Key Stage 2 + 3: Art and Design
Also suitable for History, Citizenship,
Geography, English and Literacy

Teacher Resource

Revolution: Russian Art
1917–1932
Welcome to the RA

This RA teacher resource includes:

Introduction
This overview of the exhibition will give you an insight into its context.

The vocabulary of art
This introduction to the language of art can aid classroom discussion.

Pre-visit
These are activities to complete in class before your pupils come to a workshop, self-directed visit or guided tour of the exhibition.

At the RA
These are activities for your class to complete while at the exhibition on a self-directed visit.

Back in the classroom
Practical and discussion activities inspired by your visit will help consolidate and build on what your pupils have learned.

Key artworks and information about the artists
These illustrations of a selection of artworks from the exhibition can be used as the basis for classroom discussion.

Worksheet
Print this off to use pre-visit, at the RA or back in the classroom.

Exhibition map
This floorplan of the galleries will help you plan your visit.

Introduction

Politics and history

Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932 explores the extraordinary diversity of art made during one of the most turbulent periods in modern history. The story begins in February 1917 with the abdication of the repressive Tsar, Nicholas II. In October of the same year, Vladimir Lenin and the socialist Bolshevik Party swept to power, ending centuries of autocratic rule under the Tsars and making Russia the world's first Communist state. At the same time, civil war broke out as the Reds (Communists) and Whites (Tsarist Russians) fought for control. After Lenin's death in 1924, Joseph Stalin rose to power. Under his dictatorship, the Soviet Union, as the Republic was now known, became increasingly repressive. Freedom of the individual was crushed in favour of a collective ideology.

For more information visit the BBC Bitesize website
http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/russia/russia/lifeinleninsrussiarev1.shtml

The RA exhibition

The Royal Academy's far-ranging exhibition brings to life the art produced in Russia during these years of radical upheaval, reflecting the political and social climate of the period. As well as painting, photography, printmaking, film and sculpture the exhibition presents posters, textiles and ceramics created by artists representing many different social and political points of view. The RA's exhibition takes its inspiration from a November 1932, exhibition in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) titled Fifteen Years of Artists of the Russian Soviet Republic. Nikolai Punin, an art scholar and writer, curated this exhibition with the ambitious goal of including all the artistic developments of the period and marking an important moment in the history of Russian art.

Art in Russia 1917 to 1932

During the heady, idealistic days after the Revolution, Kazimir Malevich, Vasily Kandinsky and others pursued their experiments in pure colour and form to create new art for a new world. These artists were known as the avant-garde and they believed art transmitted political ideas and the aspirations of society.

Malevich was the founder of Suprematism, a word that refers to an abstract art based upon 'the primacy of pure feeling' rather than on the visual depiction of objects. Malevich argued that art should no longer aim to depict reality but create a whole new world of its own. His Suprematist paintings focused on basic geometric forms painted in a limited range of strong colours.

Constructivism

Visionary architect and designer Vladimir Tatlin conceived a new artistic movement Constructivism in 1913. He saw art as a fundamentally useful activity, as work, capable of remaking and modelling the world for a new era. The Constructivists advocated the abandonment of traditional painting and sculpture, in favour of actual interventions into the world itself: architecture, graphic design and objects.

Socialist Realism

Under Stalin's dictatorship the Soviet Union, as the Republic was now known, became increasingly repressive. In 1932, Stalin issued a decree that all art should express Soviet ideology, clamping down on years of relative artistic freedom and experimentation. The Communist Party decreed Socialist Realism as the only acceptable style of art, demanding that artists produce figurative art that could be easily understood by the masses. Artists were to portray idealistic scenes of Soviet life: youthful, strong workers in factories, men and women at one with machinery on farms. If artists deviated from what was acceptable they could be cut off from support or sent to the 'Gulag' (prison camp).

The role of art

After the Revolution, the new Communist government used art in a variety of ways:

Art and propaganda

In 1917, eighty per cent of the Russian population were illiterate and living in small villages scattered across Russia's vast landmass. The government set about a rigorous campaign to use art, architecture, sculpture and other visual means to persuade and educate the people about Communism. Public works of art and memorials were built across the country. Artists were commissioned to paint banners and murals, and factories were encouraged to create products that championed the greatness of Communism.
Depicting leaders

In April 1918, Lenin announced his Plan for Monumental Propaganda. Painting and sculpture, and even such everyday items as fabrics and ceramics, were to promote Bolshevik ideas and glorify the leader. Russia was a profoundly Christian country but soon the Russian Orthodox Church was banned. ‘Icons’ of Lenin replaced those of Christ. Although Lenin had personally opposed Stalin as his successor, the cult status that Lenin acquired after his death legitimised Bolshevik power and, eventually, Stalin’s autocratic rule.

