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## IN THE EYE OF THE STORM MODERNISM IN UKRAINE

Lower Belvedere  
23 February to 2 June 2024



Alexandra Exter (Олександра Екстер), *Three Female Figures*, 1909-10  
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This first comprehensive exhibition outside Ukraine explores the development of modern art in the cultural centers of Kyiv, Lviv and Kharkiv during the first half of the 20th century. Modernism in Ukraine is revealed to be both international and avant-garde. From Jugendstil to Constructivism, the exhibition relays the tempestuous and fascinating history of cultural identities in Ukraine.

*General Director Stella Rollig: Modernism in Ukraine developed its progressive artistic power in the midst of great unrest and adverse socio-political conditions. The works gathered in the exhibition defied the social and artistic conventions of their time, making them ambassadors of a modern civilization grounded on cultural values, both in the past and present.*

The Modernist movement in Ukraine unfolded against a complicated sociopolitical backdrop: World War I, the 1917 Revolution, subsequent short-lived independence as the Ukrainian People's Republic (1917–21), and the founding of Soviet Ukraine. Despite the tumult, Ukrainian art, literature, theater, and film flourished.

*Like many other European nations, Ukraine experienced a national awakening at the beginning of the 20th century, which, as elsewhere, was associated with the attempt to develop a national style of art by drawing on folk motifs and distinctly national themes, says curator Konstantin Akinsha.*

*Until the first art academy was founded in Kyiv in November 1917, artists from Ukraine were forced to complete their studies elsewhere, initially mainly in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Gradually, however, the focus shifted to Western European*

*centers such as Vienna, Krakow, Munich and Paris. There, young artists explored the latest achievements in painting and became part of an international artistic milieu, adds curator Katia Denysova.*

The Boichukists (бойчукісти), followers of the monumentalist Mykhailo Boichuk (Михайло Бойчук), created their own national school of mural painting inspired by the Byzantine tradition and Ukrainian folk art. In Kharkiv, Vasyl Yermilov (Василь Єрмілов) became the foremost exponent of the Ukrainian version of Constructivism. Meanwhile in Kyiv, Oleksandr Bohomazov (Олександр Богомазов), the country's preeminent Futurist, developed the style known as Spectralism. In the late 1920s, the Kyiv Art Institute became the last refuge for pioneers of modern art such as Kazymyr Malevych (Казимир Малевич). All these developments were brutally halted by Stalinist repression in the 1930s.

With works by Oleksandr Murashko (Олександр Мурашко), Heorhii Narbut (Георгій Нарбут), Alexandra Exter (Олександра Екстер), Sarah Shor (Сара Шор), and many more, the exhibition provides an insight into the complex history of modernism in Ukraine and sheds light on an essential but little-known part of European culture.

## ARTISTS REPRESENTED IN THE EXHIBITION

English	Ukrainian
Issakhar Ber Ryback	Іссахар Бер Рибак
Oleksandr Bohomazov	Олександр Богомазов
Mykhailo Boichuk	Михайло Бойчук
Tymofii Boichuk	Тимофій Бойчук
Davyd Burluk	Давид Бурлюк
Petro Kholodnyi	Петро Холодний
Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov	Олександр Хвостенко-Хвостов
Marko Epshtein	Марко Епштейн
Alexandra Exter	Олександра Екстер
Kyrylo Hvozdyk	Кирило Гвоздик
Kostiantyn Yeleva	Костянтин Єлева
Vasyl Yermilov	Василь Єрмілов
Semen Yoffe	Семен Йоффе
Mykola Kasperovych	Микола Касперович
Fedir Krychevskyi	Федір Кричевський
Vasyl Krychevskyi	Василь Кричевський
Olena Kulchytska	Олена Кульчицька
El Lissitzky	Ель Лисицький

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Vsevolod Maksymovych	Всеволод Максимович
Kazymyr Malevych	Казимир Малевич
Abram Manevych	Абрам Маневич
Vadym Meller	Вадим Меллер
Ivan Miasoiedov	Іван М'ясоєдов
Oleksandr Murashko	Олександр Мурашко
Heorhii Narbut	Георгій Нарбут
Oleksa Novakivskyi	Олекса Новаківський
Ivan Padalka	Іван Падалка
Viktor Palmov	Віктор Пальмов
Anatol Petrytskyi	Анатоль Петрицький
Kostiantyn Piskorskyi	Костянтин Піскорський
Mykhailo Sapozhnykov	Михайло Сапожников
Manuil Shekhtman	Мануїл Шехтман
Sarah Shor	Сара Шор
Mykhailo Zhuk	Михайло Жук
Vasyl Sedliar	Василь Седляр
Oleksandr Syrotenko	Олександр Сиротенко
Ivan Trush	Іван Труш

