

Vladimir Shukhov (1853–1939)
Vasily Kandinsky (1866–1944)
Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935)
Vladimir Shchuko (1878–1939)
Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962)
Nikolay Ladovsky (1881–1941)
Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964)
Alexander Vesnin (1883–1959)
Ilya Golosov (1883–1945)
Alexander Nikolsky (1884–1953)
Anton (Antoine)
Pevsner (1884–1954)
Alexandra Exter (1884–1949)
Georgy Yakulov (1884–1928)
Boris Korolev (1885–1963)
Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953)
Olga Rozanova (1886–1918)
Alexander Archipenko (1887–1964)
Piotr Miturich (1887–1956)
Nikolay Miliutin (1889–1942)
Lyubov Popova (1889–1924)
Iakov Chernikhov (1889–1951)
Alexander Silchenkov (1889–1975)
Naum Gabo (1890–1977)
Karl Ioganson (1890–1929)
Vladimir Krinsky (1890–1971)
Lazar Lissitzky (1890–1941)
Konstantin Melnikov (1890–1974)
Ossip Zadkine (1890–1967)
Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956)
Moisey Ginzburg (1892–1946)
Alexei Gan (1893–1942)
Viktor Balikhin (1893–1953)
Anton Lavinsky (1893–1968)
Genrikh Ludvig (1893–1973)
Isaak Rabinovich (1894–1961)
Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958)
Gustav Klutsis (1895–1944)
Nikolay Suetin (1897–1954)
Mikhail Korzhev (1897–1986)
Mikhail Okhitovich (1898–1937)
Vyacheslav Vladimirov (1898–1942)
Georgy Vegman (1899–1973)
Georgy Krutikov (1899–1958)
Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
Georgy Stenberg (1900–1933)
Andrey Burov (1900–1957)
Ivan Nikolaev (1901–1979)
Ivan Leonidov (1902–1960)
Ilya Chashnik (1902–1929)
Mikhail Barshch (1904–1976)
Nikolay Sokolov (1904–1990)
Lazar Khidikel (1904–1986)
Viktor Kalmykov (1908–1981)



S.O. Khan-Magomedov

VLADIMIR AND GEORGY STENBERGS

the makers
of the avant-garde

Sergey Gordeev publishing project
[Russian avant-garde](#)

The Makers of the Russian Avant-Garde
 book series

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The book narrates the story of ~~the art of~~ the Stenberg brothers, who made numerous contributions in different spheres of art during the early stages of the formation of Constructivism, with work that included the development of spatial constructions, theater set design, exhibition design, the production of film posters, and various kinds of book graphic design.

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IN SEARCH OF THE WORKS OF THE FIRST DESIGNERS AND FIRST CONSTRUCTIVISTS

(In Place of an Introduction)

As the positions of design in modern industrial production become stronger, there is an increasingly growing interest in the socio-cultural and the formal artistic aspects of this type of activity, an interest in the formation of the modern object-space environment. ■ During the first stage of their turn to the history of the development of modern design (production art), the attention of researchers' was drawn to the purely professional methods of artistic construction (the use of materials, rational methods of accommodating function, etc.). At the next stage, the entire range of socio-cultural and artistic problems was subjected to careful study, taking into account the history of the object world as a unified process. Outside of Russia, there have already appeared publications which consider the history of the artistic construction of particular types of objects from ancient times to our days. ■ In our country, the study of the history of the object world has been in recent decades conducted separately by specialists from a variety of different fields: archaeologists, ethnographers, historians of technology, researchers of applied arts and architecture.

■ Knowing the history of design elevates the overall culture of a profession. A particularly important task for contemporary designers and art historians is research into the process of the emergence of design locally at the stage of the Soviet avant-garde — in the first fifteen years after the October Revolution. In those years, Soviet production art (*proizvodstvennoe iskusstvo*) made a considerable contribution to the development of world design, which is why the legacy of the 1920s has long been attracting the attention of the historians of culture both at home and abroad. ■ By the late 1950s, when interest in the design of the avant-garde period sharply increased after the famous Decree on the Struggle Against Architectural 'Ornamentation'¹, the experience of the first stages of development of Soviet design turned out to have been thoroughly forgotten. By the turn of the decade and during the Thaw of the early 1960s, however, one could generally notice in our art historical circles signs of great interest in the art of the 1920s. This period of Soviet art was being studied intensively by historians of cinema, theater, literature, architecture, and painting, as well as specialists in other fields of artistic creativity. ■ The situation with design turned out to be more complex. By the late 1960s (when a political «freeze» set back in), the intensiveness of research into the early stages of Soviet design subsided. Two factors were influencing the situation. Firstly, it turned out that almost

all of the pioneers of Soviet design (V. Tatlin, A. Rodchenko, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, G. Klutis, A. Lavinsky, L. Popova, N. Suetin, I. Chashnik, L. Lissitzky and others) were closely connected to the most radi-

¹ The Decree in question was the Decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Council of Ministers of the USSR of November 4, 1955 «Concerning the Elimination of Excesses in Design and Construction.»

V. Stenberg (photo portrait)
G. Stenberg (photo portrait)



cal trends within the artistic avant-garde, which in those years were seen by the official critics as purely «formalist.» It was impossible to separate the pioneers of Soviet design from the «leftist» movements (Constructivism first and foremost). ■ Secondly, among the pioneers of Soviet design, there were no specialists who could be considered exclusively as designers. A significant portion (usually the majority) of their work was connected to other artistic fields. The first and second generations of the pioneers of Soviet design were «moonlighters,» but without them, Soviet design of the 1920s practically would not exist. ■ Moreover, in addition to the fact that the pioneers of Soviet design were «moonlighters» and came from creative fields in which their primary artistic legacy was studied and analyzed with a great

delay, all of them were also connected with creative organizations and institutions whose activities were not studied in any depth for a long period of time. Almost all of these organizations and institutions were connected to multiple fields of artistic creativity and touched only partly on the sphere of design. And yet, they, naturally, had to be studied holistically, else a lot about them could be understood in a skewed way. ■ I will name here only some of these organizations and institutions, the activities of many of which remains insufficiently researched to this day: INKhUK [Institut khudozhestvennoy kul'tury] (Institute of Artistic Culture, Moscow); UNOVIS [Utverditeli novogo iskusstva] (Affirmers of the New Art); GAKhN [Gosudarstvennaya akademiya khudozhestvennykh nauk] (State Academy of Artistic Sciences); LEF [Levy front iskusstv] (The Left Front of the Arts); VKhUTE-MAS [Vysshie gosudarstvennie khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie] (Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops); GINKhUK [Gosudarstvennyy institut khudozhestvennoy kul'tury] (State Institute of Artistic Culture, Petrograd); IZORAM [Izomasterskie rabochey molodezhi] (Fine Art Workshops of the Working Youth); Proletkul't [Proletarskaya kul'tura] (Proletarian Culture Movement); Zhivskul'ptarkh [Kollektiv zhivopisno-skul'pturnogo-arkhitekturnogo sinteza] (Collective for Painterly, Sculptural, and Architectural Synthesis); the Museum of Painterly Culture; OBMOKhU [Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov] (Society of Young Artists); the Art and Production Subsection of the IZO of Narkompros [Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv Narodnogo komissariata prosveshcheniya] (Department of Fine Arts of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment); the Art and Production Council of IZO; and the system of independent artistic workshops in the

provinces. To this list one might also add such artistic phenomena as Constructivism, the concept of production art, Suprematism, methodology for the objective analysis of art, newly designed Foundations courses, and such publications as the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommuny* [The Art of the Commune] (1918–1919) and the journals *Veshch* [Thing] (1922); *Kinofot* (1922–1923); *Zrelishcha* [Spectacles] (1922–1924); *LEF* (1923–1925); *Novy LEF* [New LEF] (1927–1928); and *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* [Contemporary Architecture] (1926–1930). ■ I became acquainted with Vladimir Avgustovich Stenberg in 1969 (his brother Georgy Avgustovich had died in 1933), when I was working intensively on the monograph *The Pioneers of Soviet Architecture* for the German publisher Verlag der Kunst (Dresden). ■ I had been researching the Soviet artistic avant-garde since the second half of the 1950s. Most of my attention had to be dedicated to the study of the private archives of the makers and masters of the Russian avant-garde since in the years of Stalin's «Empire» style (1933–1955), materials concerning our country's avant-garde were very rarely collected by the state archival institutions. ■ In the process of researching materials on the Soviet avant-garde, I frequently came across the names of the Stenberg brothers. It was clear that they were among the key figures of early Constructivism and early design. As to the order in which I examined private archives, I established it myself, and the age of the subject of my inquiry played a not insignificant role. ■ I had to hurry. In examining the personal archives of the makers of the avant-garde, in many cases, I already had to work with the widow or the children of the master. ■ As for the Stenbergs, I was in no great rush, knowing that one of the brothers was in good



health. Moreover, it was no secret that the Stenberg brothers were the youngest members of the first generation of the pioneers of Soviet design, i.e. those who participated in the formation of production art from the early stages of its development. In the early 1920s, they were already widely known as active proponents of Constructivism; they took part in exhibitions, in discussions at INKhUK, and gave presentations on Constructivism. ■ The Stenbergs were part of that constellation of «leftist» artists in whose work in the early 1920s one could find the seeds of early Constructivism and early design (i.e. production art and artistic construction, as they were designated at the time). ■ The fact of the matter was that it was artists-Constructivists



Members of OBMOKhU. From left to right: K. Medunetsky, G. Stenberg, S. Svetlov

The Stenbergs (Georgy on the left, Vladimir on the right) next to a theater poster with the actress Natalia Rozenev'



who, in the first post-revolutionary years, saw the artistic possibilities of new building structures before the architects did. The paradox of the situation was that the «leftist» artists — the future proponents of Constructivism and production art — approached industrial things not so much by understanding the techniques of creation of engineered products (that came later), but by way of what one might call «engineered architecture,» which they saw in engineered constructions, where the architects themselves did not yet see it at the time. ■ Stylistically, early Constructivism was connected for artists (artists, rather than architects, in particular) to the influence of openwork latticed metal constructions of the girder type. In and of themselves,

such constructions were already widely used in the 19th century; and every architect in both the 19th and early 20th century undoubtedly was not only familiar with these constructions, but was also able to utilize them in his projects for various purposes. But if in the 19th century, at the stage of the rapid introduction of openwork metal constructions into building practices, they did not have any noticeable influence on the processes of style formation in architecture, then by the early 20th century, these constructions were no longer perceived by architects as new forms in purely visual terms. They had become familiar, and the majority of architects classified them strictly as engineered structures, which had no direct relationship to the processes of form-making in architecture. ■ By contrast, the «leftist» artists (the Stenberg brothers first and foremost among them) saw in the openwork lattice constructions (metal girders) the potential for form-making and even style formation. ■ The process of Constructivism's coming into its own is closely connected to the evolution of the creative concept developed by a group of young Moscow artists who were transitioning from experiments with abstracted form to the development of particular elements of the object-space environment. In a short period of time, the work of the young Constructivists went through two form-making stages: 1) «from representation — to construction» and 2) «from construction — to production.» Of particular interest to us is the first stage, during which the abstracted spatial constructions of the artists-Constructivists of the first tier (A. Rodchenko, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, K. Ioganson) and second tier (L. Popova, G. Klutskis, N. Gabo, N. Pevsner) came into being and became widely known. ■ The difficulty lay in the fact that

these abstracted spatial constructions of the early 1920s rarely survived in their real form (exceptions to this are one work by A. Rodchenko and one work by K. Medunetsky, both in private collections in the U.S.). This became clear to me when I tried, in the course of my research of the avant-garde, to locate the actual spatial constructions. They simply did not exist. This was also true of those spatial constructions that were shown at the OBMOKhU exhibition of 1921. ■ It became obvious that one had to look for the Moscow Constructivists' spatial constructions in the form of photographs and printed reproductions in 1920s publications. It was possible to find only a handful of such publications. ■ My last hope lay with V. Stenberg's personal archive, although my first phone conversation with him was not encouraging. My phone call and questions about the materials from the avant-garde period in the Stenbergs' private archive seemed, by all indications, to have greatly surprised Vladimir Avgustovich. He had, by that point, not just gotten used to the fact this particular period of his work (early Constructivism) was of little interest to anyone, but he almost came to believe himself that this was a fairly unproductive creative episode. That is how he put it during our first phone conversation: that it was an interesting time, but that much of what was created in it was unnecessary. He also said that there were no INKhUK documents in his personal archive, nor any photographs of spatial constructions. He added that although he remembered that there had to be glass negatives somewhere, he had not seen them for a long time. Soon afterwards, however, Vladimir Avgustovich called me and said that he had discovered the negatives. For two days (February 10th and 11th, 1969) we went through the Stenberg

archive, primarily paying attention to the search for glass negatives with spatial constructions. The negatives were in terrible condition and had started to mold. I took them with me and gave them to a qualified photographer, who tried to perform the unique job of chemically «resurrecting» the negatives. He came very close to being successful, and he made for me several prints of each negative. These were photographs of the Stenberg's works from the period of early Constructivism — color constructions and spatial constructions. I returned the actual negatives to Stenberg, along with the prints of each negative. ■ Later, when photographs of the spatial constructions were needed for an exhibition abroad, I turned to Vladimir Stenberg again. It turned out, however, that during a move to a new apartment, a lot of materials from the Stenberg archive were lost; among them were the glass negatives. As a result, the photographic prints of the Stenberg brothers' color and spatial constructions in my possession themselves became unique archival materials and have been published on numerous occasions in books, articles, and exhibition catalogs dedicated to the Russian avant-garde. ■ Along with Vladimir Avgustovich, we carefully examined all of the materials in the Stenberg archive; some of them I borrowed for photographing. ■ Normally, I visited the subjects of my research one to three times, depending on the duration of our conversations and the amount of material in their personal archives. In the case of the Stenberg archive, I had to visit Vladimir Avgustovich seven times (February 10, 1969; February 11, 1969; October 11, 1969; January 14, 1970; March 1970; April 3, 1979; April 5, 1979) and, in addition to that, we spoke five times on the telephone (February 5, 1969; October 11,

1969; January 9, 1970; January 20, 1970; December 1, 1972). To these materials, one can also add my notes taken at the evening of celebration dedicated to Vladimir Stenberg's eightieth birthday (April 11, 1979 at the House of Artists) and the records of my conversations with his widow, Nadezhda Nikolayevna (June 16, 1982; October 4, 1982; May 13, 1985; and an undated conversation). It was during these conversations that Nadezhda Nikolayevna told me that many materials were lost during the move to the new apartment. ■ At the same time, she informed me that three new originals of light constructions had been identified. Additionally, a folder with ten non-figurative color compositions of a small format (color constructions) had been discovered. ■ Thus, gradually, it became possible to construct a visual sequence of the color constructions, blueprints, and spatial constructions that the Stenbergs executed in the years 1918–1922 and that were, for the most part, shown in 1921 at the OBMOKhU exhibition in Moscow. It was after this exhibition that the Stenbergs started to be perceived as being among the young Constructivists who, along with *Tatlin's Tower*, broke through the aesthetic criteria of traditionalism and made a sizeable contribution to the creation of the style-forming concepts of the Russian artistic avant-garde. ■ As has been noted above, the Stenbergs were the youngest members of the constellation of the makers of the avant-garde. At the OBMOKhU exhibition (1921), they showed works which were created when they were between eighteen and twenty one years old. ■ This, naturally, raises the question: who were they, the Stenberg brothers? Where did they come from, what shaped them, and how did they mature as artists in the years of the Russian artistic avant-garde?

