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The Most Recognised Latvian [?] Artist in the World.

The Case of Gustavs Klucis (1895–1938)

IVETA DERKUSOVA

The political history of the twentieth century created several distorted gaps in the art history of the Baltic countries and in the collective memories of our nations. We are used to thinking in such categories as 'before' and 'after', i.e. in relation to the fifty-year-long Soviet occupation, and 'here' and 'there', i.e. art development in local art centres and in the rest of Europe. One of the topics in recent European modernism studies has been the reintegration of Eastern European national art schools into overall twentieth century European art history.¹ However, the inclusion of individual artists in a 'national art' context may bring up specific questions. The case of the Latvian-born artist Gustavs Klucis (1895–1938), whose worldwide recognition has been achieved in the framework of Russian avant-garde art, is among the most complex to be discussed within the context of Latvian art history, since his national and professional identities are hardly parallel.

The internationally accepted² interpretation of Gustavs Klucis's legacy places his creative work in the context of Russian avant-garde art. This is common for the majority of the relevant scholarly publications, both exploring Klucis's work in particular³ and in connection with his contemporaries in the framework of constructivism or photo-

1 E.g. S. A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

2 The author agrees with this viewpoint. See, e.g. I. Derkusova, *The Role of Photomontage in Shaping the Policies of the USSR. The New Kind of Agitational Art by Gustavs Klucis. – Red Cavalry: Creation and Power in Soviet Russia between 1917 and 1945*. Ed. R. Ferré. Madrid: Caja Madrid, Obra Social, 2011, pp. 158–179.

3 The author is referring to the monograph by Larissa Oginskaya (Л. Огинская, Густав Клуцис. Moscow: Советский художник, 1981), as well as to the notable Klucis solo exhibition catalogues of recent decades (*Gustav Klucis: Retrospektive*. Museum Fridericianum Kassel. Eds. H. Gassner, R. Nachtigäller. Stuttgart: Gerd Hatje, 1991; *M. Tupitsyn, Gustav Klutis and Valentina Kulagina: Photography and Montage After Constructivism*. New York: International Center of Photography; Göttingen: Steidl, 2004; *Gustavs Klucis (1895–1938): Collection du musée national des Beaux-Arts de Lettonie*. Ed. E. Guigon. Strasbourg: Musées de Strasbourg, 2005; *Gustavs Klucis: En el frente del arte constructivista. Obras del Museo Nacional de Arte de Letonia y de otras colecciones. Textos*. I. Derkusova, J. Ledezma, K. Lodder, G. Raunig. Sevilla: Cajasol Obra Social, 2009).

montage studies⁴. The artist's Latvian origin, while recognised worldwide, is usually mentioned by scholars as a biographical detail that does not affect his legacy.

At the same time, it should be noted that, in Latvia, Gustavs Klucis's national identity is of greater importance than elsewhere. The course of his life was common for thousands of Latvians who stayed in Russia after the Bolshevik coup of 1917 and fell victims to the Stalin purges in the late 1930s. Moreover, today the world's most important collection of his works is owned by the Latvian National Museum of Art. Through the lens of the collective memory of Latvians, no more arguments are needed to place him strongly into the Latvian (history) context and credit him with the title 'the most recognised Latvian artist in the world'. While this rather emotional statement is seen as a reminder of the world-famous artist's birthplace, it works. The risk of inadequate interpretation of Klucis's work arises if the designation 'Latvian artist' is used to associate him directly with the Latvian art context, namely Latvian modernism, ignoring the fact that his creative legacy was introduced into the Latvian art scene only posthumously.⁵

The author argues that neither the artist's national identity *per se* nor the present location of his artworks serves as an argument for inclusion of the artist's legacy in the national art context. Therefore, the objective of this article is to discuss the creative work of Klucis and his contemporaries⁶ in Latvia in the light of parallel and distinctive aspects, focusing on less studied details.

The generation of Latvian modernists

By age Gustavs Klucis belongs to the generation of Latvian artists who passed into history as the founders of Latvian national modernism. However, it is almost impossible to talk about direct creative contacts between Klucis and Latvian modernists. They had common historical background crucial for art development all over the Europe, but there are very few parallels in their biographies.

In his Eastern European modernism study, Steven A. Mansbach concludes that '[s]ince Klucis, Ioganson, and Drēviņš exerted little direct influence over avant-garde developments in Latvia itself, they fall outside the principal focus' of the chapter devoted to Latvian and Estonian modernism.⁷ Mansbach's opinion is reasonable, but it should be pointed out that Klucis's situation is even more unique.

4 See C. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1983; M. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph: 1924–1937*. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1996. And also catalogues of the groundbreaking Russian avant-garde exhibitions: *Werke aus der Sammlung Costakis: Russische Avantgarde 1910–1930*. Ed. S. v. Wiese. Düsseldorf: Kunstmuseum, 1977; Москва – Париж 1900–1930. Государственный Музей изобразительного искусства им. А. С. Пушкина. Каталог выставки, 2 тома. Moscow: Советский художник, 1981; Великая утопия: Русский и советский авангард 1915–1932. Государственная Третьяковская галерея, Государственный Русский музей. Bern: Bentelli; Moscow: Галарт, 1993.

5 A collection of works by Gustavs Klucis was acquired by the State Museum of Latvian and Russian Art (now the Latvian National Museum of Art) in 1959. The collection contains some 400 artworks. There is more information about the collection later in this article.

6 The well-known influence of Klucis's work on Latvian design in the 1970s falls outside of the focus of this article, but it cannot be completely ignored.

7 S. A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939*, p. 340.

Unlike two other 'Latvians of the Russian avant-garde'⁸, Aleksandrs Drēviņš (1889–1938) and Kārlis Johansons (1892–1929), whose creative work before leaving for Russia can be found in records of early Latvian modernism⁹, Klucis left Latvia before his artistic activity had been noticed in Riga art circles, and spent his entire creative life in Moscow.

Klucis studied at the Riga City Art School (RPMSk)¹⁰ from 1913 till 1915 (fig. 1). The school provided academic art education typical of the time. When Klucis quit, he had completed classes in the drawing and painting of portraits, and classes in the drawing and painting of plaster cast figures, as well as having passed an exam on perspective.¹¹ Among his classmates were the modernists Jēkabs Kazaks (1895–1920), Romans Suta (1896–1944) and Erasts Šveics (1895–1992)¹², and Klucis may have also known older fellow students.

However, for uncertain reasons, Klucis's name was left out of the records documenting the birth of Latvian modernism. In February 1915, a number of young painters, including Jēkabs Kazaks, Valdemārs Tone (1892–1958), Konrāds Ubāns (1893–1981) and also later the Russian avant-garde representatives Aleksandrs Drēviņš and Kārlis Johansons, encountered Jāzeps Grosvalds (1891–1920) after his return from art studies in Paris. In Grosvalds's family's apartment on Theatre Boulevard in Riga, the Latvian modernist group *Zaļā puķe* (*Green Flower*) was informally founded.¹³ During the following years, Grosvalds became a leading theoretician of Latvian modernism, which to a great extent developed under the influence of French art, especially cubism.¹⁴ The ideas of *Green Flower* flourished in the creative work of members of the Riga Artists Group in the 1920s. Whether it was personal reasons or professional immaturity that held Klucis back from entering the circles of his classmates and from participating in discussions of the development of Latvian art is unclear, but in his later autobiographical writings Klucis never mentioned his fellow students or his acquaintance with Grosvalds.

The World War I front approached Riga in April 1915. Klucis was conscripted into the army of the Russian empire and sent to Petrograd.¹⁵ In June 1915, Latvians in Riga were permitted to establish national riflemen's battalions, later famous for battles against German forces during World War I and for the defence of the independent Latvian state in 1919 against an invading army led by Pavel Bermond-Avalov. The reason why Klucis, then a second-year student at the RPMSk, was conscripted into the army while his schoolmates were not is uncertain. He might have been subjected to military duty due to his age (in 1915 he was twenty) without any legal chance to receive a postpone-

8 The author is referring to the title of the exhibition *Three Latvians of the Russian Avant-Garde* in the State Museum of Contemporary Art of Thessaloniki in 2007, where works by Gustavs Klucis, Aleksandrs Drēviņš and Kārlis Johansons from the George Costakis Collection were shown.

