3. Drawn-work is a decoration on cloth made by drawing out threads according to a pattern.

on the role of the artist in industrialized society, her observations can be applied similarly to the above-mentioned workshops. The role of the artist and the craftsperson is seen by Stepanova as auxiliary to that of those who execute the design, who develop new means of production, and, more importantly, to those who determined what the market needed at this point.

This study looks at the emergence of the craft revival movement in the Ukraine and how the traditional techniques and motives were incorporated into the impetus for political and cultural changes.

The first southern Russian exhibition: Nationalism on display

Preparations for the first southern Russian Kustar exhibition started in April 1905 with the application for a permit from the Kiev city administration and the founding of an exhibition committee consisting of local aristocracy and craft revival enthusiasts. While the exhibition was primarily to include examples of traditional peasant art that could be used for the future development of *kustar* industries, it was also to include examples of Ukrainian *kustar* goods already produced throughout the area. In order to collect the artefacts, members of the committee had to travel to different parts of the Ukraine, which enabled them to familiarize themselves with the state of craft production in the country. According to a report compiled after the exhibition, by the end of 1905, most objects, approximately 6000 in total, were in the museum, and the preparation for public display had started.

The exhibition opened on 19 February 1906, including the two planned sections. The *kustar* section took up the entire main floor and included embroidery, textiles, ceramics and weaving (Figure 2). Another room on the upper floor was dedicated to 5000 artefacts from Poltava *zemstvo*. Four other rooms on the upper floor were devoted to historical artefacts or, as they were called by the organizers, samples. The first of the four chambers predominantly displayed Russian embroidery from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The same area also included a recreation of a room in a wealthy Ukrainian peasant house; the sketches for this display were created by Ukrainian avant-garde artist Alexandra Exter. Janice Helland agrees with Annie Coombes that the 'mock villages' built for national and international exhibitions effectively constructed 'a feeling of geographical proximity, while the sense of "spectacle" was calculated to preserve the cultural divide' (Coombes 1988: 59, quoted in Helland 2002: 1).

Representation of Ukrainian crafts

It is appropriate to ask here just how these artefacts, presented as part of the discourse of forging national consciousness, helped to interpret and create the history of 'we' rather than the histories of 'them' and 'us'. More importantly, there is the question of how these works were represented as

Figure 2: Detail of display of Kiev Museum of Art, Industry and Science*, 1906. Photograph by Ivan Puchin. © Courtesy of Kiev State Library and Archive.*

vessels that promoted and preserved the idea of national independent identity. Biliashivsky, who by the second decade of the twentieth century had been recognized as one of the leading ethnographers of Ukrainian culture, wrote in the special Russian issue of the British art journal *Studio*:

> This process is not, however, yet completed, and the life of the Ukrainian peasant is still preserving much of what is very individual, highly artistic, and strongly characteristic of the spiritual personality of the Ukrainian race. There are still many possibilities of the study of this art, and for making observations on it as on a living thing and one necessary in household life.
>
> (1912b: 15)

In addition to these remarks on threats to traditional life, which were and are familiar to craft historians, Biliashivsky also attempted to show a clear difference between Russian and Ukrainian styles. He mentioned, for example, that there is a sharp contrast in the planning and decoration of houses in the Ukraine and in Russia. The style of the decorative murals and interior furnishings was normally closer to south-western examples than to north-eastern ones. While Ukrainian peasants created ornaments that included plants and natural curvilinear lines, Russian ornamentation tended to include geometrical forms, animals and architectural motifs. Biliashivsky continues, 'The artistic production of the Ukrainian peasant present a special attraction for the student, as the only surviving remnant of the whole national Ukrainian art which flourished vigorously in former times in all classes of the "Little Russian" community' (Biliashivsky 1912a: 15–31). Interestingly, Biliashivsky notes that what was considered peasant or 'folk' art in early twentieth-century Ukraine was at the time not invented by the peasants but rather preserved by them. Hence, another layer of history comes into the discussion: a trace of the Ukraine of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the country was fighting for its independence. The Ukrainian peasantry at the beginning of the twentieth century was not viewed as naturally gifted in the creative decoration of their lives. Peasants were instead seen as interpreters and conservators of the most prolific years of the Ukrainian nation.