The greatness of the worker

The Communist Party celebrated the rise of the factory, the machine and the worker, using images of workers and factories as a source for propaganda for the masses. Avant-garde and Realist artists alike were encouraged to portray this growth in technology, using the machine as a symbol of power and optimism for the new Russia. The Communist party also saw the strong, healthy, hard-working rural farm worker as an important part of Soviet Russia. They were promoted as equal to the urban workers, symbolised by the hammer and the sickle of the Soviet emblem. In 1928, Stalin began to introduce his Five-Year Plans for both industry and agriculture that aimed to improve production. The first of these three Five-Year Plans introduced collective farming, which uprooted rural communities and meant people destroyed their farming equipment in protest. Famine was widespread and millions died.

Nostalgia and memory

Even in revolutionary times, the traditional images of Tsarist Russia, such as birch forests and colourful onion-shaped church domes, persisted as signs of national identity. Many Russian artists, philosophers and writers were nostalgic for the beauty and charm of the old Russia, rapidly disappearing under the boots of the proletarian masses. During this era of state nationalisation and confiscation of private and ecclesiastical property, artists expressed their longing for a country that no longer existed in lyrical paintings and exquisite art journals.

The vocabulary of art

1. How do we describe colours?
Blue, yellow and red are primary colours. You cannot make a primary colour by mixing other colours together. Green, orange and purple are examples of secondary colours. You can make a secondary colour by mixing two primary colours together. You can continue mixing colours to make more colours. All colours have warm and cool hues. Warm colours have more yellow and cool colours have more blue.

2. How do we describe tone?
Tone is the range of light to dark that you can see on the surface of an object or artwork. A colour can be light or dark. Different tones of a colour are made by mixing white, black, or grey into that colour.

3. How do we describe line?
There are many different types of lines: thick, thin, curly, squiggly or straight.

4. How do we describe shape?
Geometric shapes include circles, squares and triangles. Organic shapes, which can be found in nature, are less regular.

5. How do we describe 3D form?
Something that has three dimensions has length, breadth and depth. This is a solid object or artwork that is not flat, such as a model of a building or a sculpture.

6. What does media mean?
The type of material that is used to make a piece of art or craft. This could be paint, clay, pencil, photography or film, for example. One type of material on its own is called a medium. Types of media in this exhibition include painting, photography, prints, film, sculpture, posters, textiles and ceramics.
Pre-visit

The following activities will encourage pupils to:

- understand the historical context of the exhibition
- discover how art can be used to convey a message
- gain experience and confidence in talking about works of art in a range of different mediums
- learn art vocabulary
- look closely at art
Art in context

Ask pupils to make a mind map using the questions below and then ask them to share their ideas with the rest of the class.

What is a revolution?
Why did the Russian people revolt?
What did they want that they did not have?
How can you use art in a revolution?

What is a leader?
Why do we have leaders?
How do leaders present themselves to us?
Think about how they might look in a poster, a painting, a photograph, a sculpture or on television.

Art with a message

Put the pupils into pairs and ask them to discuss their sketches with their partners using the following questions:

1. What is your partner’s sketch about? What idea is he or she putting forward?
2. How does the sketch make you feel?
3. How persuasive is the sketch as an image with no words? Why?
4. Was the sketch successful in portraying your partner’s idea?

Now choose two or three different posters from the group and discuss uses of propaganda and persuasion in art with the class.

Describe and listen

Choose between two images at the end of this resource:

- Fantasy, 1925 by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin
- Morning Still Life, 1918 by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin

Split the class into pairs. Give one pupil from each pair an example of Petrov-Vodkin’s Fantasy or Morning Still Life. The pupil with the artwork holds a copy of the painting so that their partner cannot see it.

Looking at the artwork, the first pupil describes it in as much detail as they can whilst their partner tries to draw what their partner describes.