EARLY RISE

Vladimir Avgustovich (1899–1982) and Georgy Avgustovich (1900–1933) were born in Russia in the family of the Swedish artist Iogan Karlovich Avgust Stenberg, who did his studies at the Academy of the Arts in Stockholm and also graduated from a technical school there, loved technology very much, and also had a brother who was also an artist. Their mother, Anna Mikhailovna Gerloves, was a Russian pianist. She graduated the St. Petersburg Conservatory; her father was Latvian, a dress cutter who specialized in tailcoats and morning coats; in Moscow, he worked for the firm of Mure & Murelise, was an astronomy enthusiast, and got his grandkids involved in this passion of his. ■ The Stenbergs' father came in 1898 to work at the Nizhny Novgorod fair and stayed in Russia, which became his second home. Having received in Sweden both an artistic and a technical education, in Moscow, he primarily worked as a decorator of interiors (of hotels, restaurants, hair salons, etc.) and store windows. ■ From a very early age (starting at eight), the Stenbergs' father trained them in professional painting and taught them how to construct perspectival views and shadows. His own interests gravitated towards technology, and he designed various kinds of mechanisms. It was this passion that he also passed along to his sons, who from childhood were skilled in the use of joiners' and fitters' tools. ■ The brothers went through all of their studies together. Vladimir was older than Georgy by a year and a half, but after having started school, he got sick, missed a year, and the younger brother caught up with him. From that time on, they

went through life together (thus, for instance, they sat at the same school desk in their four-year general school). After finishing school, Vladimir wanted to study to be a machinist (back then, this was very prestigious), but did not pass the technical school's entrance competition. The brothers then started together at the Stroganov School (in 1912). ■ For the first two years at the school, the brothers studied minting; they learned the methods and techniques of working with metal and came to know the particular qualities of various materials, creating objects out of copper and silver. Further on, in the third year, the brothers studied the techniques of working with gold, but then switched to the theater-decorating department. ■ At the Stroganov School, the brothers met Konstantin Medunetsky. In the first few grades, they did their general courses together, and from that point on, for almost ten years, the Stenbergs and Medunetsky studied and worked in close contact (not infrequently they signed themselves as SMS, i.e. Stenberg-Medunetsky-Stenberg). ■ Medunetsky's father was the overseer of ventilation, heating, and lighting at the Merchant Club in Moscow (modern-day Lenkom Theater). At work, he had a mechanical workshop. The Stenberg brothers dreamed of owning ice-skates (called «the Norwegians»), but there was no money to purchase them, and they decided to make the skates themselves. They went to the shop several times and looked carefully at the ice-skates in the storefront window, too embarrassed to ask the salesman for them. While there, they visually estimated the measurements, writing everything down and sketching it out later. Having designed the project, they went to Medunetsky's father's workshop (Konstantin Medunetsky himself had no need for home-made ice-skates) and showed him their

sketches for the skates. He gave them a saw for the blades and tin for the rest, and they made the ice-skates at the workshop. ■ Later, when the Stenbergs started to create their spatial constructions, they continued to use the workshop of Medunetsky's father, along with his materials. After the October Revolution, Medunetsky Sr. retired. At his summerhouse, he had a private workshop where he worked on small-scale orders (soldering buckets, etc.). At first, Medunetsky's father continued to supply the Stenbergs with materials, but his supplies were quickly running out, and he told the brothers that he needed the remaining materials for his own work. ■ This, perhaps, explains why the Stenbergs stopped making spatial constructions after 1922. At the Stroganov School, SMS studied as part of the same group in the theater-decorating department led by Yanov, who took them to theaters where they sketched the construction of the stage, its equipment, and the backstage machinery. Painting was taught by P. Kuznetsov, whom Vladimir Avgustovich considered to be his true painting teacher. As for drawing, it was taught to the Stenbergs by their father — they knew perspective well. ■ While studying at the Stroganov School, the Stenbergs worked with their father on his commissions. This, by and large, were wall paintings for various kinds of interior spaces and their decorative detailing. Among the sites on which they worked were such then-famous Moscow restaurants as the Metropole (ceiling light painting) and the Caucasus (assembled ceiling made up of painted square pieces of glass); they also painted the entrance hall walls of a rental apartment building and decorated a number of bakeries owned by the same proprietor. ■ In addition to this, the brothers were happy to oblige at the request of their parents' friends and designed decorations for

various kinds of charity evenings (for which they made invitations, decorated the buffet, etc.) and amateur plays (for which they drew stage sets). ■ In 1918, the Stroganov School was re-formed as the First State Independent Artistic Workshops [Gosudarstvennye svobodnye khudozhestvennye masterskie or GSKhM] where the Stenbergs studied in G. Yakulov's studio. ■ Already in their student days, the Stenbergs, along with their schoolmates, started to mass-produce stencils for posters for the front and the country's peripheral regions, and they later started to make posters on the theme of the elimination of illiteracy (*Likbez*). In 1919, the graduation of the first class of Soviet «red artists» took place at the First GSKhM (Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet People's Commissar of Enlightenment, approved the class). The young graduates, the Stenberg brothers among them, organized themselves into the Society of Young Artists — OBMOKhU [Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov] (1919–1923), a unique association for art and production. Its members had their own collective studio (at the corner of Kuznetsky Most and Neglinnaya streets) in the windows of which they showed their works. OBMOKhU members created easel compositions, continued to make stencils for posters, participated in the decoration of streets and squares, and organized exhibitions of their association (a total of four OBMOKhU exhibitions took place in 1919, 1920, 1921, and 1923). ■ The Stenbergs and Medunetsky started to participate in exhibitions while they were still students. The three of them were very close, lived as a commune, and, as has already been mentioned, not infrequently even signed their works «SMS» (Stenberg — Medunetsky — Stenberg). The works created by SMS stood out among the works created by their OBMOKhU

comrades. They were the first to move away from experiments with abstracted painted compositions (color constructions) to the creation of spatial metal constructions. This was influenced by the technical skills they got from their father and the minting techniques they learned at the Stroganov School, though what probably played the decisive role in shaping the general direction of the Stenberg's experiments with constructions was the knowledge they acquired in 1917 at the Military Railroad Courses, which prepared warrant officers for the Engineering Corps and which the brothers took while simultaneously continuing their regular studies at the Stroganov School. Vladimir and Georgy Stenberg both took the full course of study and passed their exams in all subjects. ■ The courses offered information about various railroad structures, bridges, etc. Particular attention was given to technical constructions, to which the Stenbergs, who at the time were learning about decorating objects and buildings in different styles at the Stroganov School, took with heightened interest. The constructions based on pure engineering (e.g. metal bridges, studied in detail) that they became familiar with while taking the Military Railroad courses made a great impression on the Stenbergs both by their rationality and the graceful laciness of open-work forms that did not have any unnecessary material. Having received knowledge about their age's newest metal constructions, with the information provided by highly qualified specialists (thus, for example, the future academician V.N. Obratzov, a famous specialist in the field of railroad construction, taught at the courses), the Stenbergs saw in engineered technical forms that which, so it seemed to them, would have to become the basis for a new approach to the problems of form-making. They did

not simply reject the forms of «historical» styles for their traditionalism and decorativeness, but increasingly inclined towards the idea that nothing at all ought to be added to the construction. They thought at the time that nothing could be more expressive than a pure engineered construction, and they became vehemently opposed to any kind of decor. ■ While they were still students, the Stenbergs began to experiment with volumetric constructions. ■ Having lost their ability to use the materials from the workshop of Medunetsky's father, the young Constructivists decided to turn for help to Narkompros. It was winter, and all three took their constructions by sled to Narkompros, where at the time everything depended on Anatoly Lunacharsky [the Commissar in charge of Narkompros] and David Shterenberg [the head of IZO at Narkompros]. SMS showed their works and asserted that if their work was needed, then Narkompros had to help them with materials and financial means. It was offered to them that they should present their works to the purchasing commission, where a number of their pieces were purchased (for museums and cultural organizations). ■ The first exhibition of works created by SMS took place within the walls of the First GSKhM. The last exhibition where the spatial constructions of the young Constructivists were shown took place in Paris in 1923 and presented works from Moscow's Kamerny [Chamber] Theater while the theater was on tour. SMS were already working at the theater and were developing a maquette for the stage design of Hazelton's play *The Yellow Jacket*. This maquette was shown at the Paris exhibition, as were, alongside it, three of SMS's spatial constructions (each one of them was only able to bring one spatial construction to Paris). As Vladimir Avgustovich recounted it to me,

at the exhibition, a wealthy American wanted to buy the maquette for *The Yellow Jacket*, but was told that the maquette was the property of the theater and was offered to buy the constructions, instead. The American said that he would buy all three objects and asked for the price. SMS dreamed of having 1500 francs each in order to buy decent suits. They also remembered their friend, the theater's electrician Kolya, and asked for the sum of 6000 francs. The American immediately wrote out a check. Later on, their colleagues at the theater scolded SMS because they sold the works too cheaply, should have asked for 60,000 francs. But at that time, what was more important for SMS were the first decent suits of their lives. Alongside Alexander Tairov, Alisa Koonen and others, they were invited to a banquet held by the wealthy American. ■ The exhibition that took place during the Kamerny Theater's tour in Paris acquainted many Europeans for the first time with Constructivist spatial constructions. The young Moscow Constructivists even gave a talk about Constructivism (on March 21, 1923 in Paris — a printed invitation in Russian has survived). Even before the Kamerny Theater exhibition in Paris officially opened, it was visited by Picasso, who even offered to help hang the exhibition pieces. ■ Before their trip to Paris, the Constructivists from OBMOKhU were given the task at INKhUK to find out whether it was true that Picasso had become a realist. The young men visited his studio. Picasso started to look at the photographs of their works, giving them the chance to look around his studio. It had two new works in it: one was a «left» composition (little cubes were nailed to a board, and the whole thing was still covered in wet paint), while the other was a smallish unfinished realistic group drawing that stood on the easel. They

asked Picasso how he could simultaneously create two such different things. He answered that the «left» things he made for the public, for sale — he had been proclaimed a «left» artist, and the public wanted to see him as one — whereas the realistic ones he made for himself, «for the soul.» ■ SMS made their spatial constructions from metal cross-sections (angles, T-bars, I-bars, channel bars, etc.), which they created themselves from strips of tin-coated roofing iron. The parts were bent or welded (and carefully fitted together). The spatial constructions were made of such materials as tin, black iron, glass, brass, wood, and enameled iron. ■ The Stenberg, as a rule, made their works together. They came up with the ideas together, discussed them, and then executed them. At first, they signed everything together, too. But when the sales of their works to the purchasing commission took place, they had begun to be counted as one artist, and there was a quota for the number of works purchased from one artist. At that point, the Stenbergs started to sign their things individually, even though they still created them together. They themselves could no longer distinguish which one of them did what. But their father could distinguish his sons' style with a great degree of precision and sometimes told them that certain things were signed inaccurately, that they ought to change the attributed authorship (where Vladimir's name should be and where Georgy's-). ■ The Stenbergs photographed their spatial compositions under the bright light of a voltaic arc, creating the arc by taking coal by connecting the electric outlet with the heating radiator. The bright light gave highly contrasting (graphic) shadows, which on the photographs formed interesting compositions in conjunction with the constructions themselves. ■ SMS were not

satisfied by the temporary nature of exhibitions — they wanted to be in the public eye at all times. ■ SMS lived (and had their studio) on the third floor of a house on Milyutinskaya street (near Markhlevsky alleyway). Their building had no other windows below their own, and they used this large wall as a background for exhibiting their works. Borrowing from David Burlyuk's experience, they exhibited their works by tying them together and hanging them out of the windows. ■ The period of early Constructivism was defined by the theorists of production art as a stage of going «from representation — to construction.» The contemporary object-space environment probably received one of its most powerful style-forming impulses from the sphere of the experimental research conducted in this period of early Constructivism, which encompassed the years between 1919 and 1923. Looking at the degree of concentration of creative efforts, the process of construction-oriented style formation accelerated up until 1921, which saw the most intensive experiments with abstracted constructions. Subsequently, alongside the formal and aesthetic experiments, one also saw the start of a broad introduction of constructions into various spheres of the object-space environment (objects, public holiday decorations, architecture, theater, etc.). ■ The movement toward construction was born among artists who conducted experiments with abstracted form. It was, however, not just the artists themselves so much as theorists who did not grasp right away the style-forming role of experiments with construction. The theorists of production art directed their careful attention towards construction only at the end of 1921 when they tried to shift it from the category of style-forming factors into an instrument of bringing artists into the process of pro-

duction, viewing the stage «from representation — to construction» as a transitional one toward the stage «from construction — to production.» They perceived early Constructivism at that point as an insignificant episode (a stage, a local artistic school) in the framework of the general movement towards a productivist art whose chain of events would go «thingism — Constructivism — production art.» Surprisingly for many, however, Constructivism as a movement in its own right and with its own system of means and techniques of artistic expressiveness quickly became one of the influential style-forming factors in the making of a new object-space environment. ■ The theorists of production art saw the move towards production as a solution, first and foremost, to socio-ethical and socio-economic problems. On principle, they did not connect this movement with any concrete style-forming processes, although they did rely primarily on a group of artists who were preoccupied with intensive experiments with abstracted form. It is well known, however, that artistic creativity cannot advance without developing new means and techniques of artistic expressiveness. Thus, the work of artists involved in the productivist movement saw the unfolding of the processes typical of the artistic sphere. In the course of experiments with abstracted form, all manner of different techniques of form-making were tried out. Among them were also the ones within which the embryo of a new style was gradually being formalized. By 1921, one could already discover in these artistic searches a central style-forming current, and by 1921–1922, an active process of crystallization of the visible (and not merely declared) means and techniques of the new artistic movement was taking place. The huge style-forming potential contained in early Con-

structivism was what made this movement an influential one in the art of the 20th century. ■ The most authoritative theorist of production art, Boris Arvatov, in a whole series of articles from the early 1920s analyzed the role of various artists in the formation of Constructivism and listed the main founders of this movement, placing them in the order of the significance of their contribution (and, simultaneously, the order in which they joined the movement's artistic search): V. Tatlin, A. Rodchenko, the group of artists from OBMOKhU (the Stenberg brothers first and foremost). ■ «After a lengthy sorting process,» Arvatov wrote, «after some very dogged struggles among those on the «left,» there has crystallized a group of non-figurative Constructivists (Tatlin, Rodchenko, OBMOKhU group), who have founded their practice on the study and processing of real materials as a transitional stage towards constructionist engineering.»² In another article, Arvatov wrote that, «**Constructivism**, i.e. the art of technical possession of real materials; the art of making things, which stems from Cezanne (Tatlin, Rodchenko, the Stenberg brothers) ... puts life above art and wants to make art into something living.»³ ■ Arvatov's articles⁴ testify to the fact that in 1922, he thought that Constructivism was personified by Tatlin, Rodchenko, and the OBMOKhU group. Moreover, from these articles, as well

as Arvatov's other statements from that time, one can come to understand that Arvatov considered early Constructivism's clear orientation towards the sphere of engineering to be one of its defining characteristics. One finds in his writing such phrases as «into industrial production (the engineer-constructor),» «towards con-

structionist engineering,» «following the path of material constructions.» ■ All the experiments with spatial constructions produced a vivid picture of Constructivism's orientation towards the sphere of engineering and construction. It is, however, in the spatial constructions produced by the Stenberg brothers and Medunetsky, which were exhibited numerous times in 1921-1922 both at home and abroad, that one finds in its most lucid form the industrial, engineered image of early Constructivism's experimental designs. ■ Lazar Lissitzky stressed the role of the OBMOKhU group in the creation of Constructivism in his 1922 talk titled «New Russian Art.» Noting Tatlin's role in the creation of «a constructive art,» Lissitzky, however, asserted that, «two groups created Constructivism — OBMOKhU (the Stenberg brothers, Medunetsky, loganson, etc.) and UNOVIS ... The first group worked in material and space, the second — in material and the surface plane.»⁵ ■ What manifested itself in this bringing together of the style-forming concepts of Constructivism (OBMOKhU) and Suprematism (UNOVIS) was the particular quality of Lissitzky's integrating talent. Lissitzky viewed the formal searches of the two innovative movements as a single process of formation of a new style, which he denoted with the word «Constructivism,» not getting too seriously into the differences between the two concepts. The differences did exist, and they were substantial, but in the grand scheme of things, Lissitzky was right in noting that both groups (OBMOKhU and UNOVIS) were working on a common task.

² *Pechat' i revoliutsiya* [Press and Revolution], 1922, issue #7, p.143.

³ *Ibid.*, p.343.

⁴ In addition to the articles mentioned above, these include the articles in *Zrelishcha* [Spectacles], 1922, issue #8, p.9; *Pechat' i revoliutsiya* [Press and Revolution], 1922, issue #6, p.308; and others.

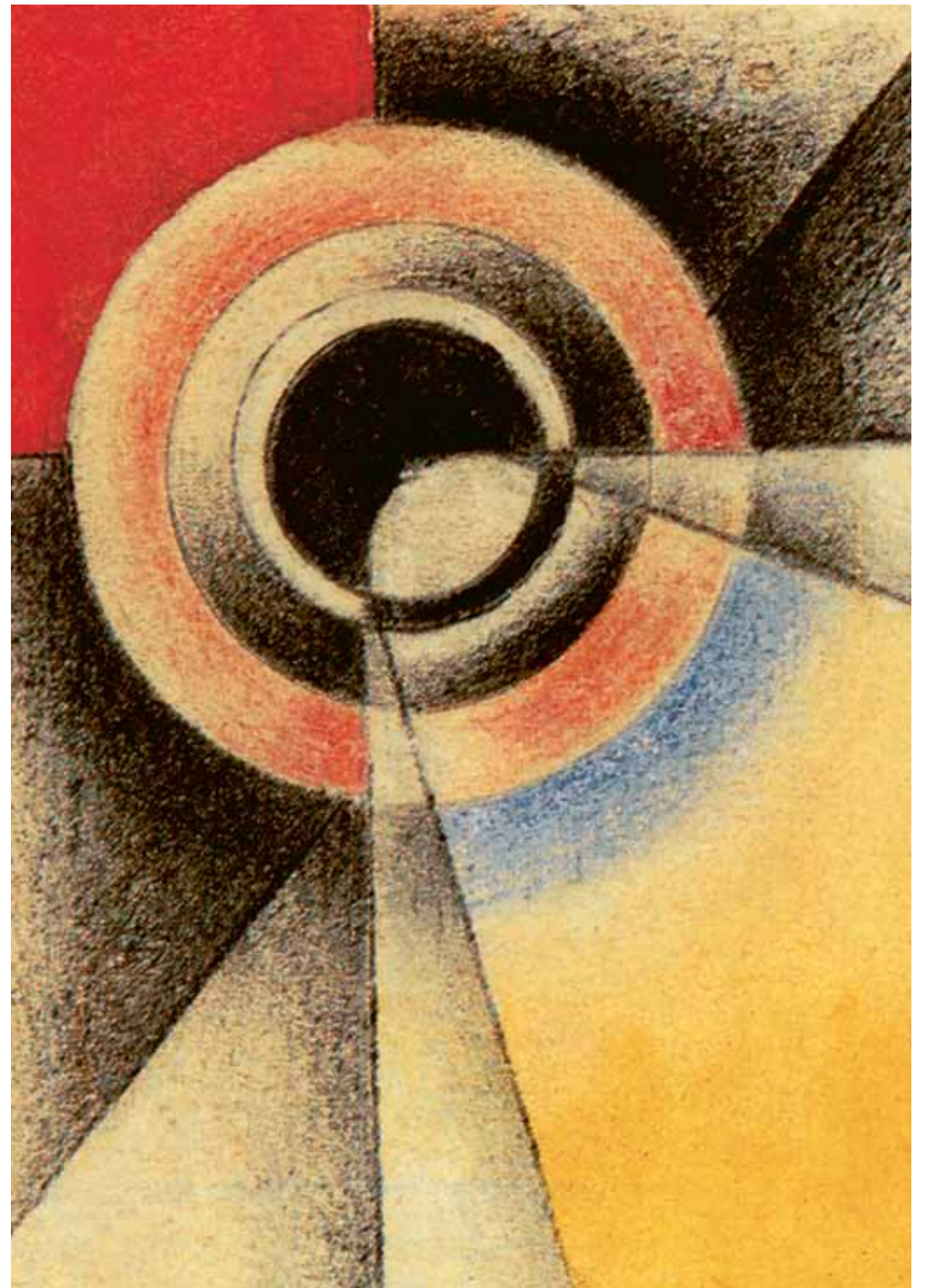
⁵ First published in the book *El Lissitzki* (Dresden, 1967).