The above-mentioned volume of *Studio* also included information on how the peasant arts were practiced and how peasants lived in 1912. As late as in 1912, the Ukrainian chapter included very little on the *kustar* production; the volume showcased real people and their surroundings rather than what they produced in the revival workshops. The images in the Ukrainian section, as claimed by the authors, were not staged, while the parts discussing Russian craft production mainly included objects produced in the *kustar* workshops that were demonstrated by professional models. The subtle message that was given to the international audience was that the Ukraine had preserved its national characteristics. Unlike in her larger neighbour and colonizer, these characteristics were still alive among its people.

The display in the first southern Russian exhibition presented crafts, indigenous or otherwise, stripped of exotic connotations and made appropriate for execution at home. This was fundamentally different from the publication *Studio* and the representation of the Ukrainian culture at World Fairs (e.g. Paris World Fair of 1900) and catalogues affiliated with those fairs. Aimed at an international audience, in these publications and fairs, crafts were presented by foreigners to provide the audience with the illusion of visiting other cultures. For the purposes of revitalization of the crafts it was most important for the first southern Russian exhibition to underscore the familiarity of its exhibits to the producers and potential consumers alike. The crafts were represented as part of the Ukraine's forgotten visual language of the last two centuries, as a result of which they required some visual reminders.

The display juxtaposed the idea of scientific preservation with the representation of the emotional comfort and warmth that was traditionally associated with handicraft production. The second room showcased the material culture of the Kiev *gubernia*, displaying embroidered towels, handkerchiefs, blouses, ceramics and *pysanky*.[4] The third room housed products from Volynskaia and Podol'skaia *gubernias*[5] and from Galicia. A separate area was dedicated to paintings and photographs documenting Ukrainian ethnography (Anon 1907: 9). The fourth room mostly showcased antiques from Poltava *gubernia*: tapestries, towels, embroidery, *plakhtas*[6], antique *naboika*[7] and boards to produce *naboika*, painted wooden utensils, woodcarvings and ceramics.

After the exhibition closed, the museum purchased almost all the antique artefacts, which became the focus of its ethnographical department. This collection was intended to fulfil two goals: first, to preserve historical examples of craft, and second, to disseminate the motifs, techniques and the samples themselves to other craft practitioners and to a general audience. In other words, the organizers tried to create a collection that connected the past and the present. In the words of Olga Rozanova, 'Every moment of the present is unlike any moment of the past, and moments of the future bear within them inexhaustible opportunities for new discoveries' (1913: 15). The result of this exhibition was the merger of the varied identifiers of tradition and innovation.

Verbovka and Skoptsy textile workshops

This interplay of tradition and innovation manifested itself particularly clearly in the activities of two embroidery workshops. The first one was Verbovka, which was organized and led by an artist and designer, Natalia Davydova, in 1900. The village and surrounding estate belonged to Natalya's husband Dmitry L'vovich Davydov (1870–1929), grandson of the Decembrist Denis Davydov and one of the two favourite nephews of Tchaikovsky.[8] Davydova was not only highly involved in the revival movement, but was also a great hostess of intellectually charged social evenings. Visitors to Verbovka remembered her as 'beautiful, serious, interesting, and musical – a socialite in the real

4. *Pysanka* is a traditional technique of decorating Easter eggs with ornaments drawn with coloured beeswax.
5. *Gubernia* in Imperial Russia can be seen as equivalent to contemporary provinces in Canada or the states in the United States. *Gubernias* had their own autonomous administration presided over by the *gubernator*.
6. *Plakhta* is a traditional Ukrainian women's skirt made from two pieces of fabric sewn together, which women wrapped around their waist.
7. *Naboika* is a printed fabric that was made by pressing carved wooden boards on fabric.
8. Decembrists were members of the uprising against the Tsar that took place on 14 December 1825. Dmitry's wife, Natalia Mikhailovka Davydova (1875–1933) was from the well-known Ukrainian family of Gudim-Levkovich. A few members of the family were patrons of the arts and active participants in the revitalization of peasant handicraft.