9 In 1915 Drēviņš and Johansons were among the founders of the early Latvian modernist group *Zaļā puķe* (*Green Flower*).

10 Beginning in 1909 the school was led by Vilhelms Purvītis (1872–1945).

11 Рижская Городская художественная школа. Удостоверение Густаву Клуцису, 8 мая 1915 года. – Manuscript in the collection of the Latvian National Museum of Art.

12 D. Lamberga, Jēkabs Kazaks. Riga: Neputns, 2007, p. 17.

13 D. Lamberga, Klasiskais modernisms: Latvijas glezniecība 20. gadsimta sākumā [Classical modernism: early 20th century Latvian painting]. Riga: Neputns, 2004, p. 32.

14 D. Lamberga, Klasiskais modernisms: Latvijas glezniecība 20. gadsimta sākumā, pp. 138–140.

15 Now St. Petersburg. From August 1914 till January 1924 it was Petrograd, and from 26 January 1924 till 1991 Leningrad. It was the capital of Russia until 10 March 1918.

ment. On the other hand, he may have had personal reasons not to ask for delay of duty. Documentary sources provide no information. While on military duty in Petrograd, Klucis attended the School of Drawing of the Imperial Society for the Encouragement of the Arts from 1915 till 1917. Most likely because he was a soldier, there are no records of Klucis's contacts with prominent contemporary artists in Petrograd.

In July the evacuation of citizens, along with the evacuation of industrial enterprises, from Riga, then the fourth largest city in the Russian empire, began. Over 300,000 refugees fled to Russia. The RPMSk was also closed, and its secretariat was evacuated to Petrograd. Thanks to Purvītis, an academician at the [Russian] Imperial Academy of Arts¹⁶, eleven pupils of the RPMSk were released from military duties for a while and were allowed to transfer to different art schools in Russia¹⁷. A number of Klucis's schoolmates¹⁸, Kazaks, Suta and the older students Tone, Ubāns and Johansons, to mention the most famous of them, went to the Penza Art School. Their studies were interrupted again in 1916–1917, when all of them were conscripted into the army and served in different Latvian rifle regiments.

Separated by art studies or military duty, young Latvian artists of the *Green Flower* group kept in contact through letters that passed between Riga, Petrograd, Penza, Paris, London and Moscow, and kept alive their discussion about the course of the development of Latvian art. Drēviņš, who lived in Moscow beginning in August 1915, in a letter to Ubāns told his friend about contemporary French paintings he had seen in the collections of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov, as well as about recent exhibitions.¹⁹

The Bolshevik coup (October Revolution) of 1917 in Petrograd and the proclamation of the independent Republic of Latvia in 1918 required that each Latvian artist decide whether to stay in Russia or return home.

The revolution of 1917 heavily influenced the twenty-two-year-old Klucis, shaping both his political opinions and his future direction in art. Klucis volunteered for duty in the Ninth Latvian Red Riflemen Regiment and took part in the October Revolution. Why did Klucis take the side of rebellion against the tsar's regime so decidedly? One of the reasons might be found in Klucis's family history. His oldest brother Jānis had been imprisoned in Russia after revolutionary activities in Rūjiena in 1905. A punishment expedition arrested Jānis Klucis, and condemned him to hard labour for fifteen years. In addition, in 1917–1918 Klucis may have come to the decision that, from an artistic professional perspective,²⁰ it was worth staying in Moscow. Later it became evident that due to his political opinions he was prepared to implement leftist ideas into art.

16 The main art schools of the Russian empire were supervised by the Imperial Academy of Arts.

17 Письмо Вильгельма Пурвита от 4 августа 1915 года в канцелярию Императорской Академии художеств [Letter of Vilhelms Purvītis to the Secretariat of the Imperial Academy of Arts from 4 August 1915]. – Александр Древин в музейных собраниях. Ed. Т. Зелюкина. Moscow: Государственная Третьяковская галерея, 2003, p. 15.

18 D. Lamberga, Jēkabs Kazaks, pp. 11–19.

19 Before they saw the collections of Shchukin and Morozov in Moscow, the majority of Latvian artists knew contemporary French paintings only from reproductions and what was told them by Grosvalds. See the letter of Aleksandrs Drēviņš to Konrāds Ubāns from 24 April 1916. – Laikmets vēstulēs: Latviešu jauno mākslinieku sarakste 1914–1920 [The age in letters: correspondence of young Latvian artists 1914–1920]. Ed. A. Nodieva. Riga: Valters un Rapa, 2004, pp. 116–117.

20 According to the memoirs of the artist's elder brother Ādams, becoming an artist was Klucis's dream since childhood. – Manuscript in private archive in Sweden, pp. 86–88.

Klucis's military duties involved serving as Lenin's guard in the Kremlin; in March 1918 he was transferred from Petrograd to the new capital Moscow, together with the new Soviet government. Somewhat paradoxically, Klucis's entering into the art circles of Moscow was related to the activities of Latvians. In Moscow, he engaged in the work of the art studio of the Ninth Latvian Red Riflemen Regiment (the 'Kremlin Studio'), founded in the Kremlin in April 1918. On 1 September studio members opened their first exhibition at the Voznesensky monastery in the Kremlin. The works of fifteen Latvian-born artists were presented in this exhibition.²¹ Mostly drawings and paintings of riflemen's everyday life were on display, and it is known that Klucis had a separate exhibition room for his works. As a result of this exhibition, Klucis received a recommendation for art studies at the Free State Art Workshops in Moscow (SVOMAS), where he became the artist we know today.

The exhibition of 1918 is notable as one of the few joint Latvian artists' exhibitions in Moscow of that time, aiming to gather as many compatriots as possible. Kārlis Johansons, in a letter to Niklāvs Strunke (1894–1966), listed Klucis among the artists participating in the 'Kremlin Studio' exhibition, saying that Strunke might know Klucis and inviting Strunke and other Latvian artists to come to Moscow from Riga as soon as possible and bring their drawings from the period of being riflemen. Strunke and the other artists who had already returned to Latvia did not come to Moscow. This is the only record of Klucis's name in the letters written by his RPMSk schoolmates.²²

The events of 1917 influenced all of Europe. Latvian artists – eyewitnesses of the revolutionary events in Russia – had also accumulated some Proletkult²³ ideas. For example, the Latvian sculptors Teodors Zaļkalns (1876–1972) and Kārlis Zāle (1888–1942) contributed to Lenin's Plan of 'Monumental Propaganda' in Petrograd in 1918–1919.²⁴ At the same time, the attempt to bring 'world revolution' and Soviet power to the newly born Republic of Latvia in 1919 failed. However, it should be noted that on 1 May 1919, International Workers' Day was celebrated in Riga in a style characteristic of Russian propaganda art of the civil war period. Many Latvian artists created city decorations. Among them were the modernists Suta, Strunke and Ubāns, as well as representatives of the traditional art school.²⁵

After the crucial year 1919, political life in Latvia calmed down. The further development of Latvian modernism brought together initial inspirations from French art and the influence of the international avant-garde. Beginning in 1922, thanks to Cultural Foundation grants²⁶, Latvian artists frequently travelled to Paris and Berlin, where artists from all over Europe, including emigrants from Soviet Russia, shared their ideas. The first Latvian avant-garde art magazine, *Laikmets* (*The Age*), inspired

21 See anonymous advertisement of the exhibition: Krievijas Cīņa [Russia's fight] 6 September 1918.

22 See letter by Kārlis Johansons to Niklāvs Strunke from 5 September 1918. – *Laikmets* vēstulēs: Latviešu jauno mākslinieku sarakste 1914–1920, pp. 173–174.