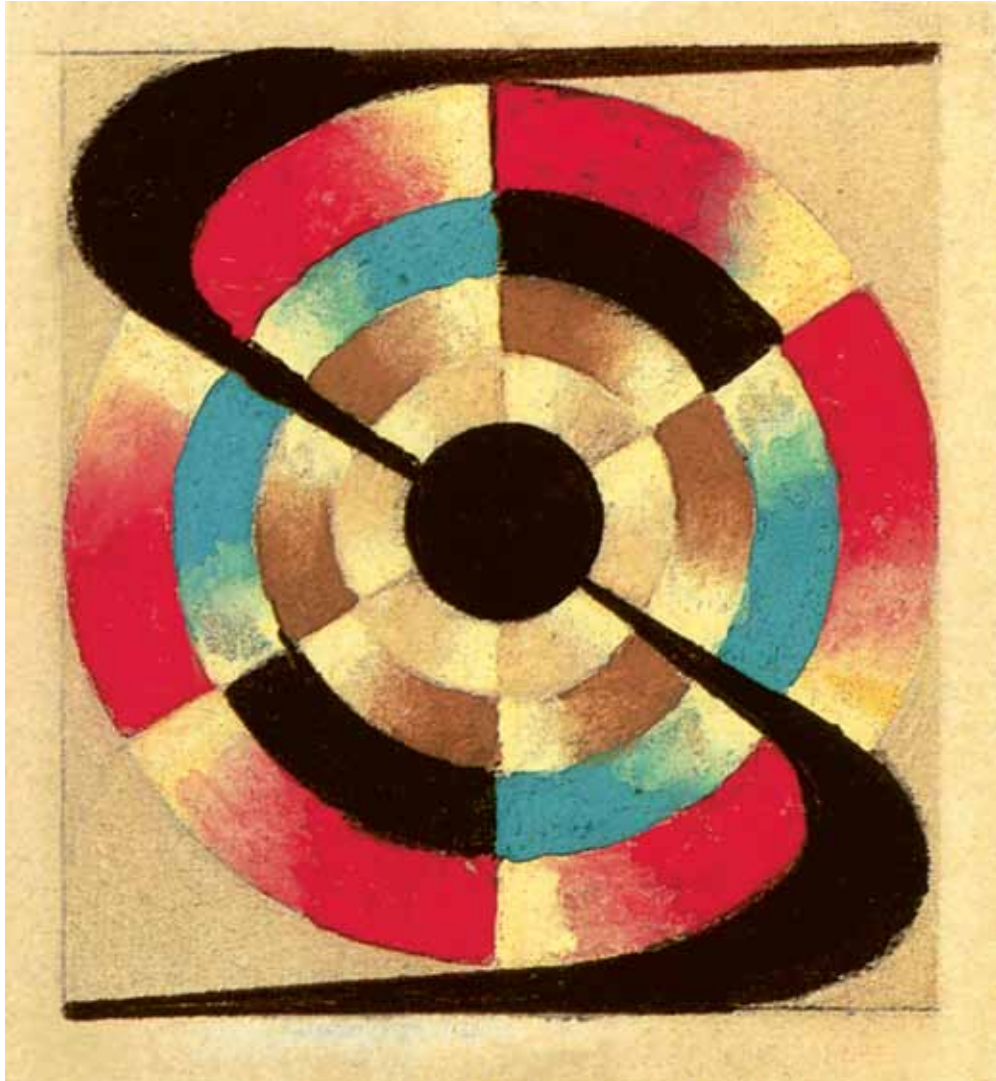
THE STAGE «FROM REPRESENTATION — TO CONSTRUCTION»

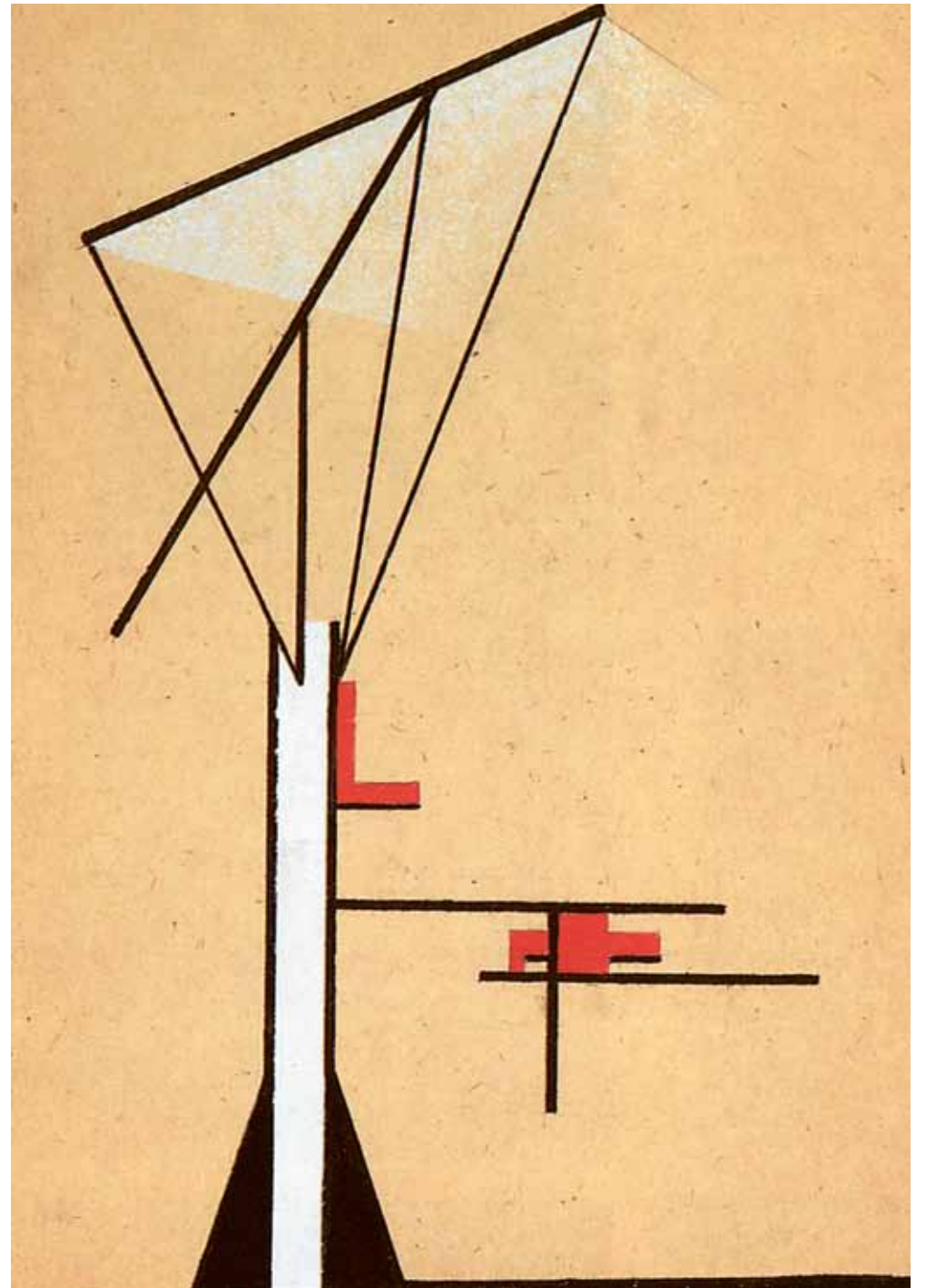
Works by Tatlin and Rodchenko had an undeniable influence on the creative output of the Stenbergs. The young artists followed in the general processes of transition from experiments done in paint to spatial constructions, but the Stenbergs did have their own particular features in the search for new paths to form-making. They, for instance, were not satisfied with everything in Tatlin's spatial constructions; the latter seemed to the brothers to be too closed up, lacking in lightness and openness. ■ The Stenbergs had received a good art education. But due to their youth, they did not go through the process of gradual rejection of figurative compositions that was characteristic of their older Constructivist colleagues. Rather, the experimental stage in their work was connected, first and foremost, with the transition from abstracted painted compositions to spatial constructions. ■ In their presentations and declarations, the Stenbergs in the early 1920s were among the most radical, forthright, and implacable thinkers who rejected the traditions of the past and criticized the «aesthetic approach» to form-making. ■ The stunning artistic resonance of Russian Constructivism is largely explained by the fact that within this movement, those who «fought against art» made up a con-

→ (pp 32–37)
Color constructions. 1918

stellation of brilliant artists who, in creating their, as they saw it, «purely technical» constructions and installations inadvertently turned them into magnificent artistic compositions. These supposedly purely technical and purely utilitarian «constructions,» then, became the crystals which, upon being thrown into their age's oversaturated «solution» of creative searches and expectations, engendered an active process of style formation. Works created by the Stenbergs played a not insignificant part in this general process of style formation during the concluding phase of the preparatory stage. ■ For the Stenbergs, unlike many other painters, the process of transition from representation to construction, from surface plane to space, was not clearly sequential over time. An enthusiasm for metal compositions was not for them merely a «way out» of painting. The Stenbergs worked with metal while they were still students specializing in minting at the Stroganov School. In their future work, they were also always making something out of metal. During his studies at the Second GSKhM, Vladimir Stenberg created a metal sculpture of a blacksmith in color, using three different materials: red copper (body), white tin (a shirt taken down to the waist), and black metal (trousers). ■ No later than 1919 (perhaps already in 1917–1918), the Stenbergs started to make their first constructions, using the combination of the texture and color of different materials, primarily metals. Their intensive work with abstracted form had its own evolution and its own pairings: «from surface plane — to space,» «from sculpture — to construction,» etc. ■ Pair I — color constructions (painted vs. made out of materials). Painted color constructions (abstracted composi-









←
Color construction (relief
composition). Textured wood,
colored glass, brass, tin, black
metal; 1919–1921

Constructive composition. 1921



tions) functioned as if they were painted projections for color constructions made out of materials. By means of painting, they depicted a flat relief. The color constructions made out of materials were executed using mainly metals of various colors (copper, white tin, aluminum, black metal) on a textured background. Other materials were used, as well: glass, sand, wood shavings, polished wood, etc. For example, on one of Georgy Stenberg's color constructions, one sees pressed into a textured surface various forms and pieces made of brass, tin, black metal, and glass. What was most characteristic for color constructions was the combination in a single composition of both painting and materials. This pair of Stenbergs' experimental compositions demonstrates the transition from painting to spatial constructions. ■ Pair II — metal sculpture (figurative vs. abstracted). What characterizes this pair is the evolution away from metal sculpture and minted decorative pieces towards abstract easel silhouette «sculptures,» which made extensive use of the color contrasts of different metals. One such construction created by Vladimir Stenberg was made up of a combination of three elements fixed to a massive dark stained wood base; the elements included a vertical black metal pipe, a metal disc (covered in white enamel) slipped over the pipe at an angle to the base, and a steel spring attached to the disc. ■ Pair III — linear graphic constructions (sketches vs. spatial constructions). In this pair, the evolution towards spatial constructions started out from graphic art. At first, a simple line composition made up of several intersecting straight and curved lines is depicted on a white background. Then, a similar graphic composition is created out

of metal rods (or wire), which are pressed into a textured surface or attached at some distance away from the surface (which can be wood, for example). ■ The three pairs of the Stenbergs' experimental works considered above clearly testify to the fact that the creative quest of these artists had three roots (in painting, decorative sculpture, and graphic art), even though they were moving in the same direction — towards spatial constructions. In these works, dating mostly to 1918–1920, there was not yet a clearly evident tendency towards engineered technical forms, which were characteristic of the constructions made in 1921. ■ The Stenbergs' heightened attention to engineered forms was, by all appearances, stimulated by an extended discussion that took place at INKhUK (January–April 1921), which was dedicated to the theme of «The Analysis of the Terms Construction and Composition and the Moment of Their Differentiation.»

THE DISCUSSION AT INKHUK OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSTRUCTION AND COMPOSITION

(January–April 1921)

INKhUK [Institut khudozhestvennoy kul'tury] (Institute of Artistic Culture) (1920–1924) was one of the centers of the formation of the concepts of Constructivism and production art. ■ In 1920, the direction of INKhUK's work was determined by a Presidium, which was chaired by Vasily Kandinsky, and the Section for Monumental Art, which he also headed. Those members of INKhUK who did not share Kandinsky's guiding principles and considered his method of analysis of works of art to be subjective countered it with the «objective method.» ■ The INKhUK members' investigations into the various aspects of this method of objective artistic analysis seemed already by early 1921 to focus their attention on the problem of constructions. 1921 passed at INKhUK (as well as VKhUTE-MAS) under the sign of constructions and under the slogan «From representation — to construction.» An enthusiasm for construction influenced the formation in 1921–1922 of the artistic concept

of Constructivism (and that of the Foundations disciplines at VKhUTE-MAS — in the earliest stage of their development, all of them were called «constructions»). ■ The discussion on the theme of «The Analysis of the Terms Construction and Composition and the Moment of Their Differentiation» played an important role at the early stage of the formation of Constructivism, and as it took place, the problem of constructions was pushed to the forefront. The discussion was organized by the Working Group of Objective Analysis at INKhUK and lasted four months. There are surviving records of eight discussion sessions, including the reports of the Commission for Summarizing the Conclusions of the Discussions, as well as the conclusions and definitions of a number of discussion participants, set down in written form by N. Ladovsky, V. Bubnova, V. Krinsky, B. Korolev, K. Ioganson, G. Stenberg, A. Rodchenko, and L. Popova; there are, additionally, graphic (or painted) works done by the participants of the discussion on the themes of Construction and Composition. ■ At the discussion sessions, the majority of participants at first spoke of construction as the artistic structure of a work, i.e. they were talking about the compositional build-up of an art object. The Stenberg brothers (and the like-minded Medunetsky), however, already in the course of the discussion veered sharply in the direction of engineering technology, both in their statements and their new works. With increasing certainty, they spoke about the fact that painting lacks construction and that the ideal construction is an engineered, technical one. ■ After the discussion's theoretical analysis, it was decided to move on to an investigation of construction in specific works. Among the pieces selected for analysis were spatial

Говорить не
принимать участия на заседании № 21 Рабочей группы
объективного анализа Инхук 25 марта 1921г.

И. Клыун -
А. Древин -
Л. Попова -
К. Медунетский -
Г. Штенберг -
В. Штенберг -
Н. Тарбукин -
В. Бубнова -
А. Бабичев -
К. Иогансон -
Н. Ладовский -
В. Кринский -
А. Родченко -
В. Степанова -

Родченко.