Describe and listen

The first pupil reveals the artwork to their partner. Ask the pupils to compare what they drew to the actual artwork.

How did the pupil interpret the spoken description?
What elements of their drawing are similar to the painting by Petrov-Vodkin? What elements have changed?

Go back to the two paintings by Petrov-Vodkin and for each, discuss as a class:

1. What is being described in the painting?
2. What do you think the artwork is about?
3. Describe the use of colour: are there contrasting colours, what do the colours and tones represent?
4. What is the focal point? Are there any hidden messages?
5. What is different about the work of Petrov-Vodkin and the work of Malevich? (discuss lines, colours, figurative, abstract)
6. How does the artwork make you feel? Why?
7. Why do you think the artist was feeling or thinking at the time?

Materials

- Coloured crayons or pencils | Paper

Ask the pupils to keep their chosen theme secret until the end of the activity.

Art with a message

Have each pupil choose a theme (from the list below) and create a propaganda poster using pencils and paper.

1. Your goal is to convince another pupil to believe in something you care about, by creating a poster.
2. Think about using colours and shapes to help you do this.
3. You should not add words!

Materials

- Coloured pencils or crayons | A3 paper

Describe and listen

Split the class into pairs. Give one pupil from each pair an example of Petrov-Vodkin’s Fantasy or Morning Still Life.

The pupil with the artwork holds a copy of the painting so that their partner cannot see it.

Looking at the artwork, the first pupil describes it in as much detail as they can whilst their partner tries to draw what their partner describes.

Describe and listen

Go back to the two paintings by Petrov-Vodkin and for each, discuss as a class:

1. What is being described in the painting?
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7. Why do you think the artist was feeling or thinking at the time?

Materials

- Coloured crayons or pencils | Paper
At the RA

These activities will encourage pupils to:

look carefully at artworks, describing what they see during self-directed visits to the exhibition

share their interpretations of different artworks

gain confidence in talking about artworks

identify and explore the context behind each artwork

Before coming to the RA, look at a plan of the exhibition (provided later in this resource) and select which rooms you would like pupils to focus on during your visit.

They can work in small groups of 3 to 4, each overseen by an adult.

We encourage pupils to sketch and draw in the galleries using pencils.

Encourage pupils to explain their ideas, opinions and reactions to the different artworks that they encounter.

Art in context

Use the worksheet provided at the end of this resource.

As you take the pupils through the exhibition, stop in three rooms and ask pupils to use the worksheet, sketching the artworks and answering or talking about the questions.

Recommended rooms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Room</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Stalin's Utopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Man and Machine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The Fate of the Peasants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Brave New World</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exploring 3D artworks

Find room 4, Kazimir Malevich.

Look at the paintings by Malevich.

What 2D shapes can you see?

Look at the 3D architects and their forms.

What shape are they?

Think about how the 2D shapes and 3D forms are similar and how they are different.

Imagine Malevich's painted people as 3D figures living in a city made of buildings that look like these architectons.

What materials would you use to construct sculptures of these people in three-dimensions?

What materials would you use to construct sculptures of the people?

What would it feel like to be a person living in a city made up of architectons?

Reflecting on the exhibition

At the end of your time in the galleries, discuss:

What did you like best of the art that you saw? Why?

What did you not like? Why?

What different materials did artists in the exhibition use?

Which artworks did you think were portraying the strongest message and why?

How do you think it felt to be an artist during this time in Russian history?

Would you recommend that your friends and family visit the exhibition? Why or why not?
Back in the classroom

These activities will:

draw on your pupils' experiences at the exhibition

encourage practical exploration and critical discussion

Exploring 2D and 3D forms
Two-part activity

Part one
Creating a new world

Pupils will create their own individual models of buildings and people, inspired by Malevich's architectons and paintings, before coming together as a class to create a collaborative installation in the form of a new world.

Creating the installation:
Talk about Malevich's room (room 4) in the exhibition.
Discuss what Malevich was trying to achieve through abstract forms and talk more about the architectons.

1. Working individually, using their sketches as a reference, encourage pupils to create their own buildings or people inspired by the Malevich room.
2. Encourage the pupils to bring the work together to create a collective installation from their sculptures.
3. Get pupils to work collectively on the theme of the display and what will be placed where.

Discuss how the addition of objects affected the overall work?

What would the title of the installation be? Why?