23 Proletkult (Proletarian Culture Association) – the leading institution promoting the Bolshevik ideology in different fields of culture. Formally established by the People's Commissariat for the Education of Soviet Russia in Petrograd on 28 November (11 December) 1917.

24 Zaļkalns returned to Riga in 1920, while Zāle returned after his Berlin period (1921–1923).

25 A. Brasliņa, *Laikmeta iesauktie. Aculiecinieki un radītāji* [Conscripts of the age. Eyewitnesses and creators]. – *Latvijai topot. Māksla un laikmets. No de facto līdz de jure* [The birth of Latvia. Art and the age. From de facto to de jure]. Ed. A. Brasliņa. Rīga: Neputns, Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs, 2008, pp. 50–51.

26 A. Brasliņa, *Nozīmīgāko notikumu hronika* [Chronology of major events]. – *Latvijai topot*, p. 227.

by the famous edition *Beuub-Objet-Gegenstand*, was published in Berlin in 1922, on the initiative of the sculptor Kārlis Zāle, an active member of the Düsseldorf Congress of International Progressive Artists, and one of the few Latvians whose entire creative work can be associated with constructivism.

The left wing of constructivism, represented later by Klucis in his propaganda art pieces, did not appear in Latvian art for both political and aesthetic reasons. As pointed out by the art historian Dace Lamberga, Latvian artists became acquainted with the term 'constructivism' in Berlin rather than in Russia, since during World War I and the first postwar years their interest in contemporary art dealing with diverse trends of geometrical abstractionism was minimal, and constructivism in Russia had not become a term when the majority of Latvian artists returned home.²⁷

The 1922 Russian art exhibition at the *Van Diemen* gallery in Berlin was the only exhibition during Klucis's life-time where his works were exhibited together with Latvian modernists, in particular sculptures by Kārlis Zāle, though their creative encounter happened at a distance: Zāle was in Berlin, while Klucis stayed in Moscow.

Pioneer of photomontage

Klucis's contribution to Russian avant-garde and the development of constructivism in particular, was very important and versatile. If we consider his identity within the Russian avant-garde context, his name is primarily associated with photomontage, both in creative work and theory.

In autumn 1918 Gustavs Klucis became a student of SVOMAS, and in 1921 graduated from the VKhUTEMAS²⁸ painting department, but his active position pushed him to search for other means of expression.

While studying at VKhUTEMAS, Gustavs Klucis deliberately experimented with the means of expression of the modern art movements (Cezannism, cubism, futurism and suprematism), exploring their limits and searching for their unique art language in the hope of achieving the goals set by the revolution. In his autobiography, Klucis was later to write: 'The search for a strong new revolutionary form had begun. [...] At that time I was convinced that the revolution required new forms of art which had never before existed. I gave myself a singular objective – to work hard to exhaust all current 'isms', and thus to be released from the burdens of the past, from the old schools, and to find new forms for the present.'²⁹ Klucis progressed through the formal practice of modernist directions at breakneck speed, frequently mastering methods of several art

27 It should be noted that, in her book *Classical Modernism*, Dace Lamberga mostly focuses on painting; therefore, her suggestions on the appearance of constructivism in Latvia cannot be considered complete. At the same time, Lamberga provides the chapters 'Constructivism in Russia and Europe' and 'Latvian Modernists in Russia', where works by Drēviņš, Johansons and Klucis are discussed in the framework of suprematism and constructivism. The author argues that the interpretation of Klucis's work in the framework of constructivism should not be limited to his early paintings, which would raise the question of whether the inclusion of Klucis's works in the study of Latvian modernism is meaningful (D. Lamberga, *Klasiskais modernisms: Latvijas glezniecība 20. gadsimta sākumā*, pp. 155–168).

28 In 1919 SVOMAS was reorganised into the Higher Art and Technical Studios in Moscow (VKhUTEMAS).

29 See the artist's autobiography: Клуцис, Г. Г. – Советские художники. Vol. 1. Moscow: ИЗОГИЗ, 1937, pp. 115–116.

trends at the same time or even combining them. Within two years – 1918 and 1919 – he took the road from post-impressionist painting to photomontage.

During the formation of his constructivist period, Klucis was influenced by several theoretical currents that were, to a great extent, associated with his professors at VKhUTEMAS. Klucis met Kazimir Malevich in 1919, but in August 1920 he participated in an exhibition organised by Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner³⁰ at the Tverskoi Boulevard music pavilion, where the two artists announced their 'Realistic Manifesto', featuring also criticism of cubism and futurism. In 1920 and 1921 Klucis worked on both graphic constructions and their realisation in various materials: wood, metal and so on. His works in the UNOVIS³¹ group exhibition in Moscow, which took place in the Institute for Artistic Culture (INKhUK) in December 1921, already show Klucis's deliberate movement towards constructivism. From his autobiography, we learn that 'on display were colour, plane and spatial constructions as well as reliefs from various materials, which, as a result of their further development, laid the foundations for a new method of organisation of the artistic-industrial object'³² (fig. 2).

His propaganda stands, tribunes and radio-orators made for the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922 clearly indicate Klucis's growing interest in art as an object of social commission (fig. 3). Klucis regarded this moment as the end of his objectless period.³³ A decisive turn to photomontage was made, and the resulting creative and theoretical legacy of Klucis clearly illustrates the growth of photomontage from an experimental avant-garde art technique into an important instrument of USSR policies. Photography had enormous potential for the development of a new artistic language, and Klucis successfully mastered the new technique in the service of Soviet propaganda.

'All attempts to turn an easel-painting into an agit-picture are fruitless',³⁴ wrote Osip Brik in 1924, at a time when photomontage had already successfully secured its position in the Soviet Union print press and in the 'mass book', becoming one of the leading propaganda art forms. The forefathers of the doctrine of socialist realism, which developed in the mid-1930s, proved that, in a certain type of political system, painting can serve the goals of propaganda very well. However, immediately after the revolution, its political leaders were rushing to involve avant-garde artists in developing the cultural policy of the new state.³⁵

30 At the beginning of November 1919 Malevich went to the Vitebsk Art School, and Antoine Pevsner took over the running of his studio at SVOMAS.

31 UNOVIS (Affirmers of the New Art) – a group of Russian artists, founded and led by Kazimir Malevich at the Vitebsk Art School in 1919. Klucis was not a member of UNOVIS.

32 Curriculum vitae. Gustav Klucis, Lehrer der Farbkurse an den VChUTEMAS. – Manuscript in the artist's family archive. Cited in: Gustav Klucis: Retrospektive, p. 300.

33 Клусис, Г. Г. – Советские художники, p. 116.

34 O. Brik, From Picture to Calico-Print (1924). – LEF 1924, no. 6, pp. 30–31, 34 (cited in *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Eds. Ch. Harrison, P. Wood. Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, pp. 325).

35 See S. Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution as Class War. – Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*. Ed. S. Fitzpatrick. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978, pp. 8–40.

Moreover, it turned out that the aesthetic platform of the constructivists³⁶ was able to successfully accumulate new political approaches and perform the task that had arisen during the artists' post-revolutionary creative quests: art had to become a means of propagating the ideologies of the Communist Party among the nation's masses. Of course, associating constructivism only with politically engaged propaganda and mass art is inaccurate, but it is clear that political photomontage, which found itself at the peak of the 'mass art' hierarchy, was, to a great extent, a logical step in the development of constructivism.