Вашему
В

←

Attendance list of those present at the meeting of the INKhUK Working Group of Objective Analysis on March 25, 1921. Signatures from top to bottom: I. Klyun, B. Korolyov, N. Udaltsova, A. Drevin, L. Popova, K. Medunetsky, G. Stenberg, V. Stenberg, N. Tarabukin, V. Bubnova, A. Babichev, K. Ioganson, N. Ladovsky, and V. Krinsky. On the right: A. Rodchenko and V. Stepanova

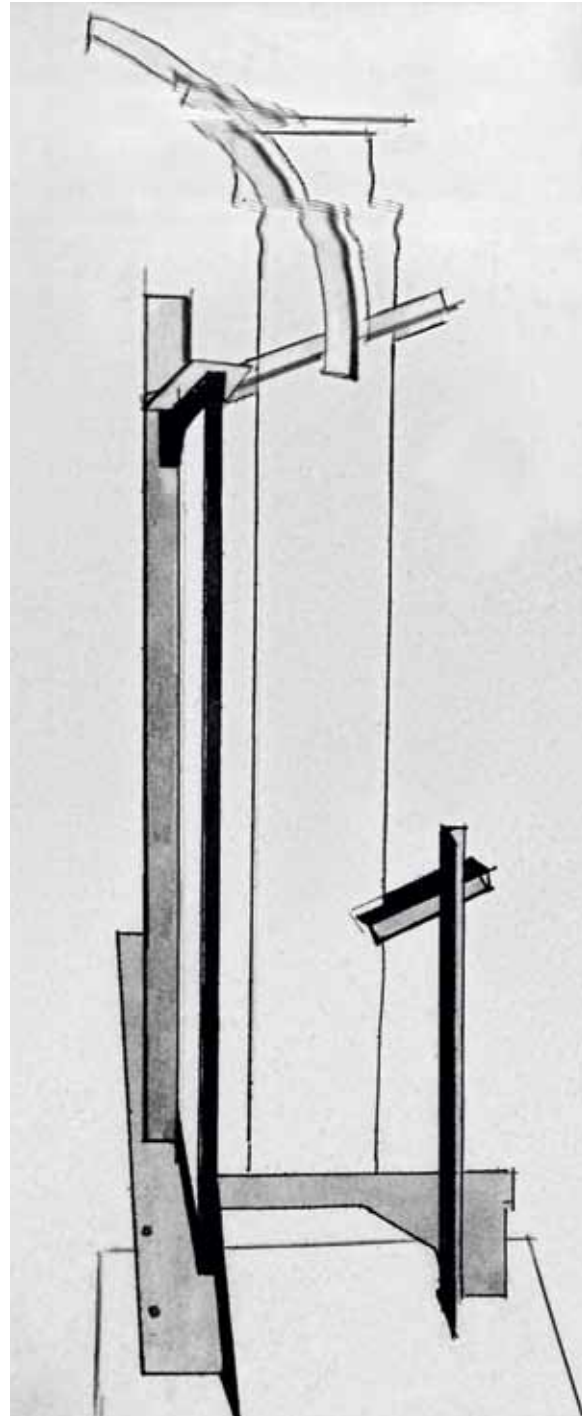
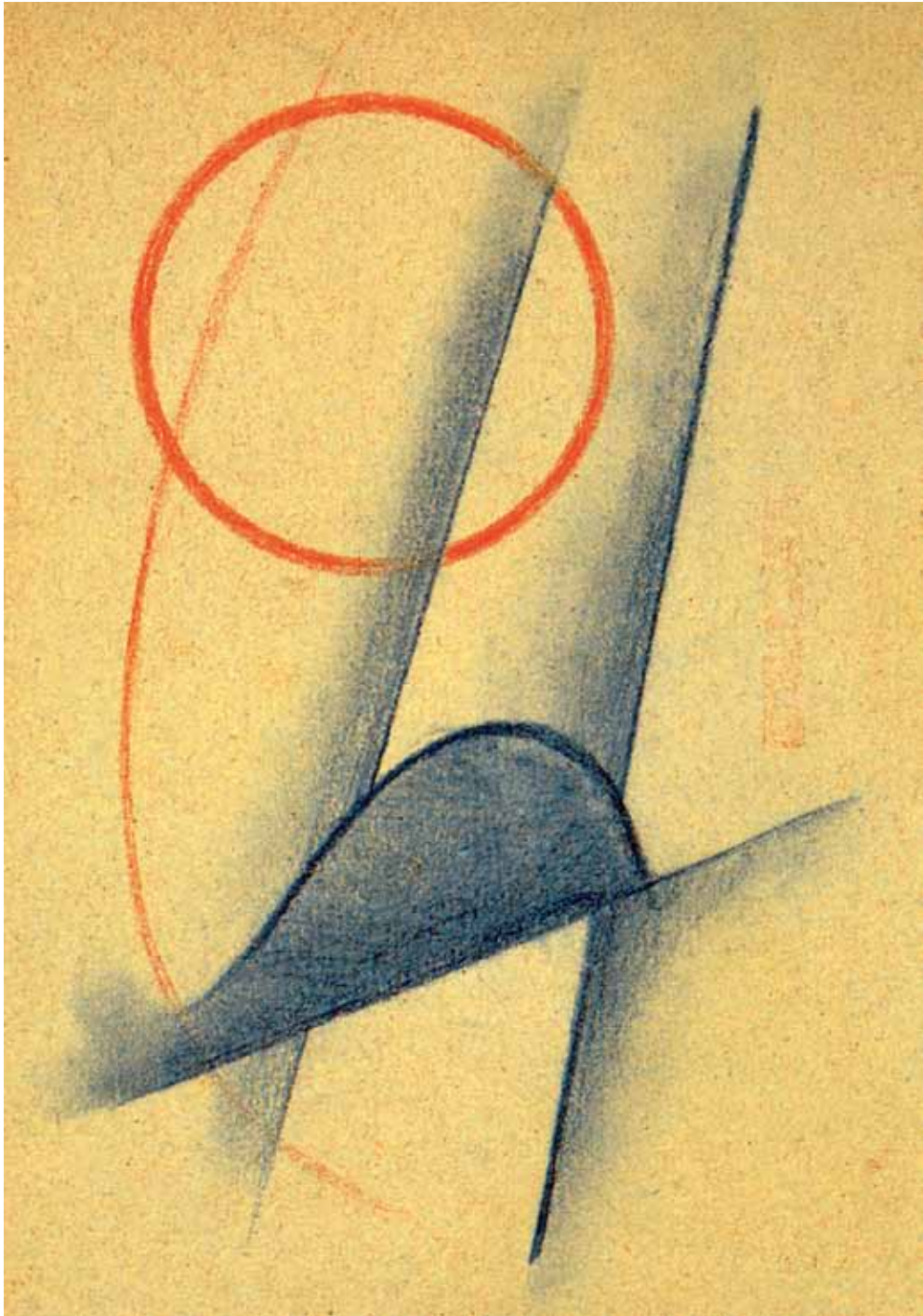
works by G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, and V. Tatlin. In selecting their criteria for judging the works, the discussion participants expressed different points of view concerning construction. These differences became increasingly apparent as the discussion progressed. As it turned out, it was in their relationship to the term «construction» that the members of the Group of Objective Analysis most clearly revealed the differences not only in their guiding creative concepts, but also in their approach to future experiments with abstracted form. ■ Some artists, such as I. Klyun, A. Drevin, and N. Udaltsova, for example, tried to find construction in painting itself, arguing that the departure from the surface of the canvas for three-dimensional space does not increase the ability to detect the constructiveness of a work. They saw constructiveness primarily in the nature of the use of the painterly means of expression. Others connected construction primarily with purposefulness or expediency and with the rejection of the «taste approach» to form, in which they saw composition. To composition as the «aesthetic arrangement» they opposed construction as the «expedient organization» of elements (L. Popova). A third group thought that «construction» presupposes a complete rejection of «aestheticism» and sought to move away from painting into spatial «technical» constructions (K. Medunetsky, G. Stenberg). In determining the construction of particular works, Karl Ioganson saw it in the «specific use of specific materials» and criticized Medunetsky and G. Stenberg for only providing representations of technical constructions in their spatial arrangements. Alexander Rodchenko in his analysis of particular works came to the conclusion that one must not approach painting «from

the point of view of a technical construction.» ■ After five discussion sessions, it was decided to give a commission consisting of A. Babichev, N. Ladovsky, and L. Popova the task of drawing the discussion's conclusions concerning the analysis of the terms «composition» and «construction.» At the March 4th meeting, the results of the commission's work were presented; these, as the subsequent conversation demonstrated, were not satisfactory to all the discussion participants. The most controversial provisions of the commission's conclusions were those which formulated the specific qualities of «construction» that differentiated it from «composition.» In the opinion of a number of discussion participants, some of these qualities could also apply to composition. ■ Having gotten carried away by the search for the definition of construction, the discussion participants dedicated much less attention to figuring out the specific character of composition. It was decided to fill this gap. ■ As for the controversial conclusions reached by the commission, it was decided to elect a new commission «for a second working-through of the material»; the new commission included A. Rodchenko, G. Stenberg, and K. Medunetsky. During the March session, the bulk of attention was dedicated to the analysis of the term «composition» and the question of how it differs from construction. At the same time, the discussion of the definition of «construction» also continued during this time. The ranks of the discussion participants were also joined by new contributors and members of the Working Group of Objective Analysis at INKhUK (V. Stenberg, A. Lavinsky, N. Tarabukin). ■ The discussion participants also continued to formulate their personal conclusions concerning the topic at hand. Georgy Stenberg

→ (p 48)
Composition. 1920

→ (p 49)
Sketches for constructions.
1921

wrote about his conclusions, which were dedicated solely to construction. In painting, he thought the elements of construction to include material (used purposefully for a particular form), form, color (which emphasizes and balances out form), and texture (also purposeful). In comparing technical construction with the painted kind, Georgy Stenberg noted both coincidences and dissimilarities between them. The coincidence lies in the fact that both the technical construction and the painted construction determine the means of the arrangement of material and its properties (weight, durability, elasticity, resistance) or the purposeful use of material, respectively. The difference between the two, in his opinion, lies in the fact that in the technical construction, «the system of arrangement is organized based on the unitary aim of the task,» whereas the painted construction stems from the «taste-based arrangement of forms which are individually constructive.» At the very end of his conclusions, Georgy Stenberg writes, «Since taste is the system for the arrangement of the painted construction, the latter is not a construction in the purest sense.» ■ The Stenbergs were reconsidering their relationship to the creation of spatial objects. What was becoming most important to them were the constructive properties of material — elasticity, weight, etc. Their whole system of criteria for the evaluation of spatial objects was changing. The old criteria came out of painting and sculpture (color, texture, feel), whereas the new relied on the engineered, technical properties of material. The Stenbergs demonstrated this new take on construction in their drawings on the theme of «Construction,» which they, like all the other participants of the discussion, submitted to INKhUK in April



of 1921. They called these drawings *Blueprints for Constructions*. ■ The last discussion session took place on April 22 (those present included A. Babichev, V. Bubnova, A. Drevin, K. Ioganson, B. Korolev, V. Krinsky, N. Ladovsky, K. Medunetsky, L. Popova, A. Rodchenko, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, V. Stepanova, N. Tarabukin, and N. Udaltsova). At the meeting, the practical works created by the participants on the themes «Composition» and «Construction» were considered. ■ The analysis of the works shows that what affected various group members' approach to the problem of the interrelationship of construction and composition was both their professional specialization and their take on the task of finding a «way out» of fine art in order to enter the object world. ■ Thus, the architects (V. Krinsky, N. Ladovsky) viewed their sketches as formal aesthetic experiments that fit within the framework of form-making tasks typical of their profession. ■ Both sculptors (A. Babichev and B. Korolev) experimented in those years within the limits of sculpture and did not aim to leave it for the object world. ■ The members of OBMOKhU (K. Medunetsky, V. Stenberg, and G. Stenberg) all came out with a common position in their theoretical formulations and drawings. They created drawings titled *Composition and Blueprint for Construction*. Their compositions were close to the compositions of a number of other discussion participants. At the same time, their blueprints for constructions stood out sharply among the submitted drawings because they were, in essence, technical projections of a certain kind of engineered spatial constructions. ■ Unlike the OBMOKhU members, V. Bubnova and L. Popova placed the greatest emphasis in their works on the problem of artistic structure. They created

brightly colored oil paintings. ■ N. Udaltsova's drawing *Composition Blueprint* was also close to these works. ■ The works of V. Stepanova and I. Klyun can also be listed alongside these drawings. ■ The works of K. Ioganson, A. Rodchenko, A. Drevin, and N. Tarabukin stand separately in categories of their own. ■ After the consideration of the drawings, work on the problem of the relationship between the terms Composition and Construction moved to the stage of drawing the conclusions of the discussion and preparing its materials for publication. A commission was elected (V. Bubnova and N. Udaltsova) and given the task of preparing the discussion materials for publication. These materials, however, were not published at that time. ■ On September 23, 1921, Osip Brik proposed at the official INKKhUK meeting to publish a volume titled *From Representation — to Construction*, for which the members of INKKhUK would have to submit articles, short written summaries of their creative credos, and three drawings supplementing them. The plan was that this would be a kind of conceptual account given by INKKhUK about its theoretical and creative investigations of the problem of «construction» and of Constructivism, which was coming into being in its bosom. ■ The Stenbergs were among the first to submit their credos to INKKhUK (V. Stenberg's manuscript is dated November 1921; G. Stenberg's manuscript is undated, but was probably written at the same time). ■ I will cite both documents written by the Stenbergs in their entirety. ■ **V. Stenberg's Credo:** ■ «I reject the art of pointless beauty, the sweet art of aesthetes, which breaks down and slows down the movement of exacting universal culture! ■ The Futurists have done their work — they destroyed the «unshakeable» art of the

В. Стенберг

Менуэто безмолвнейшей красоте
 Олауно менуэто (2) стетов пресмотренные и
 морозовские глянцевые суровой беспределом
 красоте отрывов!
 Фигурки суровые свое дело, они
 безмолвны «незримые» менуэто глянцо-
 вошведы, они рисуют в воздухе вилочка
 шло идеологии. Вы находитесь в мире
 изобретения, но архитектурные современности
 не идеология. Современности шло
 математические основы были
 наедине время инокерной
 прелести вращательной шло
 как некий фактисет, являет
 созданы свои пространственные
 законы и фундаментальные конструкции
 Силами заданы иконографии.
 Выводимая линиями экономика
 и целесообразности по отношению
 к материалу материалу как единственно
 органическую структуру: ~~структура~~
 пространству объема и ~~структура~~
 линии себе структура

Москва
 Ноябрь 1921.
 В. Стенберг

←
 V. Stenberg. Credo (for INKhUK).
 November 1921 (manuscript)

long-haired ones⁶, they ripped apart into shreds embodied ideology, they showed naked numbers, but the building of modernity is not their job. Modernity needs the mathematical creation of things. The time has come for engineering's truth, which I express as a Constructivist when I create my spatial experimental constructions. I set as my task exclusively the discovery of the maximum of economy and expediency in relation to a given material as the only organizing principle of: dynamics, space, volume, plane, line, light. ■ Moscow. November 1921. V. Stenberg.» ■ **G. Stenberg's Credo:** ■ «Constructivism is a new science. ■ Constructivism is that path of the cultural development of the world that will teach engineering to be economical, purposeful, social. ■ The experiment of a constructive spatial structure lies in the internal essence of material. ■ Space is conquered by line. ■ Glass is a surface that does not disturb a spatial solution. ■ The aim of constructive experiments is to give a new foundational formula for actual utilization in technology. ■ The plan of a constructive spatial structure. ■ The area of the structure is used for the movement of those parts necessary on the exterior that make up the organization of the given structure. ■ Constructivism provides the general development of engineering, casting aside the practical applicability part. ■ G. Stenberg.» ■ In these credos, the Stenbergs succinctly and clearly formulated their relationship to both Constructivism and «construction.» ■ Firstly, in questions of form-making, they opposed to artistic impulses the maximally expedient and economical use of material, seeing precisely in material, in the discovery of its inner

⁶ The term «long-haired» here is an allusion to the traditional image of the artist as a «priest» of High Art.

essence the basis of form-making. ■ Secondly, they viewed Constructivism as more than simply a rejection of applied art and the subordination of the principles of form-making to the demands of technology, although they clearly oriented themselves toward the «truth of engineering.» Rather, they saw Constructivism as a fundamentally **new** scientific and creative worldview, which had yet to be integrated into the sphere of production and had to influence engineers, as well, thereby making that production economical, purposeful, and social. ■ Thirdly, taking this into account, the Stenbergs viewed their spatial constructions as experiments in developing a «new foundational formula for actual use in technology.» Stressing this directedness of their experiments towards the real integration of their results into practice, the Stenbergs started to call their spatial constructions «constructive spatial structures.» ■ Fourthly, they considered the most important quality of their constructions to be their spatial latticed openness, stressing the fact that «space is conquered by line» (i.e. rod-like elements). This also explained the replacement of closed-off surfaces with glass, which «does not disturb a spatial solution.»

THE WORKING GROUP OF CONSTRUCTIVISTS AT INKHUK

Officially, the Working Group of Constructivists at INKhUK was created in March of 1921. Even prior to the formal organization of the group, however, its founding core already existed. It is important to clarify this fact because the term «Constructivism,» which would subsequently gain global fame, appeared for the first time precisely with the name of this working group. ■ In a number of his publications from 1922–1928, Alexei Gan dated the creation of the First Working Group of Constructivists to 1920⁷. The same information can be found in a brief note on Constructivism published in the journal *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* [*Contemporary Architecture*] (1926, #2). The note connects the very appearance of Constructivism with the creation at INKhUK of a Group of Constructivists and reports that its program and photographs of works were given for his information to L. Lissitzky, who was at the time leaving for Germany and France. ■ The first official meeting of the Working Group of Constructivists at INKhUK took place on March 18, 1921. It seems evident, however, that the initiating group consisting of Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Gan met more than once before this to dis-

⁷ Gan, Alexei, *Konstruktivizm* [Constructivism], Iver: 1922, p. 3; *Pervaya diskussionnaya vystavka obyedineniy aktivnogo revolyutsionnogo iskusstva* [The First Discussion-Exhibition of the Associations for Active Revolutionary Art], Exh. cat., Moscow, 1924, p. 14; *Sovremennaya arkhitektura* [Contemporary Architecture], 1928, issue #3, p. 79.

Регистрация посещаемости
Рабочей группы Конструктивистов ИНКХУК
с 18/III по 18/V 21 г.