meaning of the word' (Guseinov 2002: 106). Although hardly any of her art can be traced now, Davydova was an accomplished artist who was mostly interested in painting and designing jewellery, fashionable clothes and accessories.[9]

By 1907, the Verbovka workshop employed 200 embroiderers working on furniture covers and upholstery, throws, and wall hangings in the traditional Ukrainian style. Natalia Davydova helped local women with designs and determined what objects should be produced and in what quantities. In 1909, at the second South-Russian Kustar Exhibition, Davydova received a silver medal for her efforts in organizing the exhibition. In 1912, Davydova opened a dying shop and several embroidery workshops in nearby villages. The products of the workshops were on sale in Kiev, Odessa and St. Petersburg, as well as abroad in Turin, Berlin, Leipzig and Rotterdam. In 1915, Davydova asked Exter to become the artistic director of the embroidery workshop (Shestakov 2002: 174). The objects, which brought together the idea of mutual influence between the avant-garde and folk art and were designed by the most innovative artists, were executed, mostly in embroidery, by local peasants in Verbovka workshops. The first Verbovka exhibition (1915) at the Gallery Lemersier in Moscow included 40 items by Exter, embroidery designed by Xenia Boguslavskaia, pillowcases designed by Natalia Genke and scarves designed by Ivan Puni.[10] In addition, Georgy Yakulov exhibited four handbag designs and eleven embroidery designs, along with other items. Malevich designed two scarves and a pillowcase (Douglas 1995: 42).

The second workshop, which was instrumental in bringing together the revival of peasant crafts and the avant-garde, was organized in the village of Skoptsy in central-eastern Ukraine by the local aristocrat Anastasia Semigradova in 1909. In October 1910, Semigradova, an avid enthusiast of craft revival and a historical embroidery connoisseur, asked a professional artist from Kiev, Evgenia Pribyl'skaia, to move to Skoptsy to lead rug-making and embroidery industries. Pribyl'skaia had attended Kiev Art College, the most reputable and innovative art institution in Kiev. Similar to other Ukrainian artists, for example her fellow students and friends such as Alexandra Exter and Natalia Davydova, Pribyl'skaia combined the interest in new avant-garde art with ethnographical research on Ukrainian life and history.

Not unlike the young Exter, who travelled to the Ukrainian countryside to gather traditional motifs and decorations and whose sketches helped create the display for the first southern Russian Kustar exhibition, Pribyl'skaia independently studied antique Ukrainian art by copying textile motifs from large religious collections. Her first involvement with the revival movement was a commission to make sketches from antique rugs to be used in the rug-making *kustar* workshops in Poltava (Shestakov 2002: 172). While working in Skoptsy between 1910 and 1916, Pribyl'skaia combined her professional artistic knowledge with an increasing understanding of traditional handicrafts (Figure 3).

In 1911, Semigradova opened a combined secondary school and art school for local peasants in Skoptsy. The production of the workshops was recognized nationally; the business received a silver

9. Many aspects of Natalia Davydova's life remain unknown. As with many other women designers in the history of art, it is hard to pinpoint objects made on the basis of her designs. She is referred to, however, as the first Ukrainian professional fashion designer. She also represented Ukrainian fashion in Europe in 1917–1920 and was involved in the Western European School of fashion design in the early twentieth century. For more on this, see Sergei Shestakov (2002: 171–80). Finally, we know that Davydova left the Ukraine in 1919 and lived in Germany and then Paris until 1935, yet we do not know under what circumstances she died.

10. Participating in the exhibition were Xenia Boguslavskaia, Maria Vasilieva, Natalia Genke, Natalia Davydova, Kazimir Malevich, Lubov Popova, Evgenia Pribyl'skaia, Evmen Pshechenko, Ivan Puni, Hannah Sobachko, Alexandra Exter and GeorgyYakulov. Severiukhin and Leikind did not list Malevich as a participant of the exhibition, while Douglas and Shestakov mentioned Malevich's designs. Malevich's

Figure 3: Evgenia Pribyl'skaia, Silk Embroidery, Skoptsy, 1917, © State Museum of Ukrainian Decorative Folk Art.