First, the constructivists' utilitarian and material theories disclaimed the function of art as satisfying the decorative and aesthetic needs of the individual, instead linking the future of the creative process with technical progress, functionality and manufacturing.³⁷

Secondly, having been influenced by the new age of discoveries in science and technology, artists rediscovered photography, whose progress in assuming its position alongside the traditional forms of fine art – in many ways even aspiring to take their place – was fostered by its ability to introduce such qualities as speed of preparation, mechanisation, and image precision into art. Photography also solved one of the central formal problems of avant-garde art: the depiction of space on a flat surface was freed from the schematics of linear perspective.³⁸

Thirdly, along with the emergence of ideological tasks on the artists' agenda, the question concerning the contents of a work of art returned, having been left in the background during the dominant formal discussions of the preceding decade. After the revolution, life itself was declared to be the substance of art; therefore, a new visual language had to be found which (a) would bring a new dimension of topicality into art, and (b) would correspond to the declaration that art must become a daily element in the life of each Soviet citizen. The task of making the substance of art easy to understand for the target audience as defined by the revolution leaders – the proletariat – ultimately called for the need to return to the visually recognisable image.

The ability of photography to record actual events as they take place – i.e. its documentary aspect – was the most important, though certainly not the only, peculiarity of this medium, which was particularly well-received by the masters of Soviet political photomontage. The leading Russian constructivists (Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Gustavs Klucis and others) were seriously interested in the potential offered by photography as a modern art technique in creating a new visual language. By shifting the emphasis from recording reality, or factography, to montage – a method of image-construction borrowed from cinematography – they turned photomontage into the leading type of Soviet propaganda art.

36 In 1922, the leftist First Working Group of Constructivists, led by Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Aleksei Gan, Konstantin Medunetski, the brothers Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg and Karlis Johansons, among others, had already not only formulated in their programme the new principles of material construction, but had also defined their tasks in the field of ideology and propaganda. See A. Rodchenko, V. Stepanova, Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists (1922). – *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, pp. 317–318.

37 See A. Ган, Конструктивизм. Tver, 1922.

38 For more information regarding the effect of photography on transformations of the Russian avant-garde fine arts, see J. E. Bowlt, *The Art of Actuality: Photography and the Russian Avant-Garde. – Poetics of Space: A Critical Photographic Anthology*. Ed. S. Yates. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995, pp. 35–49.

In several of his articles on photomontage, Klucis promoted the advantages of the new visual language. Being an authority among his colleagues and claiming to be recognised worldwide as ‘the founder of political photomontage in the USSR’³⁹, Klucis wrote about his own experience in developing this media.

Although in his article ‘Photomontage as a New Kind of Agitation Art’, published in 1931, Klucis referred to his work *Dynamic City* (1919) as the first photomontage in the USSR⁴⁰, in July 1918, when preparing the panel sketch *Attack. Latvian Riflemen*, linked to the suppression of the uprising by members of the Left SR (Socialist-Revolutionary Party or Esers) during the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets, in his image, made in the tradition of cubo-futurism with an expressed rhythm of diagonals, he had integrated photographs of buildings cut out of press publications and a photograph of the Russian tsar Nicholas II cut into strips (fig. 4). Paradoxically, this very early example of photomontage, not considered by the artist in 1931 worthy of mentioning, must be considered not only the first example of photomontage in general, but the first political photomontage in the USSR. Although Gustavs Klucis maintained⁴¹ that in this piece he was looking for a way to transform a thematic composition into an abstraction, the photographic elements are what make *Attack* a topical reflection of political events and charges this work with a very important ideological load.

Dynamic City, from a year later, is a programmatic photomontage (fig. 5). In the structure and idea of the composition, Klucis went much further than overcoming the limits of the two-dimensional plane. He created an image of a city liberated from the graphic plane, freely rotating around its axis and to its depths. When commenting on the use of photography in *Dynamic City*, the artist, in fact, revealed the aggregate of the main means of expression, which would further shape the visual language of his photomontage: ‘For the first time the photograph had been used as an element of texture and imagery, and montaged according to the principle of varying scale, destroying age-old canons of representation, perspective and proportion.’⁴² In order to achieve the strongest possible visual impression, Klucis changed the scale of the image elements in his compositions and, when taking photographs, skillfully used a very high or a very low point of perspective, thus changing the perspective of image perception.

The range of technical methods used by Gustavs Klucis was extensive. During the initial years, he worked mainly with the traditional collage technique, using both printed images and photographs taken by himself and others. In 1924, he purchased his own camera, which enabled him to take more accurate photographs for his compositions and opened up opportunities for experimenting in the photographic laboratory. At the end of the 1920s, he used the double-exposure method, negative sandwiching, and produced photograms.

39 Klucis was invited to write a ‘Photomontage’ entry for the encyclopedia: Г. Клуцис, Фотомонтаж. – Большая советская энциклопедия. Vol. 58. Moscow, 1936.

40 Г. Клуцис, Фотомонтаж как новый вид агитационного искусства. – Изофронт. Классовая борьба на фронте пространственных искусств. Ed. P. I. Novitski. Moscow: ОГИЗ-ИЗОГИЗ, 1931, pp. 119–132.

41 A fragment of the author’s writing has been preserved under the composition.

42 Клуцис, Г. Г. – Советские художники, p. 116.

If we look back at historical and religious traditions (which were intensively used by the ideologists of the Communist Party when shaping the new Soviet traditions)⁴³, it becomes clear why the central position of Soviet mass art was devoted to the iconography of the leader's image. The contents of Gustavs Klucis's photomontages reveal the targeted process of construction of the Soviet state and society, led and controlled by the ideologists of the Communist Party, which gradually strengthened the cult of the leader during the years of Stalin's reign.⁴⁴

The farewell to Lenin, who died on 21 January 1924, was turned into a sort of ritual. The masses of grieving people were depicted in literature (the poem 'Vladimir Il'ich Lenin' by Vladimir Mayakovskii, for instance) and perpetuated in art. In the following years, Klucis used the silhouette of Lenin's figure with his characteristically raised arm in many of his compositions, on posters and book covers. The image towering above the crowds, rallying the masses to battle or showing the way, is a universal sign and a symbol of that era, accepted by the society as a sort of canon.

But, for Lenin's successors, much more important than reproducing the nation's grief was to ensure that the leader's ideas (and the ideas attributed to the leader) were spread among the masses. Klucis describes this in his autobiography: 'My task was to make the revolutionary struggle of the working class and Soviet reality the contents of my creative output, converting it into artistic images comprehensible to the masses. [...] Before me was the challenge of transforming the poster, the book illustration, the postcard into mass conductors of Party slogans.'⁴⁵ From the perspective of political poster development, it is important to mention the poster series dedicated to Lenin published in the second and third double-issue of the magazine *Молодая гвардия* (*Young Guard*) in 1924. In an article about these works, the author of Klucis's 1981 monograph, Larisa Oginskaya, endowed Klucis with the identity 'Artist of the Lenin theme'.⁴⁶ Klucis himself referred to his works as *photo-slogans-montages*. From that moment on, the slogan text became a key component of the political photomontage (fig. 6).

Along with the announcement of the First Five-Year Plan at the end of 1928, the emphasis on propaganda and mass art shifted from glorification of the revolution to building socialism. The working man (the coal miner, machine-operator, construction worker, etc.) became the new hero of Soviet society (fig. 7). The new industrialisation policy changed the entire country into a huge building site. All spheres of life – industry, energy, transport, agriculture and even sports and culture – became arenas of socialist competition. The period of socialist reconstruction progressed under blaring slogans, which were meant to occupy the entire consciousness of the new, collective Soviet citizen. Therefore, political posters by Klucis, printed in tens of thousands, were among the most effective weapons of the political propaganda of the time. In

43 In this respect, symptomatic examples were the 'red corners'. They were special premises or stands in enterprises and workplaces where propaganda materials were placed. By setting up portraits of the revolution's heroes in a place of honour, the Soviet power had transformed the 'red corner' or home altar tradition nurtured in the Orthodox Church for centuries.

44 See also: V. E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*. (Studies on the History of Society and Culture 27.) Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

45 Клуцис, Г. Г. – Советские художники, р. 116.