Предмет ЗАНЯТИЙ.	Федеральный съезд		Двое часов		Федеральный съезд		Продолжение		Продолжение		Продолжение		Продолжение		Итого
	10-20	21-31	1-10	11-20	21-31	1-10	11-20	21-31	1-10	11-20	21-31	1-10	11-20		
ПРодолжИТЕЛЬ- ность ЗАСЕДАНИЯ	10-20	21-31	1-10	11-20	21-31	1-10	11-20	21-31	1-10	11-20	21-31	1-10	11-20	21-31	
ЗН СЛО, МЕСЯЦ	18/III	29/III	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	1/IV	
№ фамилия	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10					
1 Ган А.М.															6
2 Иогансон К.В.															9
3 Родченко А.М.															9
4 Степанова В.Ф.															9
5 Стенберг Г.А.															9
6 Стенберг В.А.															8
7 Медуницкий К.															6
8	4	6	7	7	5	7	7	7	6						
9															
10															
11															
12															
13															
14															
15 Гости															
16 Крайновский															
17 Брюсова Н.С.															
18															
19															
20															
Всего ПРИСУТСТВО- ВАЛО на ЗАСЕДАНИИ	4	6	7	7	7	7									

← Register of attendance for the Working Group of Constructivists at INKHKU from March 18 to May 18, 1921

cuss programmatic and organizational issues. ■ One has to mention that in the course of the discussion about construction and composition, two core groups of the Constructivists' future organization started to form at INKHKU: ■ 1) A. Rodchenko, V. Stepanova, and A. Gan (who did not participate in the discussion); ■ 2) V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, and K. Medunetsky. ■ The internal ties between the members of each group were very close, which later had an effect on the activities of the INKHKU Working Group of Constructivists, which seemed to be divided into two factions. ■ On February 23, 1921, the members of the initiative group (Rodchenko, Stepanova, Gan) conducted away from INKHKU the «first» organizational meeting of the «Group of Constructivists,» which, as the report from that meeting states, put forth «the goal of fighting against the artistic culture of the past and promoting a new worldview.» In its resolutions, the report speaks of the need to select as group members «only comrades who share the basic provisions of Constructivism»; it also records the approval of K. Ioganson as a member of the group. ■ The report of this meeting is the first of a number of known documents that mention the terms «Constructivism» and «Constructivist.» These terms appeared in early 1921 (perhaps late 1920) as a peculiar kind of synthesis of two words which at that time migrated from technology into art and were perceived by artists in a new way: one was «constructor» [konstruktor] (for example, a constructor of a mass activity — i.e. an artistic organizer), the other «construction» [konstruktsiya] (a certain organization of the structure of a work of art). The words «construction» and «constructor,» however, were terms burdened with semantic associations. Newly invented terms «Constructivism» and

«Constructivist,» on the other hand, devoid of associations, turned out to be very convenient and were immediately accepted by everyone. At the same time, the very first Constructivists tended to connect their own name not so much with a construction as an object [in Russian, *konstruktsiya*] as with the process of design and construction [in Russian, *konstruirovanie*, which is a word derived from the vocabulary of engineering]. At one of the meetings of the Working Group of Constructivists, Karl loganson even proposed replacing the term «Constructivist» with the term «constructor» [*konstruktor*]. ■ On March 18, now at INKhUK itself, a second organizational meeting took place, which, in fact, became the official date of the organization of the Working Group of Constructivists. Present at the meeting were K. loganson, A. Rodchenko, V. Stepanova, and G. Stenberg. The report of this meeting notes that it was decided to add to this «initiating core» of the group three new members: A. Gan, K. Medunetsky, and V. Stenberg. These seven made up the membership of the INKhUK Working Group of Constructivists. ■ In March–May of 1921, the Group held nine meetings. The reports on these meetings have survived in a private archive (for four of the meetings — # 2, 7, 8 and 9 — there are also shorthand records of the discussions). A. Rodchenko, V. Stepanova, K. loganson, and G. Stenberg were present at all nine meetings of the Group; V. Stenberg was absent at the first meeting; A. Gan was absent at the first, fifth, and ninth meetings; K. Medunetsky was absent at the first, second, and fifth meeting. At the Group’s meetings, its secretariat was formed (consisting of A. Gan, A. Rodchenko, and V. Stepanova); the program (written by A. Gan) was discussed and approved; the Group’s organizational structure and work plan were

approved; a decision was taken concerning the creation under the Group’s aegis of an educational sub-group of VKhUTEMAS students; a number of talks were given; etc. ■ The Group was divided into three sections: ■ 1) Organizational — V. Stepanova (head) and A. Gan; ■ 2) Productivist — A. Rodchenko (head), K. loganson, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg; ■ 3) Print and agitation — A. Gan (head), V. Stepanova, and K. Medunetsky. ■ Each section conducted its own separate meetings. ■ I cite here in their entirety the first two reports of the general meetings of the Constructivist Working Group. ■ «Report #1 ■ On the organizational meeting of the INKhUK Working Group of Constructivists on March 18, 1921 ■ (Moscow, Volkhonka St. 14, apt. 8; 10:20 p.m.) ■ In attendance: ■ 1. loganson ■ 2. Rodchenko ■ 3. Stepanova ■ 4. G. Stenberg ■ Order of the day: ■ 1. Organizational questions. ■ No one is presiding. Stepanova is the secretary.

Heard	Decided
1. The question of organizing at INKhUK a Working Group for the special investigation of the problems of spatial-constructive production (Stepanova)	1. To consider the organization of the Working Group of Constructivists timely and necessary
2. The Group’s membership	2. To consider the following comrades as the group’s initiating core: Rodchenko, loganson, Stepanova, G. Stenberg, V. Stenberg, Medunetsky, Gan
3. The program of the Group’s work	3. To propose that Group members present their ideas concerning the work plan and program of the Group at the next meeting

4. The question of enlisting specialists from science and technology to work in the Group	4. To acknowledge as necessary the enlistment into the Group's work of a specialist mathematician and a technology engineer
5. The procedure for joining the Group	5. To make joining the Group contingent on the requirement to present work built on the principle of expedient constructiveness. This condition does not concern those comrades whom the Group enlists on its own initiative
6. Selection of the Group's bureau (secretariat)	6. To elect comrade Stepanova as the secretary of the Group
7. The question of enlisting comrade Gan to work in the Group (V. Stepanova)	7. To approve comrade Gan as a Group member
8. Fixing the day and place for meetings	8. To consider Monday the fixed day of the Group's meetings, to take place at the Museum Bureau at 8 p.m.
9. Order of the day for the next meeting	9. To include in the order of the day for the next meeting the question of the Group's work program

The meeting is closed at 12:25 a.m. ■ The original was signed by ■ Group members: Stenberg ■ loganson ■ Rodchenko ■ V. Stepanova.» ■ **Report #2** ■ Plenary meeting of the INKhUK Working Group of **Constructivists**. ■ March 28, 1921. (Volkhonka St. 14, apt. 8; 8 p.m.) ■ In attendance: ■ 1. Gan ■ 2. loganson ■ 3. Rodchenko ■ 4. G. Stenberg ■ 5. V. Stenberg ■ 6. Stepanova ■ Order of the day: ■ 1. Discussion of the program and of the work plan. Comrade **Gan's** report about the program and the Group's work plan. ■ 2. Organizational questions. ■ 3. Current business. ■ No one is presiding. Stepanova is the secretary.

Heard	Decided
1. Comrade Gan's report about the program and work plan of the Group of Constructivists (the report and its discussion are entered into discussion #1 of the Group of Constructivists)	1. To accept in principle all the propositions put forward by comrade Gan in the report and give him the task of writing up by Friday, April 1 of this year the specific program of the Group to be approved at the General Meeting of INKhUK
2. Comrade Rodchenko's proposal to write a report of an agitational nature on behalf of the Group of Constructivists in which to expand more broadly the Constructivists' positions, goals, and tasks	2. To give comrade Gan the task of writing the report on behalf of the Group in accordance with comrade Rodchenko's proposal
3. Comrade Gan's proposal that each member of the Group should submit his mottoes to be printed alongside the report. One motto should be based on rejection, the second on affirmation	3. To suggest that all Group members should submit their mottoes at the next meeting
4. Question of the addition to the secretariat of the Group of comrades Gan and Rodchenko (V. Stepanova)	4. To add comrades Gan and Rodchenko to the secretariat of the Group
5. Discussion of the question of who will make the presentation on behalf of the Group to defend the Constructivists' program at the INKhUK plenary meeting	5. To appoint comrade Gan as the presenter at the INKhUK plenary meeting

The meeting is closed at 2:20 a.m. ■ **Absent: Medunetsky** ■ The members of the **Constructivist** Group: ■ Copied accurately from the original ■ Secretary.» ■ At the third meeting (April 1, 1921), the Program of the Working Group of Constructivists was approved. Its text survives in a private INKhUK archive. In 1922, the Program was pub-

lished in the journal *Ermitazh [Hermitage]* in a slightly edited version⁸. ■ Below, I cite the original text of the Program (from the INKhUK archive).⁹ ■ «Program of the INKhUK Working Group of Constructivists. ■ The Group of Constructivists has set itself the task of finding the communistic expression of material structures. ■ Approaching its task in a scientifically hypothetical way, the Group insists on the need to synthesize the ideological aspect with the formal one for the real

⁸ *Ermitazh [Hermitage]*, Moscow, August 1922, #13, pp.3–4.

⁹ Translator's Note: Although the two translations are not identical, the translation below is indebted to the earlier one by Christina Lodder, which can be found in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 341–343.

¹⁰ Translator's Note: *Faktura*, the Russian word used here, is notoriously difficult to encapsulate in translation. In *transcribing* rather than translating it, I follow a precedent established by Maria Gough, Christina Lodder, and other English-language scholars. To define the term, Gough writes, «Narrowly and conventionally speaking, *faktura* means «texture» or «facture» — that is, a property of painting, sculpture, and many other arts, including verse. More significantly, for our purposes, it refers to the overall handling or working of the material constituents of a given medium, and thus to the process of production in general.» Cf. Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p.11. The definition of *faktura* offered by the Constructivists themselves appears below.

transference of laboratory work onto the tracks of practical activity. ■ Therefore, at the time of its establishment, the Group's program noted, concerning the ideological aspect, that: ■ 1) Our sole ideological presupposition is scientific communism built on the theory of historical materialism; ■ 2) Its theoretical understanding and assimilation of the experience of Soviet construction should impel the Group to move from experimental activities «outside of life» towards real experimentation; ■ 3) Specific elements of reality, i.e. tectonics, construction, and *faktura*¹⁰, become the root basis of the communistic expression of material structures, which, when they are ideologically justified, theoretically understood, and assimilated from experience, mobilize the material elements of industrial culture when they are transformed into volume, surface, plane, color, space, and light. ■ The three paragraphs of the ideological

part establish an organic connection with the formal part. ■ Tectonics or the tectonic style is tempered and formed on the one hand from the properties of communism and on the other from the expedient and purposeful use of industrial material. ■ Construction — organization. Receiving its content from communism, construction is also formed in equal measure tectonically by the content of material itself. Construction should be perceived as an aggregative function, which is taken to the limit of every entity and which does not reveal yet another functional possibility of the tectonic charge. ■ Consciously taken and expediently used material, which does not hamper the construction's movement and does not restrict tectonics — preserving and not disturbing all of this — is what the Group calls *faktura*. ■ These three main elements go into all the categories of intellectual production. ■ The group considers material elements to be: ■ 1. Material as such. ■ The study of its origin, industrial transformation or *productics*. Its properties, its significance. ■ Intellectual materials are: ■ 2. Light. ■ 3. Space. ■ 4. Volume. ■ 5. Plane. ■ 6. Color. ■ Constructivists treat intellectual materials to the same degree that they treat the materials of concrete bodies. ■ **The Group's Immediate Tasks** ■ I. In the ideological sphere: ■ To prove in word and deed the incompatibility of artistic activity with the functions of intellectual production; ■ The real participation of intellectual production as an equal element in the creation of communist culture. ■ II. In the practical sphere: ■ To publish statements; ■ To publish a weekly informational outlet, *VIP (Vestnik intellektual'nogo proizvodstva) [The Newsletter of Intellectual Production]*; ■ To publish brochures and pamphlets on the questions connected to the Group's activities; ■

To construct designs; ■ To organize exhibitions; ■ To establish links with all Production Boards [Translator's Note: The Russian original uses the term *Glavk*, a Soviet abbreviation from «glavnyy komitet» (head committee), which could be applied to the central offices of any ministerial organization] and Centers of that unified Soviet machine which produces and shapes in practice the communist forms of life. ■ III. In the agitational sphere: ■ The group declares an implacable war against art as such; ■ It asserts the lack of continuity between the artistic culture of the past and the communist forms of Constructivist structures.» ■ The artists of the Group of Constructivists were used to considering theoretical propositions put forth by participants in various discussions as part of an artist's artistic credo to help understand his or her foundational concepts. This had been their practice at Zhivskul'ptarkh (1919–1920) [see p 10 for the meaning of this abbreviation], the Section for Monumental Art (1920), and the INKhUK Group of Objective Analysis (1921). ■ The arguments and discussions were happening among artists who filled the theoretical propositions they were proclaiming with professional and artistic content. Practically all the theoretical declarations made by the artists themselves were only the theoretical part of an artist's (or school's or movement's) artistic credo and did not claim to have any general, universally applicable theoretical meaning. The conversation between artists, even if it had a distinctly theoretical bent, still took place through a professional language understood by each artist, despite all the metaphorical and categorical appearance of certain mottoes and declarations. ■ The theorists of production art (B. Arvatov, B. Kushner, O. Brik, A. Gan), on the other hand, were not, by and large, profes-

sional artists, and they developed their theoretical work in a somewhat different plane. They were interested in precise definitions, common terminology, and theoretical propositions as such, i.e. not just those that were part of a particular artistic credo, but those that had a general applicability. ■ All of this led to certain difficulties in the mutual relations between the artists and theorists of production art. The former not infrequently accused the latter of scholasticism, while the latter, easily reaching the most radical proposals in their speculations, criticized the artists for their slowness, lack of boldness, etc. ■ Uninitiated into the nuances of terminology, the artists lost their spirit a bit in joint discussions with the theorists. What happened at the same time was a shifting, imperceptible at first glance, of the stresses made in the discussion of the problems. The theorists' participation undoubtedly raised the theoretical level of the discussions, but the discussions increasingly switched to a level of abstraction from the problem itself at which arguments about terminology or attempts at clarifying the content of particular definitions often overshadowed the creative problems that interested the artists. ■ This process also characterized INKhUK's activities as theorists of production art gained increasing influence in its work. ■ Already in the discussion about composition and construction, one sees the very different approaches to the problem at hand taken by the artists and the theorist Nikolay Tarabukin. In the Group of Constructivists, Alexei Gan was the only theorist, and he was given the opportunity to formulate programmatic propositions, figure out terminology, etc. This very much suited the artists, who did not want to get into the terminological nuances and were more interested in the essence of the problem. The result

of such «division of labor» within the Group turned out to be unexpected for the artists themselves. The shorthand records of the discussions of the Group of Constructivists testify that instead of discussing the essence of the problem, the artists often had to discuss questions of terminology, making their way with difficulty through the dense thicket of Gan's scholastic definitions. Getting carried away in his development of Constructivism's platform of verbal declarations, Gan liked to give terms a new meaning, justifying his verbal experiments at length (he had, for instance, a quite particular understanding of the terms *tectonics*, *faktura*, etc.) and making their formal logic invulnerable. The artists (including the Stenberg brothers) tended to yield to Gan's verbal balancing acts. Most often, though, when finally getting a clarification from Gan, who, as it turned out, put a completely different (or, at least, not common) meaning into a term, they simply gave up, thinking that their real concern lay with the essence of the matter and not the terminology. As a result, the Constructivists' programmatic documents and declarations gradually got clogged up with terms and formulations whose true meaning was only clear to the Constructivists themselves, and even then not all of them. ■ All of these difficulties are clearly illustrated by the surviving reports of the discussions at the meetings of the Working Group of Constructivists of Gan's talks and of the programmatic documents and terms. ■ As a unified whole, the INKhUK Working Group of Constructivists worked from March through May of 1921. After that, INKhUK's activities were put on hold for several months due to the fact that a commission reviewing and revising its institutional goals was working there (from May 24th on). INKhUK's meetings resumed