Figure 4: Hannah Sobachko-Shostak, Decorative panel 'Gifts of the Earth', 1911, © State Museum of Ukrainian Decorative Folk Art.

catalogue raisonné cites at least two designs on display. According to Dmytro Horbachov, Exter had asked Popova, Rozanova, Malevich, Puni, Boguslavskaia, K. Vasilieva, Genke, Yakulov and N. Udal'tsova to create designs and participate in both Verbovka exhibitions in 1915 and 1917.

medal at the Second All-Russian Kustar Exhibition in St. Petersburg in 1913 and a gold medal at the Kiev Agricultural Exhibition for rug-making and embroidery revival. Many of the motifs were copied from works created in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which are generally considered the most productive times for the creation of Ukrainian religious objects (Kara-Vasilieva and Chernomorets' 2002: 18–25) (Figure 4). While in the nineteenth century the exaggeration of lines, colours and feelings of baroque-inspired motifs was considered too elaborate, by the early twentieth century this was viewed as the embodiment of the turbulent social times of the seventeenth century, an era that in this way was not unlike the early twentieth century. Both baroque and traditional Ukrainian art, according to Alexandra Exter, underscored expressive symbolism and multi-dimensional qualities of artworks (1918: n.p.).

Suprematist embroidery and the ideal of artistic authorship

Workshops such as Verbovka and Skoptsy were the transitional quasi-modern spaces where, paradoxically, the spaces between designer and maker as well as between producer and consumer unknowingly merged. The process usually commenced with the leaders of the workshops commissioning or acquiring motifs from trained designers. For example, Rozanova remembered that in early 1917, she produced 'over twenty decorative works for the exhibition [second Verbovka show] and will get for them about 300 rubles or maybe even more …' (letter to Bazil, 1917 from *Olga Rozanova 'Lefanta Chiol'* 64). Nadezhda Udal'tsova mentioned in her diary,

> Today I worked a lot again sketching. If Davydova takes everything, I will bring for 130 rubles, yet I sketched for about 400. I should finish everything in January. Then for the exhibition I need to make several designs for the dresses, and decorative panels. Unfortunately, I gave very few sketches to embroiderers.
>
> (1994: 32)

Benjamin traces the change from *Handwerk* to *Kunstwerk*, 'from craft to art – from unauthored object to authentic authored valuable' (Leslie 1998: 8). The author and the value of the work make the capitalist exchange value more important than it would be in craft works with anonymous producers. However, with the embroidery produced in Verbovka and Skoptsy, a different process had occurred. Within craft production, another layer of production is introduced in the conditions of the workshop through one person designing and another (or several) executing the design. This additional step in the manufacturing process made the authorship less important and the work less valuable. Often the names of the designers were remembered while the names of the makers were obliterated, and they were referred to as generic 'peasants from Verbovka workshops'. Moreover, since the embroidery was not signed by the artists, including Malevich or Exter, and since these objects were textiles and

therefore had from the very beginning different social and artistic value, they had been largely forgotten for the previous 80 years. Udal'tsova and Rozanova and other avant-garde artists viewed their involvement in the Verbovka workshops as creative enterprise and as a means of making ends meet. Hence, they emphasized money. The space between creativity and capitalist production had closed.

The marketability of objects in capitalist society has been the most important driving force behind craft production. As early as 1907–1908 when the workshops of Zozov, Verbovka, Sunki and Samgorodok employed over 200 peasants each, the workshops already based their production on the demands of the market and recent textile fashions. The best-represented crafts in the Ukraine were embroidery, *merezhka* and fabric-weaving. Even the best embroidery works could not be sold if they were not ready to be used as adornment for dresses or jackets, curtains, table linen and other decorations. For instance, the Kiev Kustar Society dedicated 1908 to the development of a wide variety of *kustar* products, both in terms of quality and quantity. The members also tried to develop and expand the *kustar* industry, ensuring the products' saleability 'by adapting them to the taste and needs of the market' (Kievskoe Kustarnoe Obschestvo 1909: 1). The Kiev Kustar Society hired an instructor whose responsibility it was to create and supply ready-to-be-copied patterns to the craftspeople. This strategy, as opposed to assigning a professional artist or instructor for each workshop or a village, made the instructor available to a much wider circle of craft practitioners. It also promoted the need to travel among the peasant population, which stimulated the exchange of ideas and motifs among the areas. Because of the designers' and instructors' expertise, education and visibility, art and design historians accepted the assumption that the designer was superior to the maker. While this may hold true, it is obvious that the saleability of the objects was the primary concern of patrons, makers and designers alike. In this sense it was the consumer who was the most important player, and who, paradoxically, almost always remained anonymous.