46 Л. Огинская, Густав Клуцис – художник Ленинской темы. – Декоративное искусство СССР 1970, по. 4, рр. 36–41.

1932, Klucis introduced the use of photomontage in monumental propaganda. Colossal photomontage panels made to decorate cities during Soviet national festivities (May Day, the commemorative day of the 1917 Revolution, etc.) released photomontage from the confines of the sheet of paper and became Gustavs Klucis's contribution to the consolidation of the role of photomontage in the art of propaganda.

Beginning in the first half of the 1930s, all industrial achievements were linked to the persona of Stalin. His monumental image towering above the masses marched in time with the workers or was presented as a full-size portrait in the photomontages of the time, replacing the image of Lenin, which had embodied the ideals of the preceding decade. From 1930 on, Stalin referred to himself not only as the one implementing Lenin's ideas, but also as the one who aspired to the role of leader in the final stage of bringing the Marxist theory to life. Klucis's poster *Raise higher the flag of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin!* (1933) illustrates the new approach (fig. 8).

It is clear that Gustavs Klucis was not the one choosing the themes for his posters. From 1929 on, he collaborated with the State Publishing House (ИЗОГИЗ),⁴⁷ and by 1935 he had created at least seventy political posters. As the head of the photomontage unit of the *October*⁴⁸, he also used his publications to defend the advantages of this type of art in the field of propaganda art: 'Replacing a drawing of a hand with a photograph of it, the artist represents this or that moment more truthfully, more vitally, and more understandably for the masses. The rationale for this replacement is that the photograph is not a sketch of the visual fact; it is its precise fixation. This accuracy, attached to documentary photographs, has a force of influence on the viewer that a graphic representation cannot ever achieve.'⁴⁹

In the early 1930s the atmosphere in Moscow had become fairly unconducive to creative work, in particular for artists representing avant-garde movements. The 11 March 1931 'Resolution on Poster Literature Production' by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) (TsK VKP[b])⁵⁰ centralised all poster production, established control over poster themes and tightened censorship. As a result, the number of commissions for posters Klucis was used to receiving from IZOGIZ considerably decreased. The 23 April 1932 'Resolution on the Reorganisation of Literature and Art Associations'⁵¹ by the Central Committee, closed down all creative societies and was followed by the founding of the centralised Union of Soviet Artists. Both resolutions cleared the way for the victory of socialist realism and raised an avalanche-like outburst of criticism of formalism and a campaign against *group-ism* (*групповщина*) at all levels. As early as May 1931, Gustavs Klucis, together with six colleagues from the artists-productionists group, announced their withdrawal from the *October*, which

47 IZOGIZ also acted as a censor.

48 *The October* – Association of Artistic Labor (Объединение новых видов художественного труда *Октябрь*) – was founded in 1928, and Gustavs Klucis was among the authors of its first declaration. His comrades at the *October* photomontage section were his wife Valentina Kulagina and the artists Sergei Senkin, Vasilii Elkin and Natalia Pinus.

49 Г. Клуцис, Фотомонтаж как новый вид агитационного искусства, p. 120.

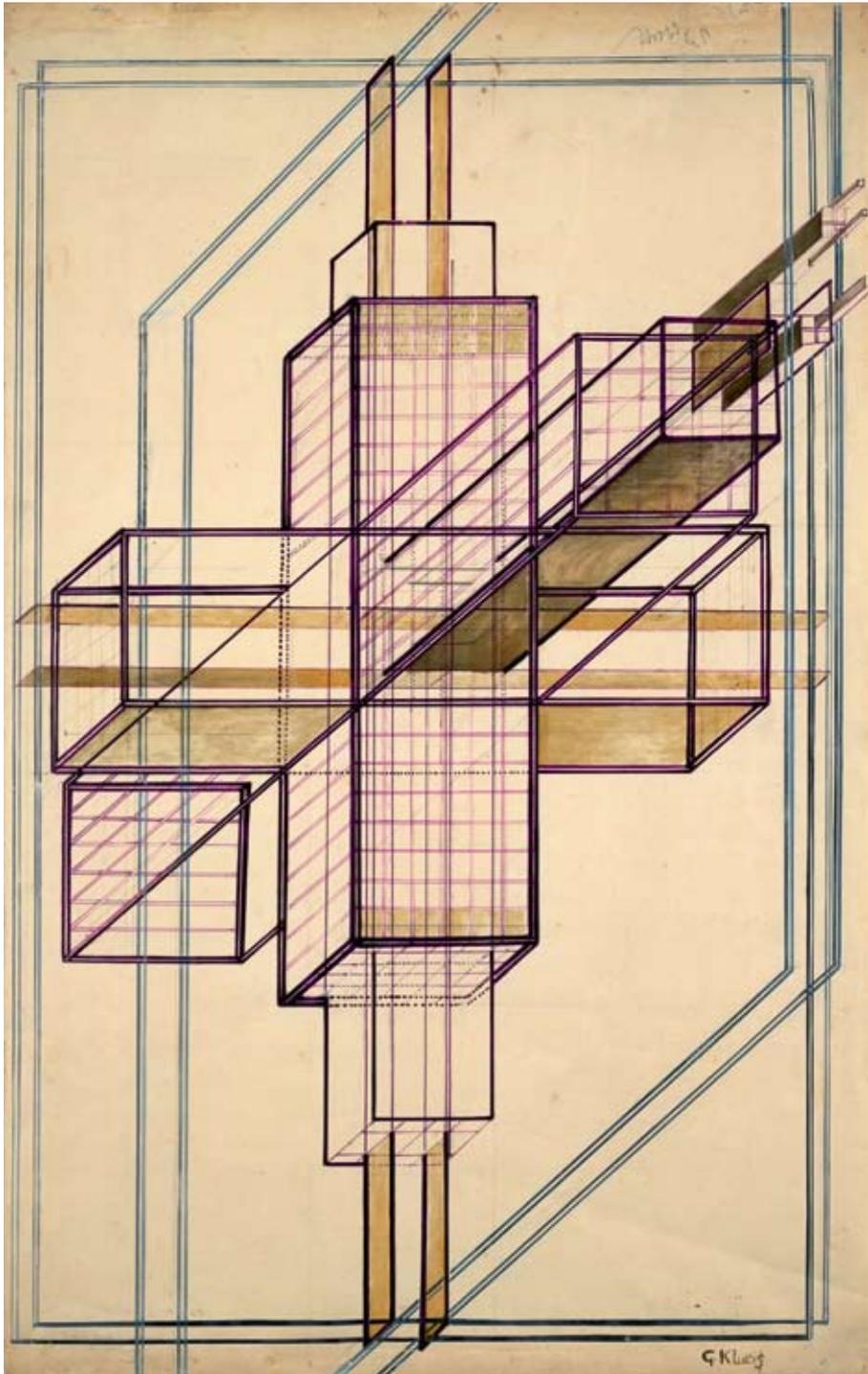
50 Постановление ЦК ВКП(б) 'О картинно-плакатной агитации'. – За пролетарское искусство 1931, no. 2. Moscow, Leningrad: ОГИЗ-ИЗОГИЗ, p. 1.

51 Постановление ЦК ВКП(б) 'О перестройке литературно-художественных организаций' от 23 апреля 1932. г. – За пролетарское искусство 1932, no. 7–8, p. 1.



1.

Gustavs Klucis, Photograph (c.1914–1915).
Collection of the Latvian National Museum of Art (LNMA).