## EXHIBITION TEXTS

### Overall Introduction

*In the Eye of the Storm. Modernisms in Ukraine* recreates the polyphony of artistic styles and identities that existed in Ukraine in the early 20th century. The exhibition tells the story of modernist artists and their experiments with national styles in a bid for Ukrainian cultural autonomy. For hundreds of years, Ukraine's territory had been divided between various empires with its people not perceived as a single nation until the late 19th century. However, there had been periods of sovereignty in the country's history that were crucial for the formation of a Ukrainian identity. Such a complex background resulted in a vibrant fusion of Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, Jewish, and other elements to create a distinctly local cultural profile. Modernism in Ukraine unfolded against a complicated sociopolitical backdrop of collapsing empires, World War I, the revolutions of 1917, the short-lived independence of the Ukrainian People's Republic between 1918 and 1921, and the founding of Soviet Ukraine. Despite such political turmoil, this became a period of true flourishing in the Ukrainian arts.

### Secession in Ukraine

Until 1917, there were no institutions of higher art education in Ukraine, which compelled aspiring artists to complete their studies elsewhere. Initially, they went mainly to St. Petersburg and Moscow, but gradually the focus shifted to the Western European centers of Vienna, Kraków, Munich, and Paris. In these cities, young creatives from Ukraine explored the latest artistic achievements in studying and transmitting atmospheric effects and fleeting impressions. Equally, they became familiar with the attempts by artists across the European continent to formulate a national artistic style. This prompted Ukrainian artists to draw inspiration from native folk traditions, themes with national topicality, and other tropes of local cultural heritage.

## **Independent Ukraine**

After the fall of the Romanov empire in 1917, Ukrainians finally had a chance at statehood, proclaiming the independent Ukrainian People's Republic in early 1918. This sociopolitical transformation provided new impulses for developing national art and culture. Keen to overcome the imperial legacy of Ukraine's centuries-long provincial status, the country's leaders started to establish national cultural institutions. Chief among these was the Ukrainian Academy of Art, the first-ever art school of higher education on the territory of present-day Ukraine. Opening in November 1917, the Academy's inaugural faculty included key artists such as Fedir and Vasyl Krychevski, Oleksandr Murashko, Mykhailo Zhuk, Abram Manevych, Heorhii Narbut, and Mykhailo Boichuk.

## **Lviv**

At the turn of the 20th century, the western Ukrainian region of Halychyna (Galicia) was an autonomous province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Lviv, the province's capital, was home to a substantial Ukrainian, Polish, Jewish and Armenian population. Despite certain tensions, the city became a multicultural and cosmopolitan artistic center. Ukrainians in Austria-Hungary enjoyed greater freedoms than their counterparts in the Russian Empire and could develop a national culture more easily. Lviv-based artists, such as Ivan Trush, Olena Kulchytska, and Oleksa Novakivskyi, were educated in Vienna and Kraków. Like their colleagues in east-central Ukraine, these artists engaged with the latest artistic trends and combined them with the study of their local traditions.

## **Decadents**

Decadence, an artistic movement that flourished in Europe at the turn of the century and rebelled against the modern industrial world, also emerged in the work of early 20th-century Ukrainian artists. Trying to escape the materialism and corruption of their time, they explored spiritual and aesthetic qualities in art, often employing fantastic and erotic imagery. Paintings by Ivan Miasoiedov, Vsevolod Maksymovych, Kostiantyn Piskorskyi, and Mykhailo Sapozhnykov incorporate different elements of Decadence. Due to

historical circumstances, these traits arrived in Ukraine somewhat belatedly and lingered for longer than in Western Europe.

## **Cubo-Futurism**

In early 20th-century Ukraine, artistic styles not only quickly replaced each other, but also coexisted, constantly evolving and mutating. Young artists from Ukraine experimented with visual language by combining elements of different radical trends that they had encountered in Western European capitals. In particular, they reworked Cubism, with its geometrization and fragmentation of the picture plane, and Futurism, characterized by vehement energy and movement. Art created in Ukraine featured dynamic compositions and simplified forms with a gradual move towards non-figuration and abstraction. At the same time, artists from Ukraine imbued their canvases with a vibrant palette and rhythmically applied paint, inherited from Ukrainian folk embroideries and ceramics.