Craft and revolution: The layering of live experience

Yet, who in these turbulent years was interested enough in fashion and interior design to continue purchasing it? When considering the overlapping of historical memories and the intersections of historical layers, one should keep in mind the hardships of physical existence, as well as the challenges of the negotiations of one's political, social and artistic identities in the time between the two Russian revolutions. Russian symbolist writer and memoirist Zinaida Gippius wrote about the politically unsettling winter of 1915:

> All this winter was in deep, chaotic nightmare … even not excitement but excitation, the new intellectual groups formed and unformed, fights and debates occurred, friends separated, enemies united … Censorship raged.
>
> (2002: 42)

Amid the constant volatility, the food shortages, the famines and the many deaths, the artists still found the creative process exhilarating. If, during the peasant craft revival phase, the general purpose was to teach a craftsperson something considered relevant to his or her life, the merging of non-representational art and the *kustar* revival increased the gap between designer and maker.

While researchers have noted that avant-garde artists in Russia and the Ukraine, such as Malevich, Natalia Goncharova, Exter, Popova and Rozanova, were interested in and influenced by 'folk' art, their backgrounds, their personal vision, and their ability to transform visual impressions into unique forms brought these initial influences to new levels. For example, Dmytro Horbachov compares the compositions of Malevich to the 'stable order of the peasant ornamental "tree of life"'. Arguably, local peasants experienced the modernity of the new century differently. Naturally, the peasants' understanding of life did not remain static, but the modernism of Malevich's interpretation, that is, his personal expression through abstract form characteristic of Modernist movements, differed significantly from the world view of the local employees of the workshops.

The reason for these differences lies in way of life, social circles and perhaps educational opportunities. Malevich, Exter and Popova had opportunities that local artists such as Evmen Pshechenko (1880–) or Hannah Sobachko did not have. For example, Pribyl'skaia, who according to her own recollection, 'was in full control of the *kustar* production' in Skoptsy, soon noticed several younger, talented peasant artists for whom she provided some training and encouragement (*c.* 1940: 2). The combination of the village school, the craft workshops, and the support of Pribyl'skaia and Semigradova created an appropriate climate for several local amateur artists to become semi-professional and create sketches for the designs that combined traditional ornamentation with the influence of the avant-garde.

The traditional compositions created by local artists Hanna Sobachko-Shostak, Evmen Pshechenko and Vasil' Dovhoshia were rooted in traditional ornamentation, which in turn was influenced by the Ukrainian baroque. For example, Pshechenko started creating sketches for embroidery and works on paper while helping his wife who worked for Davydova and Exter in the early 1910s. For the 1915 exhibition in Moscow, he exhibited three embroidered pillows and 32 sketches for embroidery (Shestakov 2002: 175). The catalogue mentioned that Pshechenko's works were 'examples of contemporary peasant ornamentations' (Anon 1915: 2) (Figure 5). However, his decorative panels show both the influence of the Suprematist use of geometrical planes and the use of Ukrainian traditional imagery. He divided the painting into two equal parts as if to signify these two main influences in his work. One part was geometrical, formal and angular, and the other was curvilinear and sinewy, similar to the fluid lines of art nouveau and traditional Ukrainian imagery.