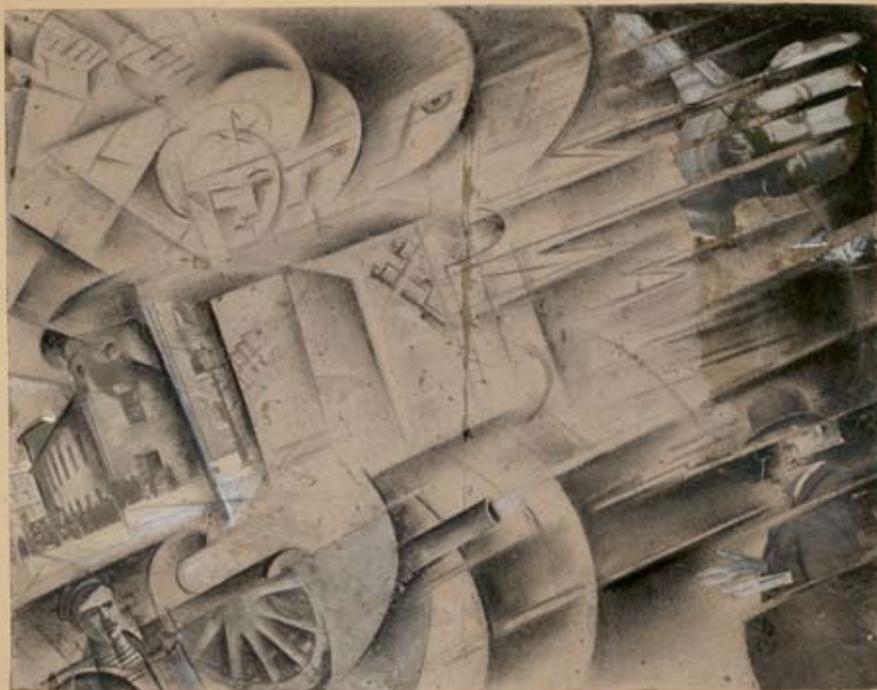
2.

Gustavs Klucis. Construction (1920–1921).
Coloured inks and egg varnish on paper. 66.4 x 41.5 cm.
LNMA inv. no. VMM Z-6673.
Photo by Normunds Brasliņš.



3.

Gustavs Klucis. Screen-Tribune-Kiosk (1922) for the Fifth Anniversary of the October Revolution. Illustration for an article by Boris Arvatov in the magazine *Пролетарское студенчество* 1923, no. 2. Letterpress print on paper. 25.9 x 16.1 cm. LNMA inv. no. Z-8750/38.



- 4• Gustavs Klucis. Attack. Latvian Riflemen (Attack. A Strike at the Counter-revolution). Design for a panel at the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in Moscow (1918).
Photomontage, pencil and charcoal on paper. 52 x 67,5 cm.
LNMA inv. no. VMM Z-7853.
Photo by Normunds Brasliņš.



5. Gustavs Klucis. *Dynamic City* (1919).
Photomontage, collage, gouache, pencil and aluminium foil on paper. 37.6 x 25.8 cm.
LNMA inv. no. VMM Z-6701.



6.

Gustavs Klucis. Oppressed Peoples of the Whole World – Under the Banner of the Comintern Bring Down Imperialism! (1924). From the series of photomontage-slogans dedicated to Lenin in the magazine *Молодая гвардия* 1924, no. 2-3. Photomontage, collage and gouache on paper, on cardboard. 31.9 x 24.3 cm. LNMA inv. no. VMM Z-8868.

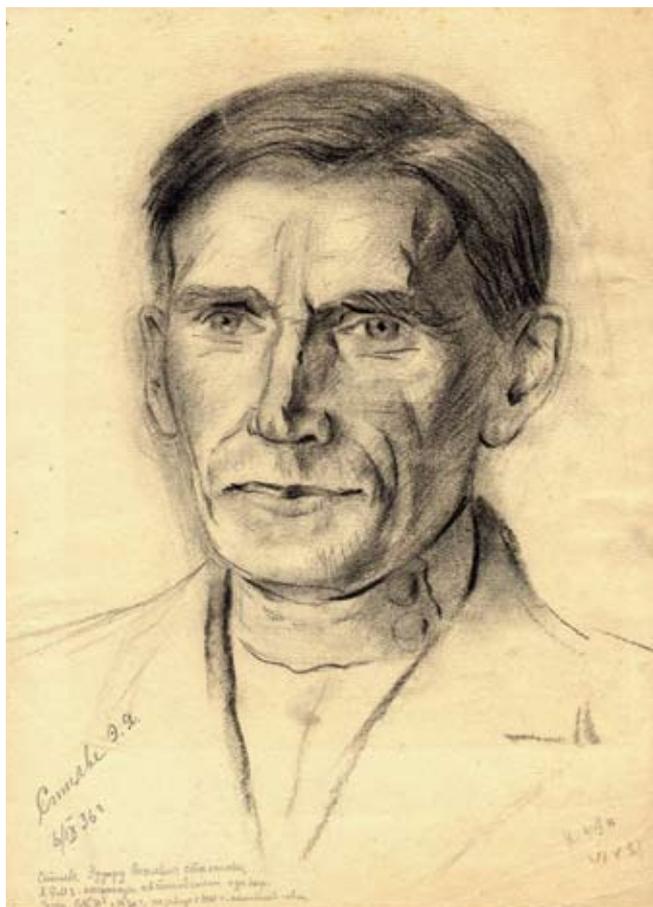


7.

Gustavs Klucis. Poster *Let's Train Millions of Qualified Workers for 518 New Factories and Plants* (1931). Lithograph on paper. 142.6 x 103 cm.
LNMA inv. no. VMM Z-8771.
Photo by Normunds Brasliņš.



8. Gustavs Klucis. Poster *Raise Higher the Flag of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin!* (1933). Lithograph on paper. 87 x 175 cm. LNMA inv. no. VMM Z-8769. Photo by Normunds Brasliņš.



9. Gustavs Klucis. *Portrait of Eduards Stilve, Stakhanovite of the Kharkov Electromechanical Factory* (1936). Charcoal on paper. 40.5 x 30 cm. LNMA inv. no. VMM Z-8881.



10.

Gustavs Klucis. Five mitten patterns (Latvian mitten patterns) (1936–1937). Watercolour and pencil on paper. 22.2 x 32 cm. LNMA inv. no. VMM Z-7868.

was massively criticised in the press, and joined the Russian Association of Proletarian Artists (RAPKh)⁵², whose members soon collectively entered into the ranks of the Union of Artists of the USSR. The criticism⁵³ directed at avant-garde art, and in particular at the members of the *October*, triggered processes which led to tragic consequences for many artists who had faithfully served the Communist regime since its beginnings. At the moment socialist realism took the stage, there was no longer room for either the innovative means of expression offered by photomontage or for its advocate Gustavs Klucis. From the mid-1930s on, Klucis was gradually pushed out of the elite of Soviet poster artists and was forced to revise his creative programme. This was when Gustavs Klucis began his collaboration with the Latvian Culture and Education Society *Prometejs* (*Prometheus*).⁵⁴

Latvian in Moscow

The question of what importance his national identity held for Klucis himself is difficult to answer. Very little information is available, and it is often implicit. It is certain that on official forms he indicated his nationality as 'Latvian'.⁵⁵ On the other hand, after the Revolution of 1917 internationalist ideas prevailed, and a person's nationality was not of great importance. From his arrival in Moscow in 1918 till the early 1930s, Klucis worked hard to fulfil his ambitious creative plans and gain a prominent place among Russian artists. His relationships with Latvian artists namely Aleksandrs Drēviņš and few others until 1930s were rather private than collegial.

The activities of the Latvian community in Moscow, in the framework of *Prometheus*, and the era in which it existed were influenced both by USSR policy towards ethnic minorities and by the 'general line' of the Communist Party. In the process of the liquidation of art groups and societies, *Prometheus's* art section was in an exceptional situation. Working under the many-branched *Prometheus* society was the art section itself, formally neither a society nor a group. Hence, collaboration with *Prometheus* in the mid-1930s became important even for an artist like Gustavs Klucis. The society helped with a supply of paints and canvas, and also acted as a commissioner and organiser of exhibitions. Erection of a new building on 5 Smolensk Boulevard in Moscow, where *Prometheus* moved in autumn 1935, improved the working conditions of the art section.⁵⁶

52 А. Дейнека, Г. Клуцис, П. Фрейберг, С. Сенькин, Н. Пинус, В. Кулагина, В. Елкин, В Российскую ассоциацию пролетарских художников от группы 'Октябрь', заявление. – За пролетарское искусство 1931, no. 5, p. 33.