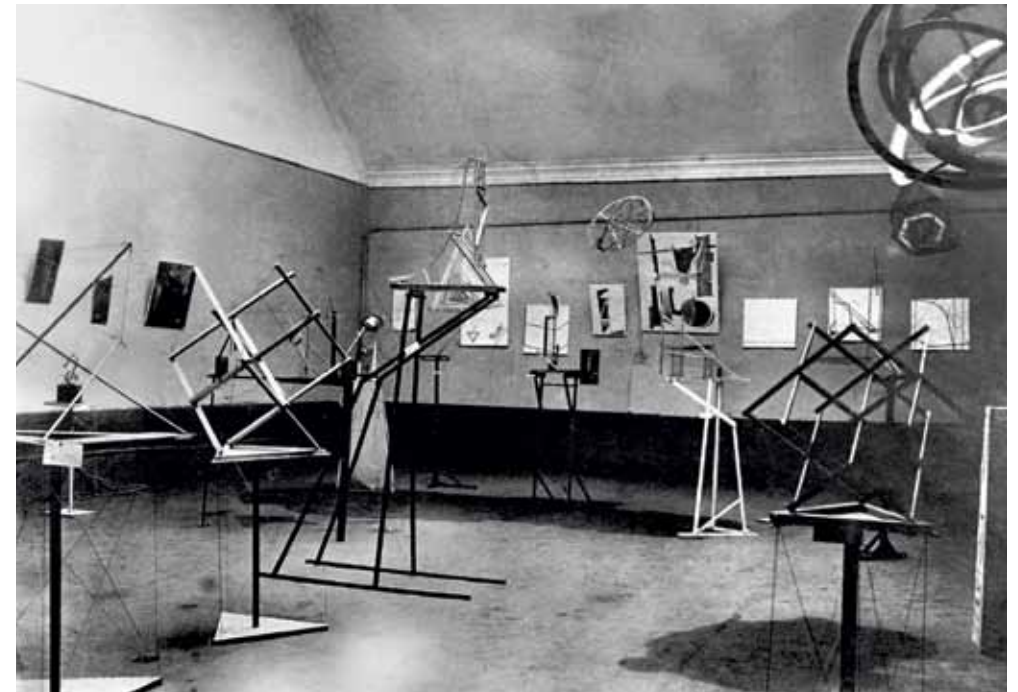
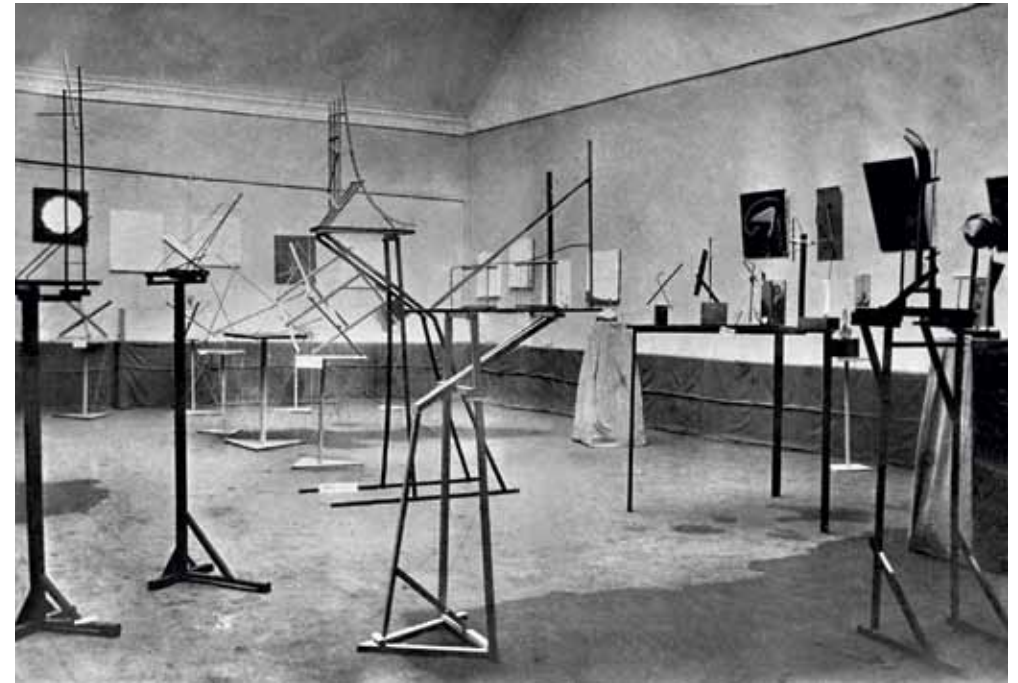
in the Fall, when its Presidium was re-elected. Osip Brik became the chair of the Presidium in place of Alexander Rodchenko, and the governance of INKhUK passed into the hands of the theorists of production art. ■ The documents of the Working Group of Constructivists speak of «constructing» and «inventing.» An artistic conception of form-making aimed at constructing and inventing was typical of the first Constructivists. It was precisely in such an approach to the problems of form-making that they saw the special concerns of the artist who was to be integrated into the object world.



A room with the spatial constructions, color constructions, and plans for constructions by V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, K. Ioganson, K. Medunetsky, and A. Rodchenko at the Second Spring OBMOKhU Exhibition in Moscow. [General views](#), 1921.

THE MOVE TOWARDS CONSTRUCTION – THE 1921 OBMOKHU EXHIBITION

In late May 1921, works by five members of the Working Group of Constructivists (K. Ioganson, K. Medunetsky, A. Rodchenko, V. Stenberg, and G. Stenberg) were shown in Moscow in a separate room at the *Second Spring OBMOKhU Exhibition*, in which a total of fourteen artists (including non-members of OBMOKhU) took part. ■ Rodchenko and Ioganson first placed their constructions on cloth-covered bases, much as one would with sculpture (and with all works standing at the same height). The Stenbergs and Medunetsky, however, created special stands. The Stenbergs, moreover, created stands of a specific shape and height for each construction, thinking that the height of the object's installation was very important for how it would be perceived. At that point, Ioganson also created special stands, but all of them were the same — triangles at the top and bottom connected by bracing. Rodchenko suspended everything in the air. ■ The OBMOKhU exhibition attracted attention as a show of works by artists who «emerged» into the object world through spatial constructions and demonstrated new techniques and methods of constructing. General installation views of the exhibition room and images of individual constructions shown at the exhibition were published in the 1920s in both Soviet and foreign publications, such



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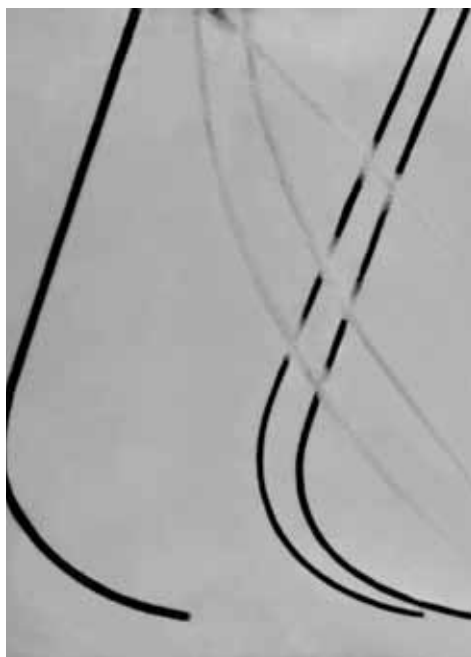
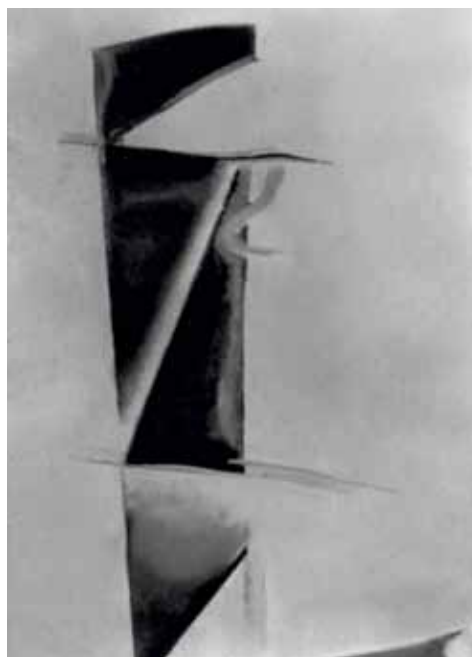
Color construction. 1921

as the journals *Zrelishcha [Spectacles]*, *Kinofot, Veshch [Thing]*, Moholy-Nagy's book *From Material to Architecture* (Munich, 1929), and others. ■ The exhibition was significant because it marked the first time when spatial constructions were demonstrated in such large numbers and in an interconnected context as elements of artistic culture. This was an important psychological break through the barrier which separated the style-forming processes in the artistic and the engineering or technological spheres. ■ In their analysis of the processes of form-making in the 1920s, various authors have returned numerous times to the 1921 OBMOKhU exhibition, trying to understand its place and role in these processes. Thus, for example, Ya. Tugenkhod, in analyzing a number of exhibitions that took place in 1924, wrote that in comparison with the specific works on view at the *First Discussion Exhibition* (1924) [see footnote 6 above], what had «predominated» at the 1921 OBMOKhU exhibition were «spatial and volumetric experiments, which had a purely self-sufficient meaning — these were 'things in themselves.'»¹¹ ■ This was, indeed, so; the constructions shown at the OBMOKhU exhibition were of a highly abstracted nature. They clearly reflected an important analytical stage in the work of a group of artists who subsequently made a great contribution to the development of Constructivism and production art. ■ But as I have noted above, neither the theorists of production art nor the artists themselves could properly appreciate right away the role of experiments with construction for the processes of style-formation and the formation of design. ■ And yet one

of the defining characteristics of Soviet art in the 1920s lay in the fact that the artists-



¹¹ *Khudozhnik i zritel' [Artist and Viewer]*, 1924, issue #6–7, p 66.

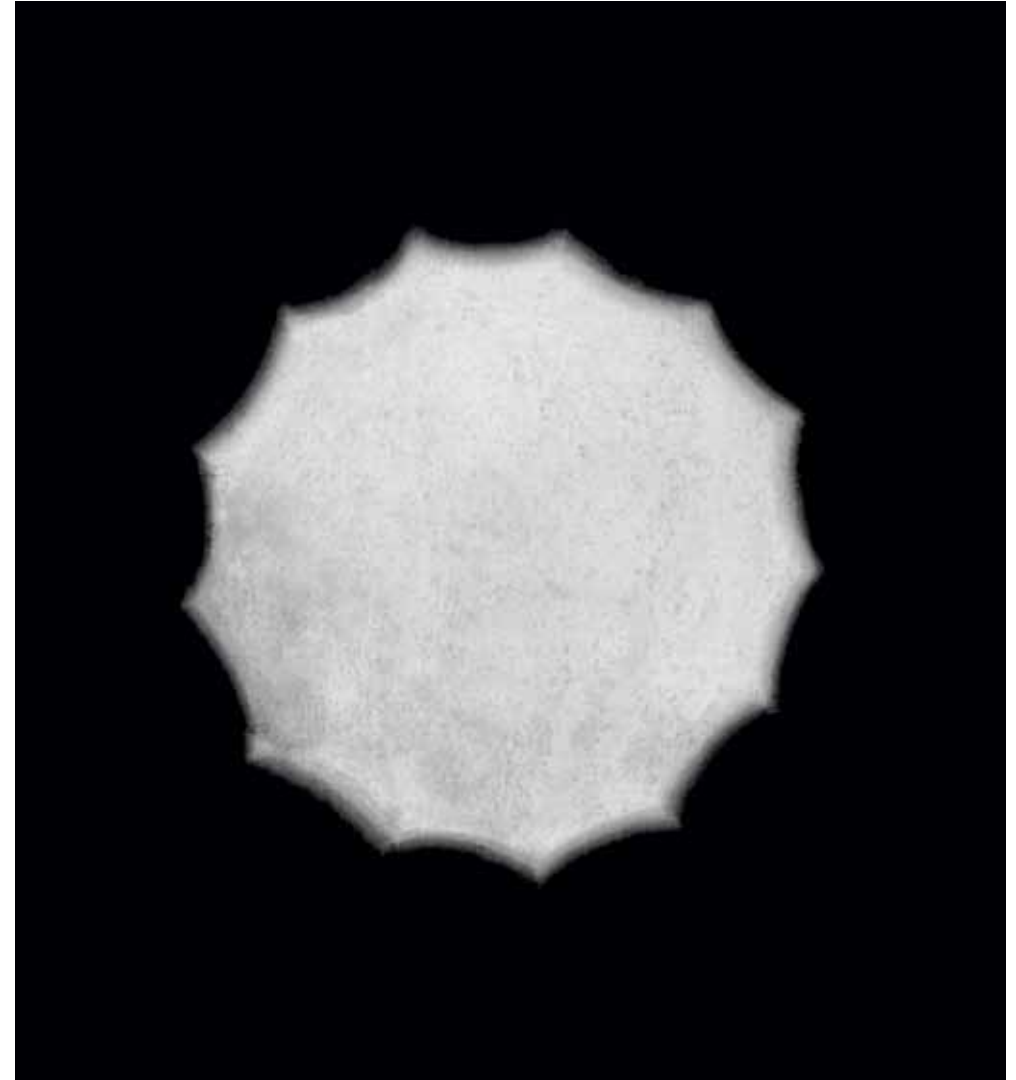


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Color constructions. 1921

Constructivists, having passed through a stage of intensive experiments with spatial constructions, singled out the goal of **constructing** as the basis of form-making for objects. This aim in the questions of form-making largely encouraged the appearance of a specialist of a new type: the artist-constructor (this term was already in use in the first half of the 1920s). ■ Constructing turned out to be the particular feature of the new profession that fundamentally distinguished it from the work of an artist in the applied arts or an artist who earlier would have worked in art-related industry. ■ Even before the Revolution, the Stroganov School of Art and Industry and a number of other educational institutions had been preparing artists with various specializations for work in industry. ■ These artists' main task was the creation of the exterior artistic form of a product, which they did masterfully, having been given professional training in the surface treatment of materials, carving, and decorating in a variety of styles. ■ It was these techniques and means of artistic expressiveness that were the basis of form-making for their products in the works of the Stroganov School graduates. The constructive foundation of the products was also well-known to them, but it was treated primarily as a technical construction upon which the artistic «cover» was «superimposed.» ■ It is important to keep all this in mind in order to appreciate the role of the stage «from representation — to construction» in the process of formation of Constructivism and production art, in order to understand why emphasis on **the thing** did not come immediately, why it was preceded by strange **constructions**. ■ It was, of course, possible to change the stylistic «cover» of the object world without turning to construction. And, moreover, to change it in the most rad-

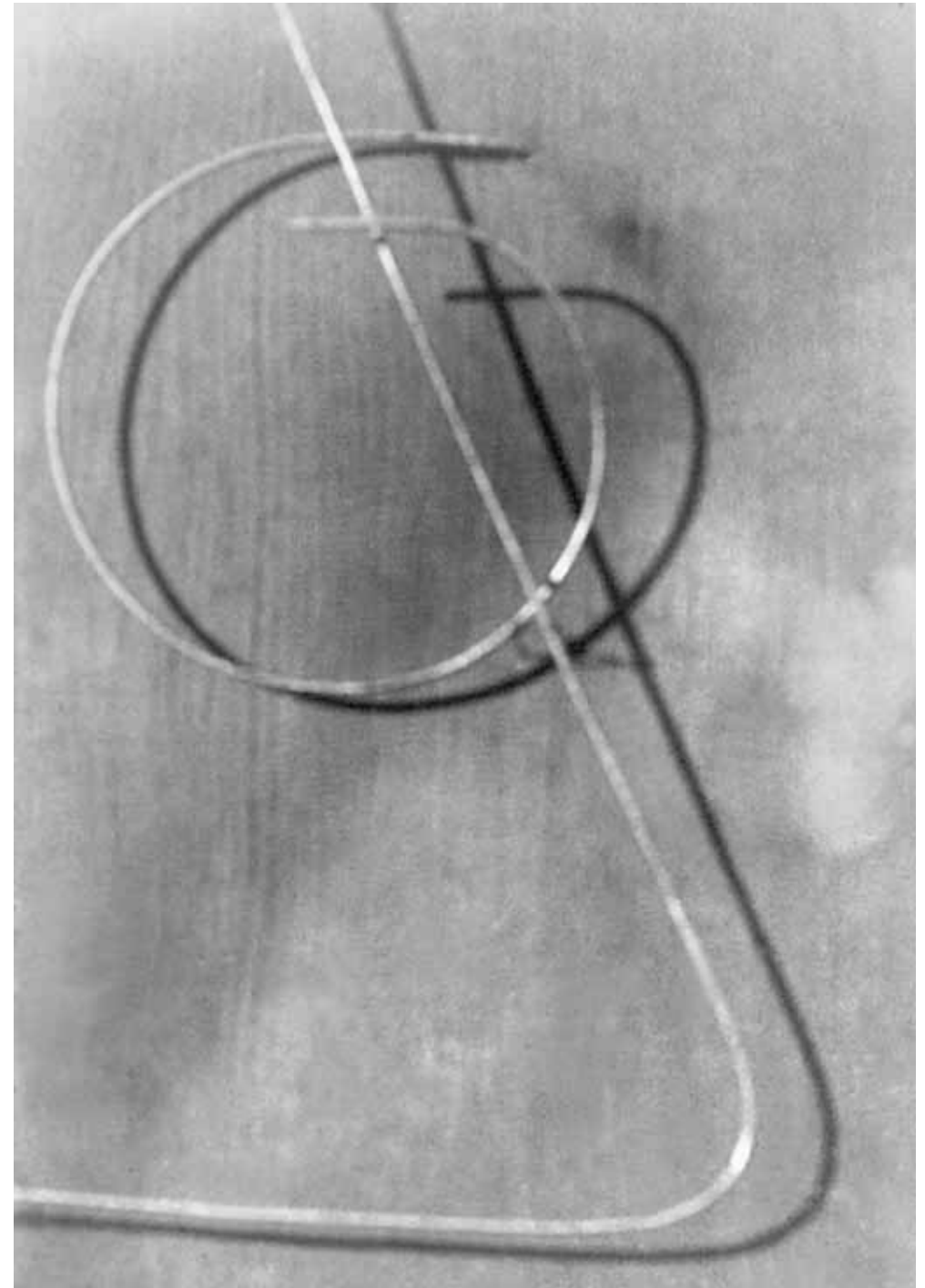
ical fashion, as was proposed, for instance, by Kazimir Malevich in his use of simple geometric forms and color. ■ The Constructivists' accomplishment lay in the fact that they tried to find (and did find) an impulse towards form-making that would differ in principle (and not just in technique) from the traditional approach towards the making of a thing's form. Such an impulse, then, was found in construction, in its connection with the function of the product and the technology of production. But in order to get to this form-making impulse, one had to put one's faith in construction or the structural basis of an object. ■ What characterizes the Constructivists' conception of form-making is their taking of the constructive structure to the level of artistic form. The impulse of form-making comes as if from inside the object. The importance of this kind of impulse is characteristic of artistic styles that appear during periods of intensive technological development. Constructivism took this particular impulse for form-making as its foundation. What is more, the impulse became of decisive importance at an early stage of the movement's emergence, which largely helped Constructivism to find its own direction and identity. ■ But the role of this «constructive» impulse was not understood immediately or by everyone. ■ The turn of a group of artists in the early 1920s toward experiments with spatial constructions should be understood as a profoundly important stage in the re-orienting of artistic processes of form-making from the techniques of external stylization to the techniques of Constructivism. This was the contribution of the Moscow school of Constructivism to the general process of formation of the new style. ■ The year 1921, which became decisive for the stage of transitioning «from