It is in his and other peasant artists' works that one feels a real furthering of the peasant revival ideas, notably the desire to connect the life experiences of the workshops' employees with new artistic influences and modern life. The same desire to conflate the modern and the traditional can be seen in Dovhoshia's panel 'A Fairytale Bird', 1923–1930 (Figure 6). Here, while some shapes are

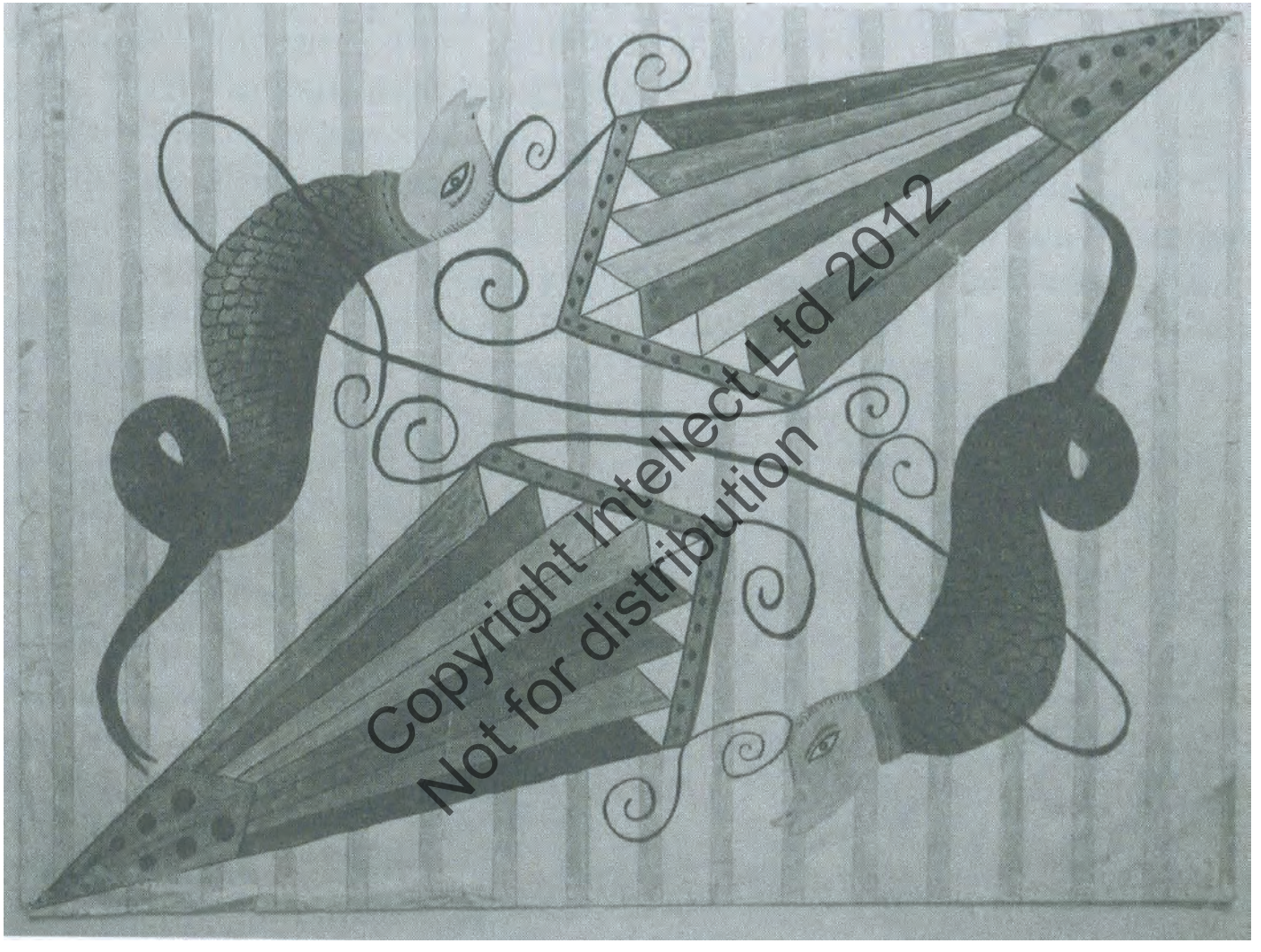

Figure 5: Evmen Pshechenko, Monsters*, 1923–1930, © State Museum of Ukrainian Decorative Folk Art.*