## **Kultur Lige**

The organization Kultur Lige (The Jewish Cultural League) was founded in Kyiv in 1918 to promote the development of contemporary Jewish-Yiddish culture. It operated within a unique sociopolitical context shaped by the Ukrainian People's Republic that recognized the multicultural and multilingual nature of Ukrainian society. The Kultur Lige's Art Section united young Jewish artists from Kyiv and many other cities. They sought a synthesis of Jewish artistic tradition with the achievements of the European avant-garde. Abram Manevych, one of the founding professors at the Ukrainian Academy of Art, was the only representative of the older generation in the Art Section. Unlike his younger colleagues, he propagated a more moderate approach to art. The Kultur Lige had ceased to exist by the mid-1920s, under growing pressure from the Soviet regime.

## Theater Design

In the late 1910s, Ukraine experienced a boom in theater productions thanks to the combined talents of experimental writers, directors, and scenographers. The transformation took place against the backdrop of the Ukrainian War of Independence (1917–21), mainly fought between the national Ukrainian forces and Russian Bolsheviks. Two names stand out as catalysts of this revolutionary shift in theater—Alexandra Exter and Les Kurbas. In early 1918, Exter opened a private studio in Kyiv with a separate course on stage design. Among her students were some of the most acclaimed theater designers of the next generation, such as Anatol Petrytskyi and Oleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov. As a theater director, Kurbas introduced a modern European repertoire to his program and hired some of the most progressive artists as set designers.

## Kharkiv

After nearly five years of the bloody War of Independence, the Bolsheviks defeated the national Ukrainian forces. They established the Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic and made Kharkiv its capital. The city quickly transformed from a provincial center into a refined cultural hub. Its Derzhprom Building, constructed in 1928, became the first skyscraper of the USSR and a symbol of Soviet modernity. In the 1920s, Soviet authorities introduced the policy of ukrainizatsiia (Ukrainization) to encourage the development of a national language and culture. Kharkiv became a springboard for the ambitious project to create a new cultural identity that was both Ukrainian and Soviet. The leading Ukrainian artists, writers, and scholars, who worked in Kharkiv during this time, were among its supporters.

## Kyiv Art Institute

In the mid-1920s, the Ukrainian Academy of Art was restructured into the Kyiv Art Institute in line with the ideology of the Soviet regime. With a modern curriculum, including contemporary subjects such as production design, the Institute became one of the USSR's leading art schools. It also hired new instructors from across the Soviet Union,

with such progressive artists as Kazymyr Malevych and Vladimir Tatlin joining its faculty. The last generation of Ukrainian modernists matured under their tutelage. Artistic creativity, however, was cut short by a radical change in the political climate as art came to be viewed through the prism of class consciousness. With Soviet subject matter henceforth dominating all spheres of cultural output, more value was placed on art as propaganda than on the merits of artistic experimentation.

## **The Boichukists**

A native of Halychyna, Mykhailo Boichuk studied art in Vienna, Kraków, Munich, and Paris. In 1917, he established a fresco and mosaic studio at the newly founded Ukrainian Academy of Art. Advocating that art should be a national treasure and not a mere commodity, Boichuk created his own unique style that drew on Byzantine art, Italian pre-Renaissance frescoes, and Ukrainian folk traditions. In the early Soviet period of the 1920s, his studio emerged as a school of monumental art. Its members, henceforth known as the Boichukists, completed numerous state commissions for public spaces and buildings. The collaboration proved short-lived: labeled "bourgeois nationalists," Boichuk and a close circle of his associates were executed during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, with most of their public art subsequently destroyed.

## **Postscript**

The so-called Ukrainization policy was abruptly curtailed in 1932–33 and ruthless purges of the Ukrainian intellectual elite followed. Many writers, theater directors, and artists, including Mykhailo Boichuk, Les Kurbas, and Mykhail Semenko, were labeled "bourgeois nationalists" and executed. Many more were imprisoned and sent to labor camps, known as the Gulag. Manuscripts, books, and artworks were incinerated. Murals were overpainted or scraped off walls. Canvases that were not destroyed were sent to secret, hidden repositories. Artists and artworks from Lviv faced a similar fate when the USSR incorporated the western Ukrainian territories after World War II.