Color construction. 1921

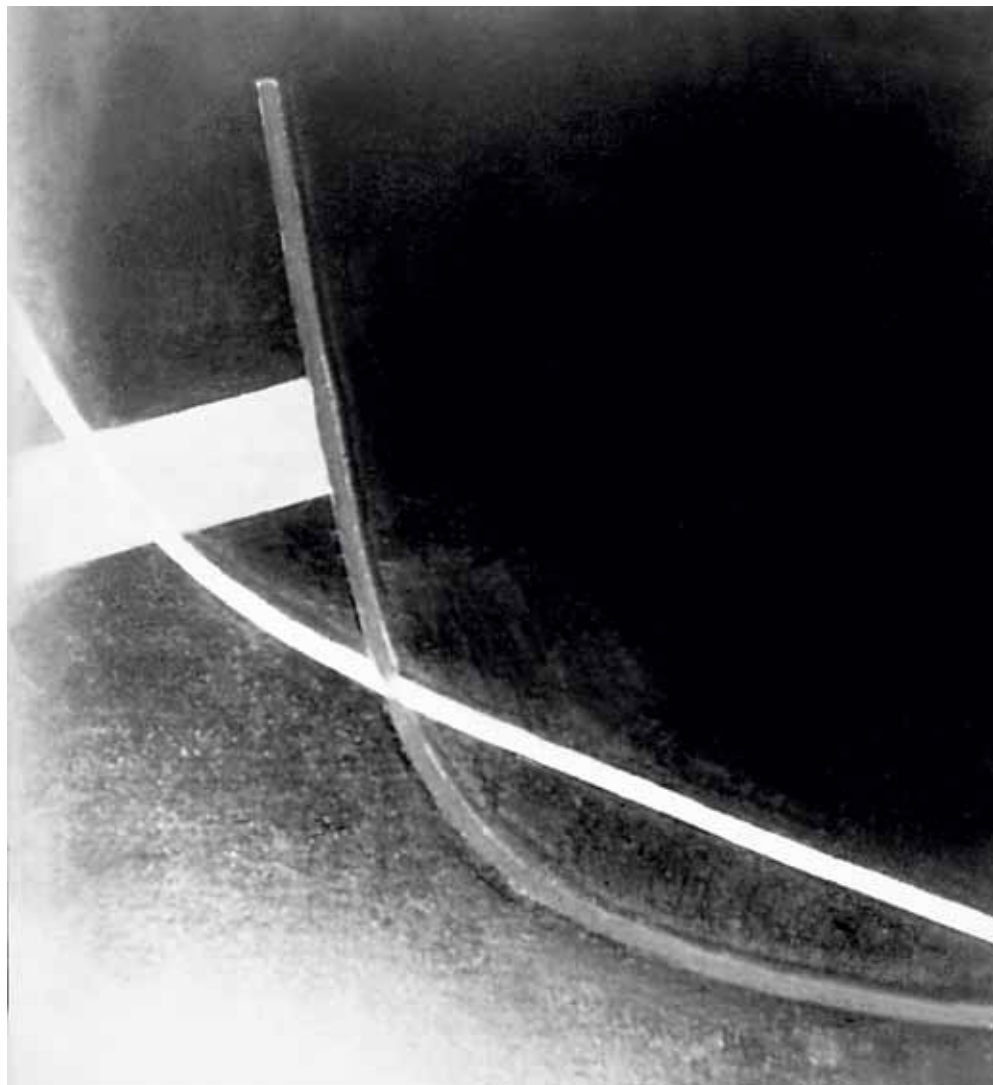


→
Linear relief composition.
1921

representation — to construction» was marked by intensive experiments with spatial constructions, carried out first and foremost by the members of the INKhUK Working Group of Constructivists, whose works were shown at the OBMOKhU exhibition. It was a powerful collective salvo, which allowed construction and constructing to take an important place among the means of form-making and the processes of style-formation. ■ The theorists of production art did not immediately appreciate the role of the experiments with spatial constructions. They started to pay close attention to construction only at the end of 1921. Coming in at that time as the new head of INKhUK, where the interest in «construction» among artists had by then reached its apogee, Osip Brik tried to move «construction» from existing in the category of style-forming factors to being an instrument for integrating artists into industry, viewing the stage «from representation — to construction» as only a transitional one to the stage «from construction — to production.» ■ Among the artists who made a significant contribution to the emergence of early Constructivism as a whole, one can name, first and foremost, V Tatlin, A. Rodchenko, N. Gabo, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, K. Ioganson, N. Pevsner, L. Popova, A. Vesnin, G. Klutskis, V. Stepanova, A. Lavinsky, and A. Exter. ■ In this general process, however, one can separate out a line of work that played an important role for the style-forming conception of Constructivism in its search of the main stylistic mode, comparable with Suprematism's stylistic mode. ■ What undoubtedly gave the original powerful creative impulse to the whole form-making process within the framework of Constructivism were Tatlin's counter-reliefs and his *Monument to the Third International*. After that, the form-making

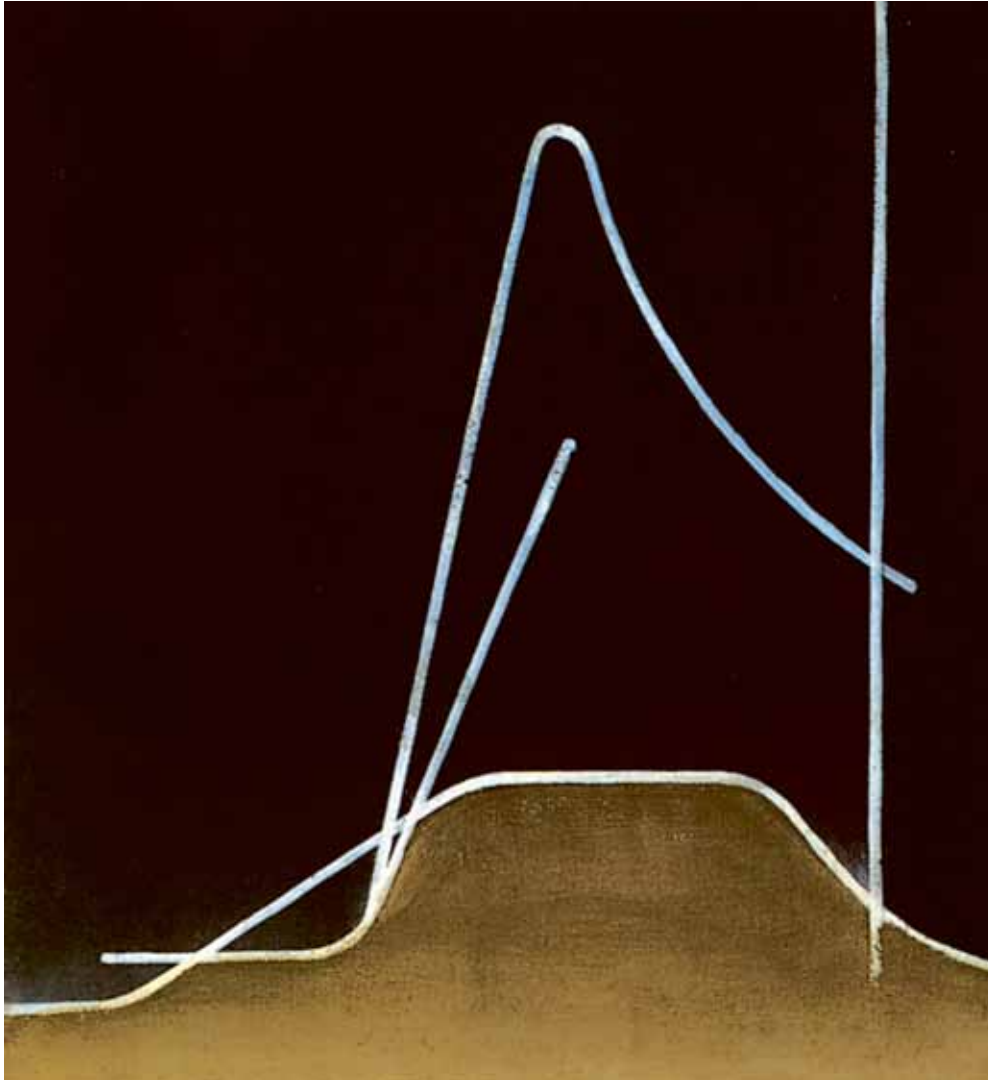


Linear relief composition.
1921



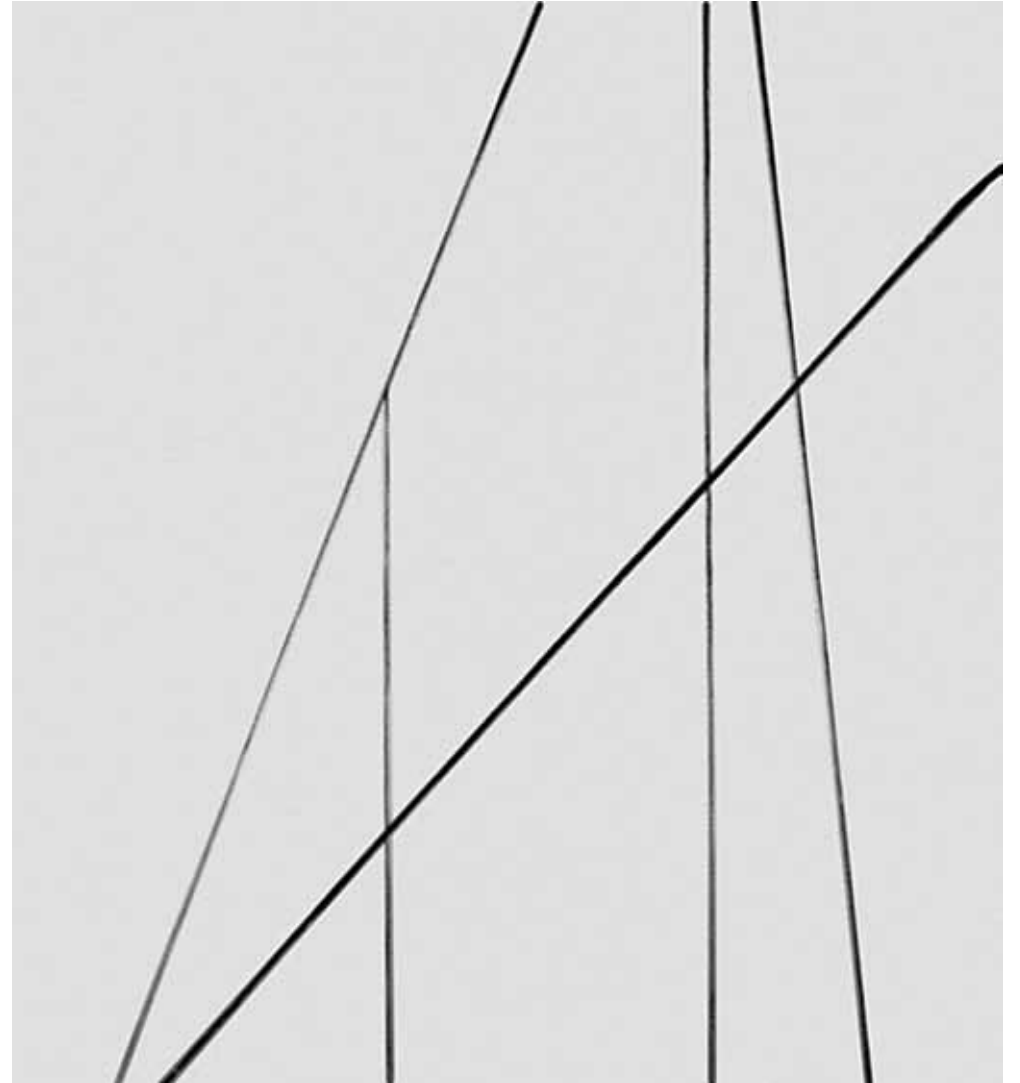
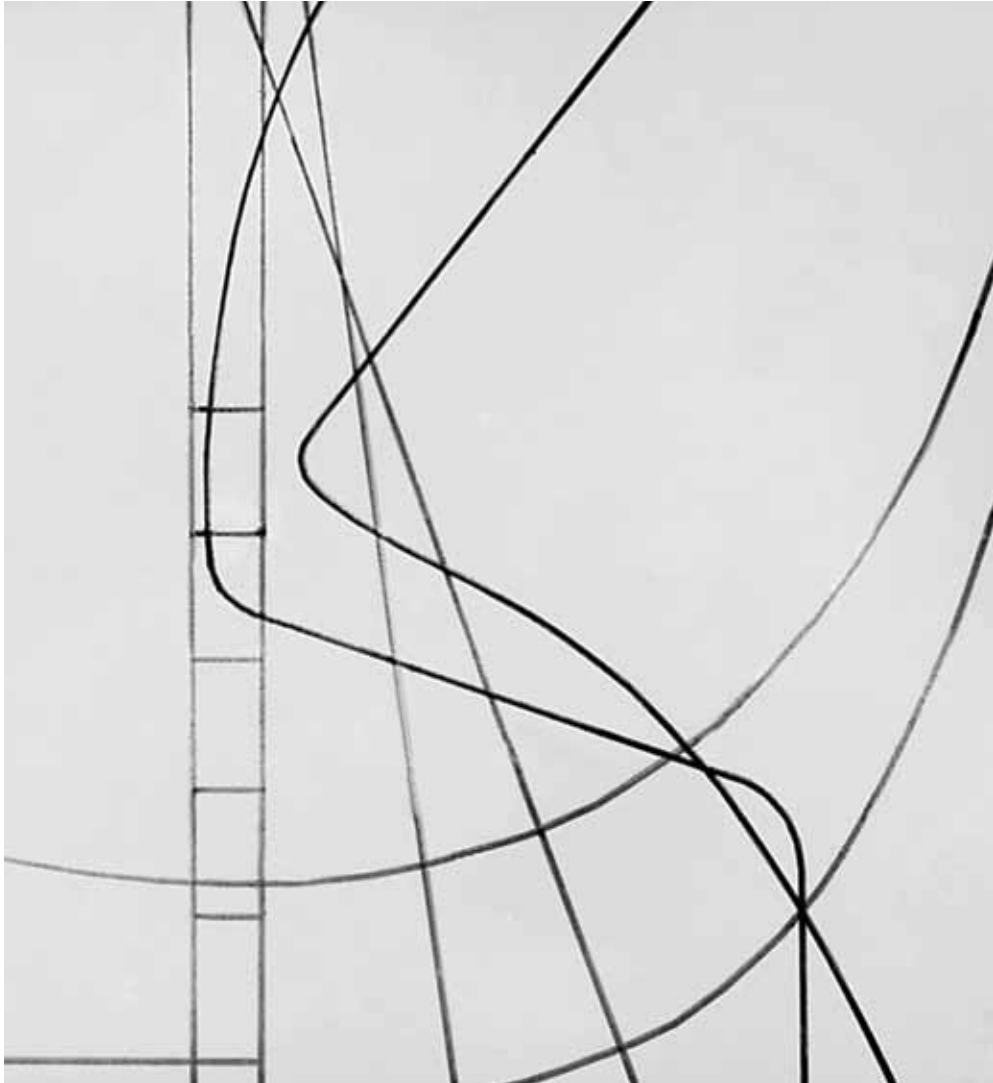
tendency that determined much of Constructivism's stylistic direction in the early 1920s was connected to experiments with abstracted open-work spatial constructions. The main role here was played by those members of the INKhUK Working Group of Constructivists whose works were shown at the 1921 OBMOKhU exhibition, i.e. A. Rodchenko, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, and K. Ioganson. ■ For their part, the Stenbergs showed at the exhibition the entire array of their experimental works: all the versions of color constructions, sculptural silhouette constructions, linear graphic constructions, as well as new works, which developed further the blueprints for constructions presented at INKhUK during the discussion about composition and construction. ■ These new works can be viewed as the fourth pair: «from blueprint — to construction.» The blueprints consisted of sketches in the form of one or two orthogonal projections, an axonometric drawing, and a section plan. Some of these sketches remained autonomous works; others were, in fact, preliminary blueprints that were realized as spatial constructions. The works shown at the exhibition used standard elements. These were, by and large, compositions that visually revealed their constructive tension while the dynamism of the overall appearance was made up of a stable base and the development of movement in the middle section into an easy, silhouetted «entry» into the surrounding space. ■ On the whole, the following features were characteristic of this entire new series of designs and spatial constructions: 1) the designs and constructions were created as if they were fragments of engineered constructions or constructive nodes of some kind of technical structure; the main emphasis in them is placed not on the com-