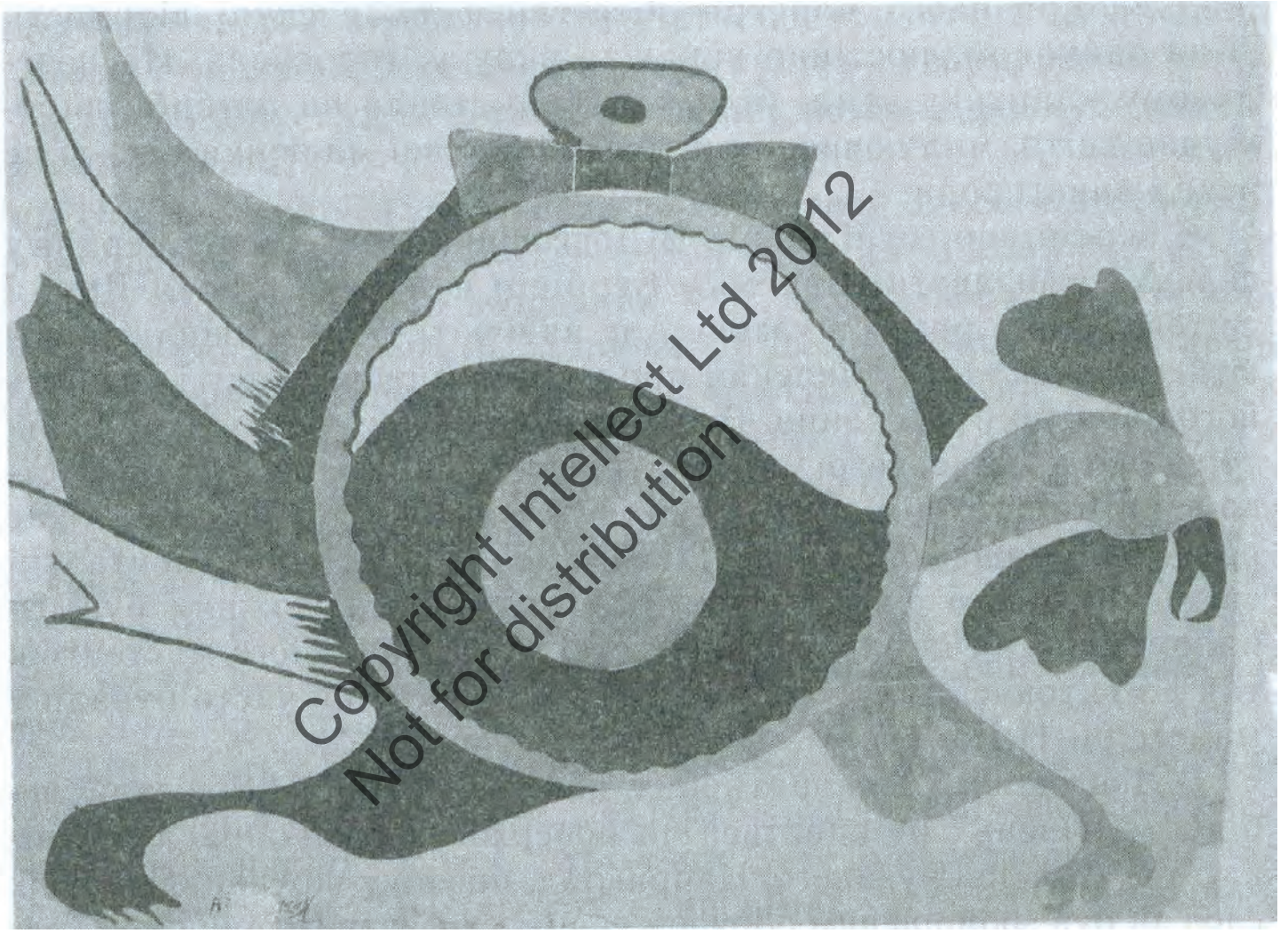

Figure 6: V. Dovhoshia, Panel 'Fairytale Bird', 1923–1930, © State Museum of Ukrainian Decorative Folk Art.

derived from the traditional imagery of the Ukrainian 'folk' tradition, the style of this bird recalls the early abstractions of Exter and Kandinsky. Indeed, as one can see from the introduction to the *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Works of Evgenia Pribyl'skaia and Hannah Sobachko* in Kiev in 1918, the main goal for Exter was to allow 'artists from different art movements the opportunity for exploring a variety of formalistic approaches' (*Catalogue* 1919: 2). Exter's conclusions suggested that perhaps the best way to understand their legacy on a theoretical and practical level was to imagine it as interpolation between abstraction and figurative works, between what was considered traditional and avant-garde objects.