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In the 1970s, the West rediscovered the revolutionary art of the early Soviet period. This led to the appropriation of Ukrainian artists, as they conveniently fell under the umbrella term "Russian avant-garde." Artists who had spent all their lives in Ukraine, and whose artistic experimentation was integral to the development of Ukrainian culture, unexpectedly became "Russian." The current exhibition, which is touring Europe, seeks to redress this historical oversight by introducing the international public to the complicated story of modernism in Ukraine, an essential but little-known part of European culture.

## UKRAINE 1904-1938

### Cultural Events in Ukraine

**1904:** Official opening of the Kyiv Museum of Industrial Arts and Science, the first publicly accessible municipal museum in the city

**January 1905:** The first exhibition of Ukrainian artists from both the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires is staged in Lviv

**November 1908:** The exhibition Zveno (Link) in Kyiv becomes the first showcase of radical modern art on the territory of Ukraine

**1908:** Poltava Zemstvo (District) House is constructed based on Vasyl Krychevskyi's design as the first example of modern Ukrainian style in architecture

**February 1914:** The exhibition Koltso (Ring) opens in Kyiv uniting the young generation of progressive local artists

**November 1917:** The Ukrainian Academy of Art, the first-ever art school of higher education in Ukraine, opens in Kyiv, admitting students of all genders, nationalities, and ages

**January 1918:** The Kultur Lige is established to promote the development of contemporary Jewish-Yiddish culture

**March 1918:** Alexandra Exter opens her private studio in Kyiv

**1922:** Les Kurbas establishes the Berezil Theater in Kyiv

**1922:** The All-Ukrainian Photo-Cinema Administration (VUFKU) is founded in Kharkiv

**1924:** The Ukrainian Academy of Art is restructured as the Kyiv Art Institute

**1926:** The Berezil Theater moves to Kharkiv

**1928 & 1930:** Contemporary art from Soviet Ukraine is shown within the Ukrainian section of the Soviet Pavilion at the Venice Biennale

**1932–34:** Socialist Realism is introduced as the only official art style of the Soviet Union

**1937:** Mykhailo Boichuk, Les Kurbas, Ivan Padalka, Vasyl Sedliar, and Mykhailo Semenko are executed, in addition to many other Ukrainian-Soviet cultural practitioners

## Historical Events in Ukraine

**1905:** Revolution in the Russian Empire and the end of absolute monarchy; lifting of prohibitions on Ukrainian-language publications; Ukrainian recognized as a language in its own right and not a mere dialect of Russian

**July 1914:** World War I breaks out: Ukraine turns into a battleground between the Russian Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Germany

**February–March 1917:** The February Revolution in Russia and abdication of Tsar Nicholas II

**October–November 1917:** The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia

**November 1917:** The Ukrainian People's Republic is established as an autonomous state with Kyiv as its capital

**December 1917:** The Bolsheviks establish the Ukrainian People's Republic of Soviets in Kharkiv

**January 1918:** The Ukrainian People's Republic proclaims its full independence and declares war on invading Bolshevik Russia

**1918–21:** Ukrainian War of Independence: Ukraine's territory becomes a battlefield between several Ukrainian governments, the imperial Russian Army, the Bolsheviks, and the newly established Republic of Poland

**January 1919:** Unification of the Ukrainian People's Republic and the Western Ukrainian People's Republic into a single state

**1921:** The Bolshevik Red Army conquers two-thirds of Ukraine; the western third becomes part of Poland

**1922:** The Ukrainian Socialist Soviet Republic, with Kharkiv as its capital, becomes a founding member of the Soviet Union

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**1920s:** The Soviet government encourages Ukrainian language and culture with the policy of Ukrainization

**1932–33:** Millions in Ukraine die as a result of an artificially created famine, known as the Holodomor, during Stalin's collectivization campaign

**1930s:** Reversal of the Ukrainization policy; "Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism" is declared the primary foe in Ukraine

**1937–38:** Stalinist purges of the Ukrainian intellectual elite

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## EXHIBITION CATALOGUE



***In the Eye of the Storm.  
Modernismen in der Ukraine***

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## GENERAL INFORMATION

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<b>Exhibition</b>	In the Eye of the Storm. Modernism in Ukraine
<b>Curators</b>	Curated by Konstantin Akinsha and Katia Denysova together with Maryna Drobotiuk and Olena Kashuba-Volvach (both from the National Art Museum of Ukraine, Kyiv).
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For more information on the exhibition and high-resolution press photos please visit [www.belvedere.at/en/press](http://www.belvedere.at/en/press)