53 Е.г. В. Костин, Фотоколлаж и механистические ошибки 'Октября'. – За пролетарское искусство 1932, no. 7–8, pp. 18–21; Л. Роцин, 'Октябрь' в идеологическом ремонте. – За пролетарское искусство 1931, no. 5, p. 7.

54 The Latvian Culture and Education Society *Prometheus* – active in Moscow from 1924 till 1937. Klucis was formally a member beginning in 1929.

55 Curriculum vitae. Gustav Klucis, Lehrer der Farbkurse an den VChUTEMAS. – Gustav Klucis: Retrospektive, pp. 299–301.

56 Т. Зелькина, Латviešu kultūras un izglītības biedrība 'Prometejs' [Latvian Culture and Education Society 'Prometheus']. – Latvijas Arhitektūra 1999, no. 22 (2), pp. 90–92.

Attempts to draw Latvian artists into *Prometheus*, beginning in the second half of the 1920s, failed several times.⁵⁷ The lack of interest in joining in the social activities of the Latvian community among artists successful on the Russian art scene was one of the main reasons for this failure. Under the new conditions in the 1930s, the unity of Latvian artists who lived in Moscow acquired tremendous importance in defending their professional (and also material) interests. At the Conference of Latvian Soviet Artists on 7 April 1936, which focused on the struggle against formalism⁵⁸, Klucis said: 'the [Communist] Party and government just now are paying great attention to national art and its improvement'⁵⁹. Another speaker, Ādolfs Pureniņš (1901–1938), drew attention to the fact that 'till the present day, in works by Latvian artists, too little attention has been paid to the social and political life of Latvians living in the Soviet Union. The urgent task is to create artworks showing our collectivists, shock-workers and stakhanovites.'⁶⁰ In public speeches, artists suggested that the cultivation of national originality would be a tool helpful in the prevention of formalism and naturalism. In fact, this shows that they tried to use the argument of specific national identity to defend the Latvian artists who were blamed for formalism.⁶¹

In 1936 *Prometheus* sent Klucis on a creative trip around Latvian settlements in present-day Russia and Ukraine, with the task of documenting the everyday life, traditions and culture of Latvians. Works representing local landscapes and portraits of Latvian workers-stakhanovites show Klucis returning to a traditional means of expression. His paintings and drawings of this period seem to have a rather documentary value for the cultural history of Latvians in exile (fig. 9).

However, the study⁶² of Latvian traditional ornament drawings left from Klucis's collaboration with *Prometheus*, and intended to be issued as a sample book, has revealed unexpected aspects of Klucis's creative opinions, drawing parallels to the theoretical views of Latvian modernists.

As during the trip Klucis did not find all of the necessary materials, he continued to work on this task when he was back in Moscow. It should be stressed that the artist did not create original compositions; instead, he collected what he believed to be authentic ethnographic samples. Surprisingly, the source he used for ethnography studies was the monthly magazine *Zeltene (Maiden)* of 1935–1936, issued in Latvia and targeted to the typical housewives.

57 V. Šalda, *Latvieši Maskavā [Latvians in Moscow], 1923–1938*. Daugavpils: Daugavpils Universitātes Akadēmiskais apgāds 'Saule', 2010, pp. 371–372.

58 [P. Viksne], *Latvju padomju mākslinieku konference [Conference of Latvian Soviet artists]*. – *Celtne* 1936, no. 4, pp. 307–310.

59 [P. Viksne], *Padomju latvju mākslinieku konference (beigas) [Conference of Soviet Latvian artists (conclusion)]*. – *Celtne* 1936, no. 5, p. 387.

60 [P. Viksne], *Padomju latvju mākslinieku konference (beigas)*, p. 386.

61 There was a discussion on 'formalism' in paintings by Aleksandrs Drēviņš at the above-mentioned Conference of Latvian Soviet Artists on 7 April 1936. – See [P. Viksne], *Latvju padomju mākslinieku konference*, pp. 307–310.

62 For more information, see also: I. Derkusova, *Stāsts par grāmatu, kas netika nodrukāta*. Gustava Kluča latviešu etnogrāfijas studijas. / *Story of the Book Which was Never Published*. Latvian Ethnography Studies by Gustavs Klucis. – *Muzeja raksti 4 / Museum Writings 4*. Ed. G. Cēbere. Riga: Latvijas Nacionālais mākslas muzejs, 2012, pp. 109–122.

Latvian ethnography studies show Klucis's responsible approach to the task of creating a sample book, and give some indication of his knowledge⁶³ of Latvian traditional culture. At the *Prometheus* art section meeting on 1 November 1936, summing up the results of the creative trip, Klucis drew attention to the fact that Latvians living in Kharkov did not recognise their national ornaments: 'There are fifteen people attending the group of artistic embroidery. They have no samples. They take Western European blouses with contemporary décolleté and sew on Ukrainian ornaments.'⁶⁴ Copying ornament patterns from *Zeltene*, Klucis chose only samples representing the use of ethnographic patterns (fig. 10). He was very critical of contemporary stylisations of traditional patterns seen on household objects and also on arts and crafts. This can also be seen in his essay in the magazine *Celtne*, published after visiting the joint pavilion of the three Baltic states at the *International Exposition* in Paris in 1937. Klucis's disappointment in the Baltic pavilion, expressed in the article, could be regarded as a political necessity, a way to address criticism of his 'bourgeois' motherland. However, the objects Klucis noted in his revue⁶⁵ are familiar: 'On the floor in the middle of the little Latvian hall there is a small flowerbed. By the entrance – a portrait of Ulmanis. [...] The whole room is in semi-darkness because, although the windows are large, they are decorated with stained glass, like the windows of a medieval church, though the mosaic is meant to contain local subject matter. Handicrafts, embroidery, brooches, belts, shawls and disagreeably modernised furniture. [...] Dishes in mock national style. The whole hall leaves a somewhat dismal impression. Not a single independent, fresh idea.'⁶⁶

Klucis's criticism provides a platform to talk about some professional opinions that draw implicit parallels between him and the Latvian modernists. In his paper 'The Ambivalence of Ethnography in the Context of Latvian Modernism'⁶⁷, Eduards Kļaviņš discusses the competing theories of ethnographic interpretation maintained by Latvian 'traditionalists' and 'modernists'⁶⁸. According to Kļaviņš, 'modernists' blamed 'traditionalists' for the inability to overcome the influence of the late nineteenth century national romanticist iconography, and for keeping the stylisation of ethnographic materials in the traditions of the outdated art nouveau. Latvian modernists, who were oriented towards contemporary French art, related the formal backwardness of the older generation to their failure to cut Russian-German cultural roots, discredited in the light of (then) recent Latvian history. In modernists' opinion, such an approach prevented the establishment of a new national art. Since formal discussion of national form and iconography in Latvia, explored by Kļaviņš, dates to the 1920s, Klucis most

63 I doubt if Klucis's knowledge of national ethnography was retained from his early youth. Presumably, the artist made every effort to study the subject, using all the sources available in Moscow.

64 Prometeja mākslas sekcijas apspriedes protokols 1936. gada 1. novembrī [Protocol of Prometheus art section meeting on 1 November, 1936]. – Latvijas Valsts arhivs [The State Archives of Latvia], coll. 1339, reg. 1, file 196, p. 4.

65 Most likely, furniture by Haralds Kundziņš (1898–1981) and ceramics by Jūlijs Madernieks (1870–1955).

See V. Veismanis, Ko Latvija rāda visas pasaules tautām [What Latvia shows to peoples of the world]. – Jaunākās Ziņas 19 June 1937.