The copying of the image in the technique of embroidery can also be considered as a slowing down movement, and therefore as giving back the pre-modern identity. Buck-Morss writes,

> The technological reproduction gives back to humanity that capacity for experience which technological production threatens to take away. If industrialization has caused a crisis in perception due to the speeding up of time and the fragmentation of space, film shows a healing potential by slowing down time and, through montage, constructing 'synthetic realities' as new spatio-temporal orders wherein the fragmented images are brought together 'according to a new law'.
>
> (1989: 268)

Reading this description of movie montages, it is difficult to avoid thinking of Suprematist embroidery on several levels. On one level, the embroidery is the slowing of the dynamic process of sketching that allows the artist/designer/creator/maker to experience the composition on a different level. The embroidered Suprematist compositions were objects created for consumption, meaning that they constitute superficial realities along with innovation, the new order and the new laws of existence. Finally, the designs created by local artists are also montages that bring together and create a 'new tradition' that contains both innovation and 'folk', and that is impregnated with nationalist characteristics and national symbols that the artists saw while growing up. Sadly, after the initial period of cultural revival, after the1917 Revolution craft revival lost its modern relevance. Most of the innovative designs were abolished and only 'folk' images were retained and reproduced for the next seven decades.

Conclusion

In early twentieth-century Ukraine, the issues of national identity found their material embodiment in the revival of the traditional crafts. The collection and production of these crafts helped negotiate difficult notions of Ukrainian cultural independence. The first southern Russian exhibition attracted

the attention of artists and patrons who were interested in artistic production. Similar to the Russian avant-garde movement, Ukrainian avant-garde artists were interested in merging the traditional crafts, which at times they considered 'primitive', with artistic innovation and refusal of naturalistic representation. These experiments found their expressions in the creation of craft objects in workshops such as Verbovka and Skoptsy. Although organizers of the workshops claimed that peasant participants and professional artists had the same goals of furthering craft revival, the effects and interests differed significantly between artists and artisans.

The attempt to innovate the peasant tradition provides an interesting case study of what one could call expedited modernization of the craft revival motives and techniques. However, the designs that were given to the peasants did not resonate with their everyday lives or concerns, and as a result these were perceived as far removed from their personal world and stories. As designs by artisans trained in the workshops demonstrate, professional artists' attempts at creating abstract designs remained unappreciated by the workshop workers. Therefore, it seems that for the peasants this speedy turn to avant-garde aesthetics was only partially beneficial. In terms of economic and educational gains, the artisans benefited from training by the professional artists as much as from fair pay for their work. One example is Hannah Sobachko, who benefited from collaboration with professional artists but at the same time managed to create designs that expressed her vision of traditional motives. Avant-garde innovations were much in demand in larger cities such as Kiev, Moscow and St. Petersburg, and even abroad. For artists such as Malevich and Stepanova, participation in the revival workshops meant an attempt at merging their nationalistic ideas and innovative avant-garde aesthetics and ideology.

The attempt to combine the revival of traditional handicrafts and innovative Supremacist motives had come to an end soon after the Russian Communist revolution of 1917. The artists were not as keen on participating in the rural revival, and instead continued their work in the cities. For example, Varvara Stepanova (with Liubov Popova) continued to design textiles for Tsindel (the first State Textile Factory) in Moscow. Given that Stepanova and others continued to design for the masses, one can conclude that their experience before the revolution proved positive and encouraging for their work.

The process of designing and making avant-garde crafts demonstrates an ideal, although prematurely interrupted, case study of the interrelationship between craft, art and design. It seems that the introduction of Supremacist embroidery did not manage to establish a sustainable understanding and interaction between artists and peasants, and this forced the artists to continue their artistic practice in the cities where the reception of the experiments and innovations was more enthusiastic. For the artisans, the work in the workshops on the whole stimulated learning and development of innovative techniques. Some, albeit a minority, developed an idiosyncratic style that combined some aspects of avant-garde image simplification with more traditional natural motives.

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