What words would you use to describe the atmosphere of this 'city'?

How would it feel to live there?

Materials
Card in different colours (echoing colours from Malevich's paintings) | Cardboard boxes or old cardboard tubes | Masking tape

Part two
Analysing tone

Using the installation piece created in part one as a still-life display, pupils will create charcoal drawings in 2D to describe the 3D forms.

1. Use spotlights or torches to light the sculptures, creating a dramatic effect on the city.
2. Seat the class around the spot-lit installation.
3. Ask pupils to lightly map out the arrangement to fill a whole page of A4 or A3.
4. Start to shade in the darkest tones first then work up to the lightest, which will be left as blank white paper.

How does the direction of light change the look and feel of the installation?

How do contrasting tones show 3D form?

Ask each pupil to talk about drawings and the decisions they made.

Materials
Thick white paper (A4 or A3) | Drawing boards | Charcoal sticks | Erasers | Pencils | Light or torch that can be used to spotlight elements of the installation
Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935)
Kazimir Malevich stands out among the artists of the avant-garde for his total commitment to a whole new way of thinking about art and life. In 1915-6 Malevich painted Suprematism, a work that represents his theory of the same name, with which he aimed to express ‘pure feeling’, abandoning the real world and instead turning to geometric shapes and bold colours. He was arrested in Russia in 1927, following a trip to Germany where he had been teaching and receiving critical success.

Malevich continued to work in this geometric, bold style, exhibiting his Suprematist works alongside his more “figurative” work in the 1932 exhibition organised by Nikolai Punin. He tried to make the case that his Suprematist works had been a precursor to the political revolution. His works of the early 1930s depicted peasants, workers and sportsmen but did not fit the doctrine of Socialist Realism. Instead, these faceless figures protested the damaging policies of collective farming under Stalin.
Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin (1878-1939)
Unlike some other artists in the exhibition, Petrov-Vodkin maintained his style of painting from 1917 to 1932, though he changed the content of his work. He trained as an icon painter and studied art in Petrograd, taking inspiration from the great masters of the Italian Renaissance. He was one of the few artists permitted to sketch Lenin in his coffin, and later produced work to suit Socialist Realism. Though a supporter of the new government, Petrov-Vodkin did not produce overt propaganda; he painted in a figurative, realist style, often using symbols and mystical elements. The positioning of subjects was important in his still-lifes, landscapes and portraits. He worked with the idea of a "spherical perspective", depicting what the viewers could see in front of, behind, and all around them. Petrov-Vodkin received critical acclaim, becoming the first president of the Union of Artists (previously the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, AKhRR) and having a major retrospective in 1936-7. He was even invited to paint murals for the Palace of the Soviets, a commission that was never realised. He died from tuberculosis in 1939.
Pavel Filonov (1883-1941)

Pavel Filonov does not fit neatly into the categories of avant-garde or Socialist Realist, instead he invented a style he called “Analytical Realism”. When he painted, he added to his subject little by little, “growing” his paintings like the process of growth in a living organism. The end result was an almost kaleidoscopic image made up of smaller, repeating elements. Filonov’s approach was not well-received in the 1920s and 1930s, and he was encouraged by those around him to paint commissions in the official Socialist Realist style, in order to survive. He continued to resist and he made paintings that were realistic in aesthetic but that did not conform to the doctrine of Socialist Realism. He insisted his ‘ideology will find its own path…’, and continued painting in his analytical realist style. He starved to death in the Siege of Leningrad in 1941.
Vassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)
Kandinsky is an extremely influential artist, known to have painted one of the first abstract paintings around 1910. Born in Russia, Kandinsky lived and worked in Moscow between 1914 and 1921. From 1896 to 1914, he lived in Munich, where he encountered the colors used in Impressionist, German Expressionist and Fauvist works and began to experiment with creating a “language” freed from figurative, capable of evoking ideas and emotions. The abstract artworks he produced were among the first of their kind. Motivated to leave Germany by the outbreak of the First World War, Kandinsky returned to Moscow. Kandinsky married and attempted to reintegrate himself into Russian culture. The Russian authorities in the years immediately after the revolution encouraged him, as he was a successful artist by this point. In 1918, he founded the Institute of Artistic Culture in Moscow, which strived to determine the course of artistic experimentation in post-revolutionary Russia, and he set up new museums across the Soviet state. In 1922, disillusioned by the rise of Socialist Realism, Kandinsky moved back to Germany to teach at the Bauhaus in Weimar.