66 G. Klucis, Parīzes iespaidi (Starptautiskā izstāde Parīzē) [Impressions of Paris (The international exposition in Paris)]. – *Celtne* 1937, no. 10, pp. 777–782. (Translation into English by Valdis Bērziņš.)

67 E. Kļaviņš, The Ambivalence of Ethnography in the Context of Latvian Modernism. – Local Strategies, International Ambitions: Modern Art and Central Europe 1918–1968. Ed. V. Lahoda. Prague: Artefactum, 2006, pp. 59–64.

68 The most active theoreticians of the rival groups were, respectively, the applied artist Jūlijs Madernieks and the modernist Romans Suta.

likely rejected decorative stylisation of the ethnographic pattern for very similar reasons. First of all, decorativeness in art was contrary to the aesthetics of constructivism and, secondly, Klucis rejected the pseudo-contemporary stylisation of ethnographic material, seeing its specific value in authenticity.

Kļaviņš also drew attention to the role of folk art in the overall genesis of European modernism, which in the framework of the development of the 'national constructivism' concept⁶⁹ encouraged Latvian artists to switch their focus from 'national spirit' to 'national form'⁷⁰. Similar to the opinion of the promoter of 'active art' Andrejs Kurcijs (1884–1959) that the 'national element can not be found in the subjects of artworks or in the data of ethnography, but in the analysis of plastic values'⁷¹, Kļaviņš concludes that 'preoccupation with 'plastic values' led to the recognition of local ethnographic ornamentation because of its absolutely dominant abstract, geometric and rhythmic character'⁷².

Paradoxically, Gustavs Klucis's ethnographic drawings, created for specific needs and actually standing outside the context of the artist's creative work, were noted by young Latvian designers dealing with kinetic art who studied Klucis's constructivist works in the late 1970s and 1980s. In their essay in the catalogue of the 1982 exhibition devoted to Gustavs Klucis, *Revolution. Idea. Movement*, the artist Valdis Celms and the theoretician of design Jāzeps Kukulis-Baltinaviētis introduced an unexpected interpretation of Klucis's constructivist works. They suggested that the spatial constructions by Klucis were structurally similar to the geometric structures characteristic of Latvian national ornaments, which converted his constructions into universal signs – symbols of the new era.⁷³ Celms developed his idea in the 1991 essay 'Gustavs Klucis and Latvian Tradition', based on Klucis's ethnographic drawings in the catalogue of Klucis's retrospective exhibition. Celms was convinced that constructivism as an internationally shaped art current accumulated aesthetic experience from artists representing different nations. According to Celms, Klucis's contribution might be found in the constructive nature and rational aesthetics characteristic of the Latvian tradition. He asserted that the unity of the beautiful and useful in Latvian tradition was similar to the constructivists' theory of the culture of materials⁷⁴.

Agreeing with Celms that constructivist aesthetics were shaped by a multicultural synergy, including international folk art experience and a number of the universal principles it draws on, the author argues that even if a formal resemblance of Klucis's early constructions to geometric or rhythmic structures characteristic of Latvian national ornament can be found, this resemblance should be regarded as a part of the universalism of the constructivist aesthetics rather than an approval of the deliberate use of Latvian national ornament by Klucis. It should be stressed that Klucis's

69 The authorship of the 'national constructivism' idea is attributed to Romas Suta (T. Suta, Romans Suta. Riga: Latvijas Enciklopēdija, 1996, pp. 45–48).

70 E. Kļaviņš, *The Ambivalence of Ethnography in the Context of Latvian Modernism*, p. 61.

71 A. Kurcijs, *Aktīvā māksla [Active art]*. Potsdam: Laikmets, 1923, p. 32.

72 E. Kļaviņš, *The Ambivalence of Ethnography in the Context of Latvian Modernism*, p. 62.

73 *Revolūcija. Ideja. Kustība. Gustavam Klucim veltīta izstāde LPSR Mākslas muzejā [Revolution. Idea. Movement. Exhibition dedicated to Gustavs Klucis at the Art Museum of the LSSR]*. Ed. I. Konstante. Riga: LPSR Mākslas muzeju un izstāžu apvienotā direkcija, 1982, pp. 5–6.

74 V. Celms, *Gustav Klucis und die lettische Tradition. – Gustav Klucis: Retrospektive*, pp. 293–297.

ethnographic drawings of the late 1930s have nothing in common with his early constructivist works.

Legacy

1937 was a terrible year for Latvians in Moscow. *Prometheus* was abolished⁷⁵, and many of its members were arrested and condemned to death. Gustavs Klucis's loyalty to the Soviet rule during all of his splendid career as a photomonteur could not prevent his tragic fate. Under false accusation, he was arrested on 17 January 1938 as a 'member of an armed Latvian terrorist organisation' and shot at the Butov firing range in Moscow on 26 February. Only in 1956 was Klucis rehabilitated and adjudged innocent.

During the Khrushchev Thaw, the wave of rehabilitations included artists who had been eliminated from the official art scene of Moscow for about twenty years. Though Klucis was completely unknown in Latvia during his life-time, his comeback exhibition was organised in Riga. The *Exhibition of Works by Artists - Latvian Red Riflemen* opened on 17 January 1959 at the State Museum of Latvian and Russian Art (now the Latvian National Museum of Art) in Riga. The curator, Arturs Eglitis, in his preface to the catalogue stated that the aim of the exhibition was to introduce to the audience Latvian-born artists who lived and worked in Moscow in the 1920s and 1930s, and whose creative legacy 'except for their tragic and untimely deaths ... shall be considered to be a notable contribution to the common treasury of multinational Soviet art'.⁷⁶ The return of the six Latvian artists⁷⁷ to public recognition through an exhibition in Riga was natural and symbolic in a way, even if the real reason for organising it was different from what was stated officially⁷⁸. Many of the works by the artists represented in that exhibition were acquired for the museum's collection by the Ministry of Culture. A number of works by Gustavs Klucis were donated to the museum in 1964 by his widow, the Russian artist Valentina Kulagina (1902–1987).

Since a comprehensive collection of works by Gustavs Klucis has entered the cultural space of Latvia, its interpretation has changed several times, focusing on different periods of his legacy according to the leading ideology and art currents of the times. According to Eglitis, during the 1960s revolutionary subject matter in Klucis's works was used as an argument for the extension of Latvian 'Soviet art' history. In the 1970s Klucis's heritage in Latvia became topical in the context of design, while since the late 1980s the interpretation of Klucis's work has been reintegrated into the context of the avant-garde. Today the process of the re-construction of our collective memory, saturated with the cultural heritage created by our most talented compatriots during

75 16 July 1937, Decree no. 1129 by the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR.

76 Каталог выставки работ художников – красных латышских стрелков. Eds. А. Ф. Эглит, В. К. Зедайн. Riga: Государственный музей латышского и русского искусства, 1959, p. 5.

77 On display in Riga were works by Gustavs Klucis, Aleksandrs Dreviņš, Voldemārs Andersons (1891–1938), Kārlis Veidemanis (1897–1938), Pauls Irbitis (1890–1938) and Vilhelms Jakubs (1899–1938). Along with Irbitis and Jakubs, who worked as artists beginning in the late 1920s, there were others participants in the 1918 'Kremlin Studio' exhibition.

78 The author argues that the curator Eglitis knew the true tragic story of Latvian artists, but his public rhetoric was supposed to fit into the framework of official ideology.

the twentieth century all over the world, raises new risks of inadequate interpretations. The author argues that the linking of Klucis's creative work directly to Latvian art is not acceptable, since that leaves many aspects of comparative research unstudied.

To sum up, the exclusion of such artists as Klucis from our collective memory and from the records of the national culture heritage is not acceptable. At the same time, it is necessary to be very careful when referring to his creative work in the context of Latvian art of the inter-war period. As Klucis's name was integrated into the Latvian art scene posthumously, his legacy, although housed in Riga, remains an integral part of the Russian avant-garde.