Marc Chagall (1887-1985)
Marc Chagall was born in Russia to a Lithuanian Jewish family. He left for France in 1912. He returned to Russia to visit his fiancée in 1914 and was prevented from leaving by the outbreak of the First World War. He settled there, painting exuberant, fantastical pieces, buoyed by the reunion with his wife Bella. While Promenade, 1917-18 is primarily about his wife, the work’s optimism and spirit of freedom reflects his hopefulness about the Revolution. He was appointed Commissar for Art in 1918, and set up a school in Vitebsk, inviting other artists (Malevich, El Lissitsky) to teach there with him. He revelled in the artistic freedom accompanying the Revolution, but his art revolved around depicting people, places, memories and emotions. Later, once the civil war took hold, living conditions worsened and some of the initial exuberance surrounding the revolution dissipated. Chagall moved to Moscow and then left Russia permanently in 1922, returning to France.
Alexander Deineka (1899–1969)

Having originally trained as a graphic artist, Deineka often used bright colours and simplified form, focusing on the interplay between space and people. Deineka enjoyed success as an avant-garde painter in the 1920s. In the 1930s, he adopted Socialist Realism, depicting idealistic scenes of Soviet life in line with the Communist ideology.

Lyubov Popova (1889–1924)

One of the avant-garde Constructivists, Popova studied under Vladimir Tatlin. The new Communist society in Russia demanded a new visual culture and the Constructivists, among others, sought to provide it. They saw fine art painting as a practice that was linked to the bourgeoisie. They still believed in the usefulness of artistic creativity but in the necessity of applying it to concrete constructions and political messages. Popova described her painting, illustrated below, as one of a series of ‘preparatory experiments for concrete materialised constructions’. Popova died in Moscow aged 35, of scarlet fever.

Alexander Deineka
Race, 1932
Oil on canvas, 180 x 135

Lyubov Popova
Space-Force Construction, 1921
Oil, tessellation on plywood, 124 x 82.3 cm

The Association of Historical and Regional Art, Tula
Photo © Provided with assistance from the State Museum and Exhibition Center ROSIZO.
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Isaak Brodsky (1884–1939)
One of the leading Socialist Realists, Brodsky was known for painting revolutionary events and leaders of the Communist movement. He painted Lenin several times, even posthumously. He was a key member, alongside Boris Kustodiev and Konstantin Yuon, of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), which was set up in 1922. The same year the group staged at an exhibition called ‘Paintings by Realist Artists to Help the Starving’.

Boris Mikhailovich Kustodiev (1878–1927)
Primarily a portraitist and painter, Kustodiev depicted mass demonstrations and workers in support of the revolution. As living conditions worsened and the initial euphoria dispersed, he soon began to criticize the regime, painting pieces such as The Bolshevik, 1920, a metaphor for the crude force that had risen over the country. He created designs for the State Porcelain Museum in St. Petersburg from 1923.
A graphic designer and architect, El Lissitzky was influential in the birth of non-representational graphic art, as well as typography and advertising. He was born in Russia and after a period of travel in Germany and Europe in his late teens and early twenties, he returned to Moscow, due to the outbreak of war in 1914. In 1919, Marc Chagall invited El Lissitzky (along with Kazimir Malevich) to teach architecture and graphics at his school in Vitebsk, where El Lissitzky previously studied. Hugely influenced by Malevich, he became one of his most devoted followers, subscribing to the Suprematist idea of expressing pure feeling through graphic art. This brought about a monumental change in El Lissitzky’s art and he began to create propaganda posters in support of the revolution. In the early 1920s he became involved with different art magazines and designed and published books, also starting to use photography in his practice.
Art Explorers

At the exhibition, choose three artworks.
Draw what you see and write your answers to the questions for each artwork.

What do you see?

What does it remind you of?

How does it make you feel?

How do you think the artist was feeling?
Need more information?

The RA Exhibition in Focus guide, an informative source of information about different artworks and themes in the exhibition is given out free at teacher events and school visits or workshops. You can also download it from the RA website.

The RA website exhibition page has links to related articles, resources and key images of artworks.

Why not check out the RA exhibition catalogue for this exhibition? Available to buy from the RA shop.