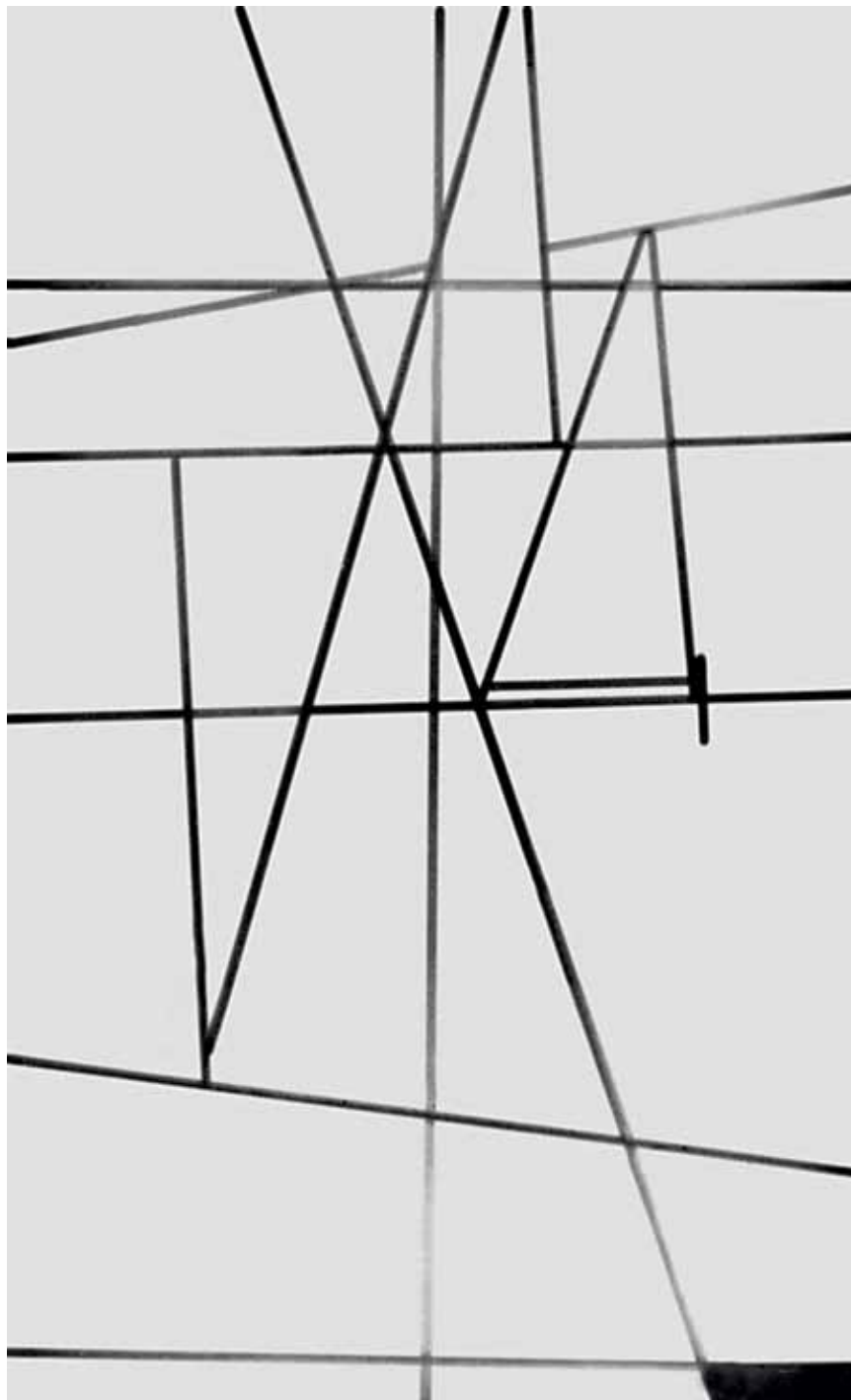
Linear relief composition.
1921



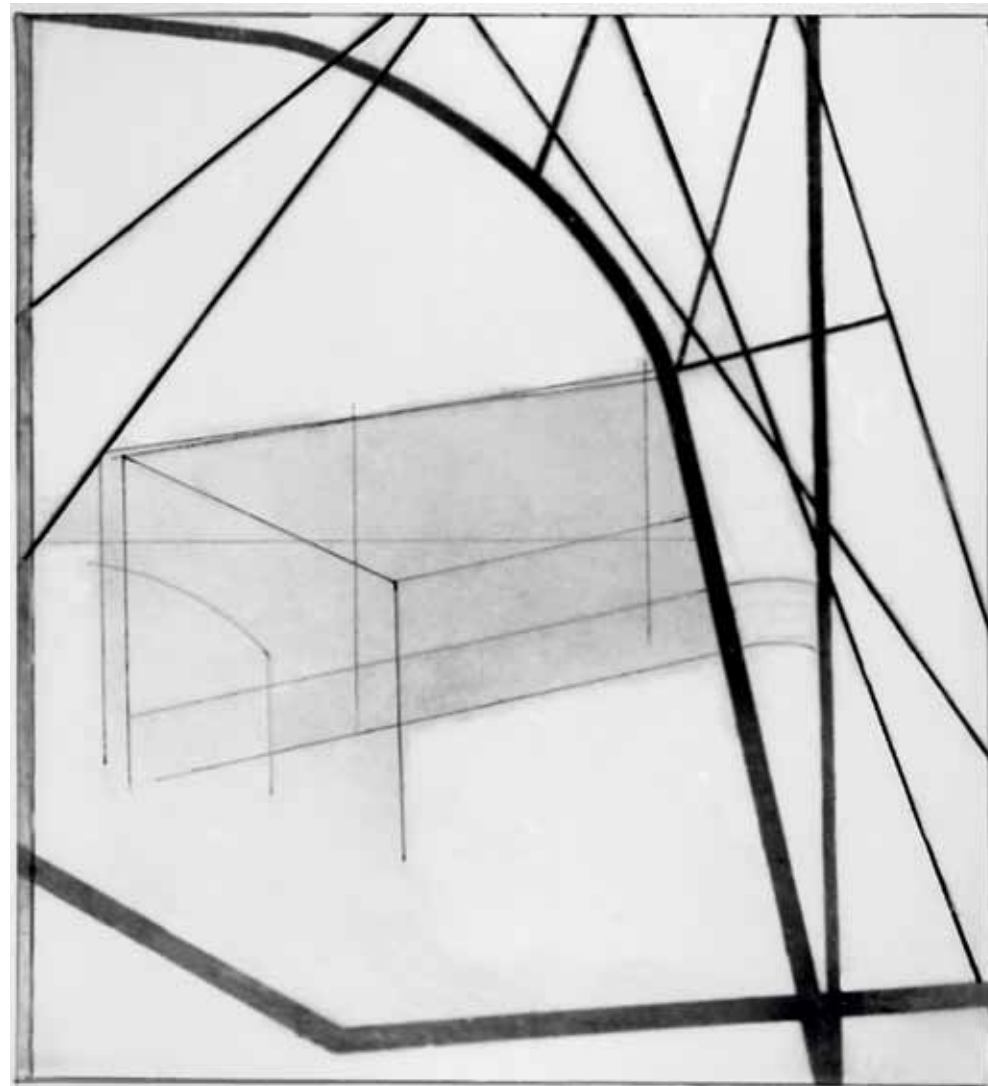
positional interrelationship of various materials, but on the actual constructive joining of working elements; 2) the constructions had become open and spatially airy; they lacked closed-off surfaces. Pieces of glass used as the surface planes, which emphasized the constructive, engineered nature of the whole structure, bringing it closer to a model of an ultra-modern building; 3) if in their earlier spatial objects, the Stenberges used a wide variety of prefabricated sectional metal elements (rod, pipe, sheet, etc.), then in the new constructions, they used tin to make specialized constructive and engineered sections (angles, channel bars, T-bars, I-bars). In addition to this, along with the rod-shaped elements, they also started to use bracing (cables, wire), i.e. constructive elements which served to expand the works. ■ For practically all of 1921, the Stenberges experimented intensively with spatial constructions. At the time, their works were perceived as among the most characteristic of the stage «from representation — to construction.» Thus, when in the Fall of 1921, those working at INKhUK started to take stock of this stage, the works done by the Stenberges, as well as those of Medunetsky and Ioganson, ended up being in the center of attention. ■ V.F. Koleychuk spent many years recreating the works that were shown at the 1921 OBMOKhU exhibition. He was able to accomplish this with both practically all of the spatial constructions and many of the color constructions. In the building of the Tretyakov Gallery on Krymsky Val Street, a special space was provided in which in 2007, Koleychuk opened anew the recreated OBMOKhU exhibition. Eighty six years later, visitors to the Tretyakov Gallery saw a real exhibition of the avant-garde period and were able to examine from the inside all of the objects of this amazing exhibition.

Plans for constructions.
1921

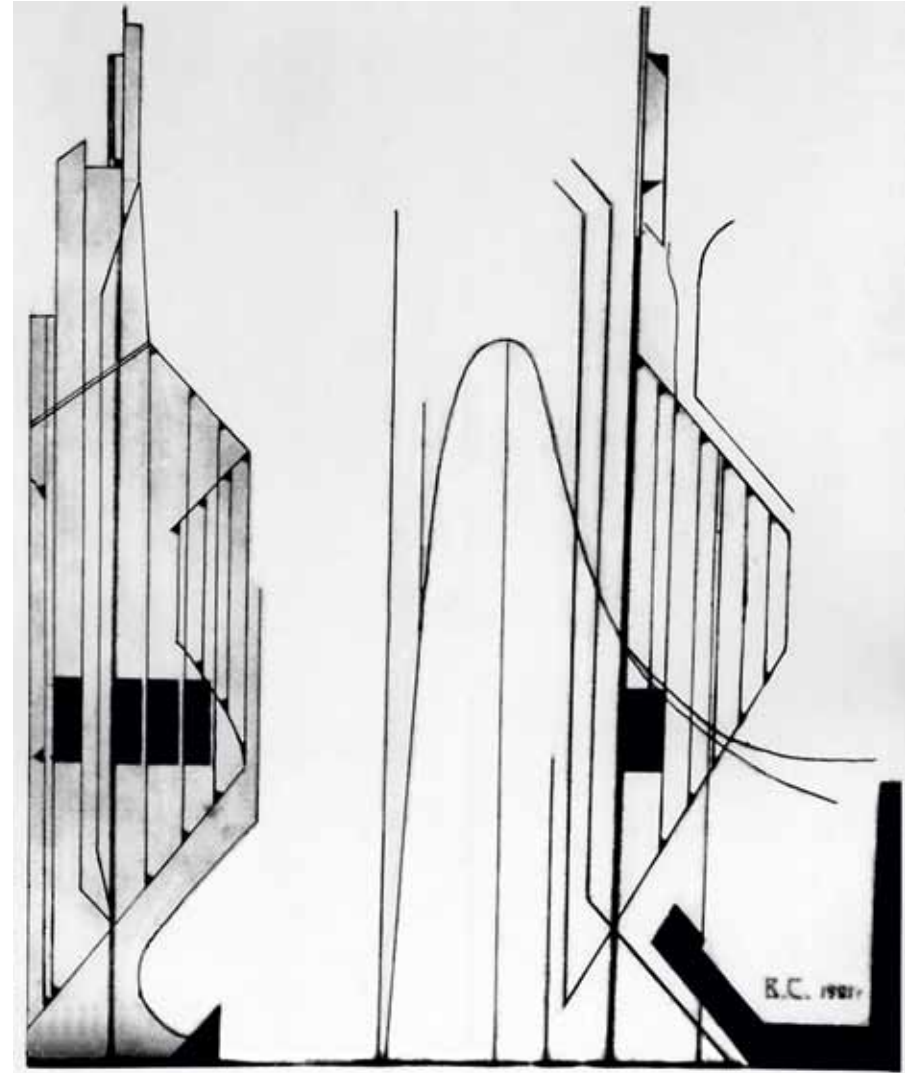
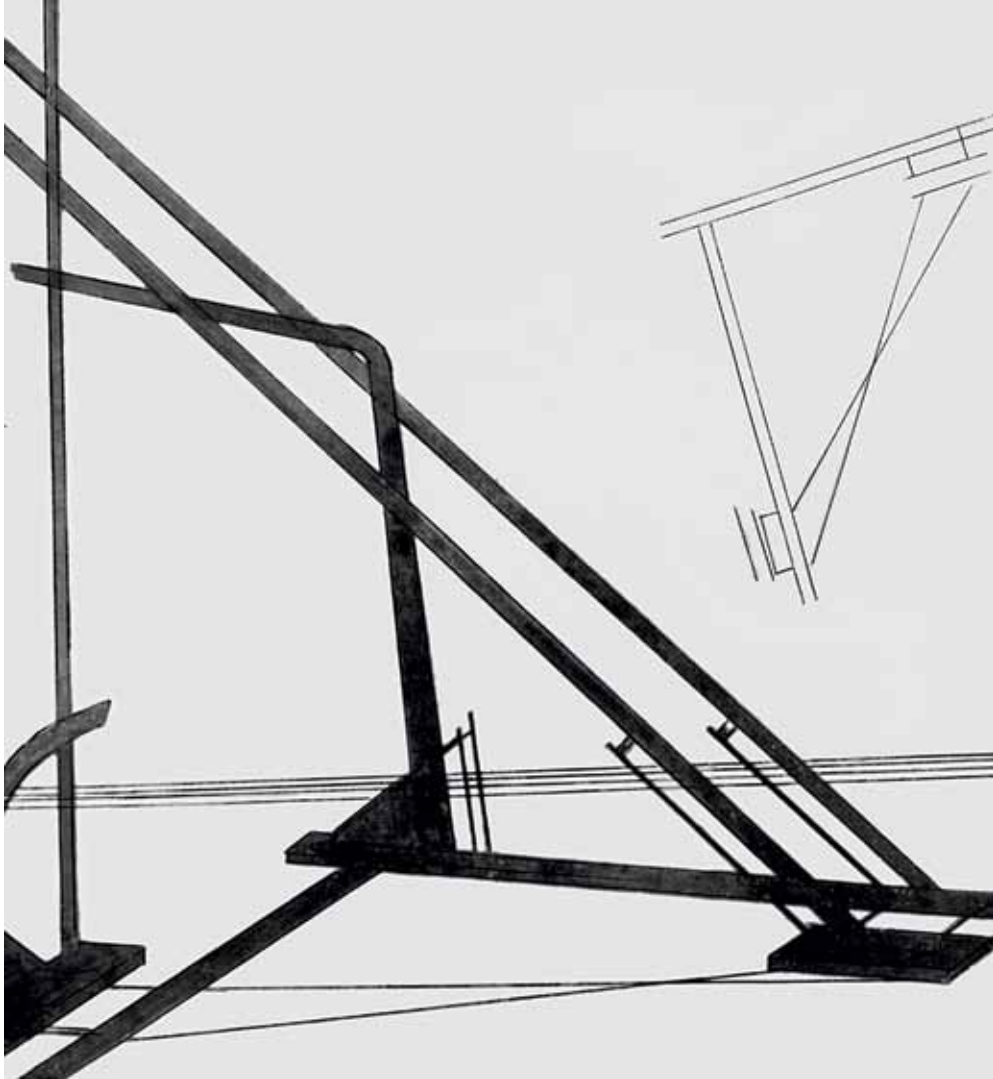


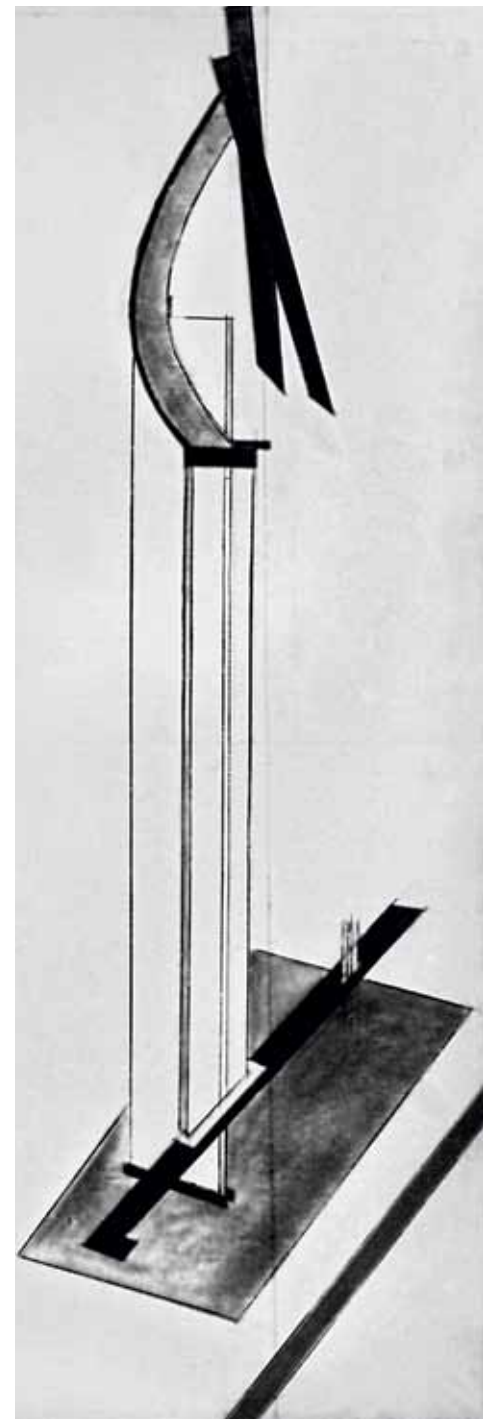
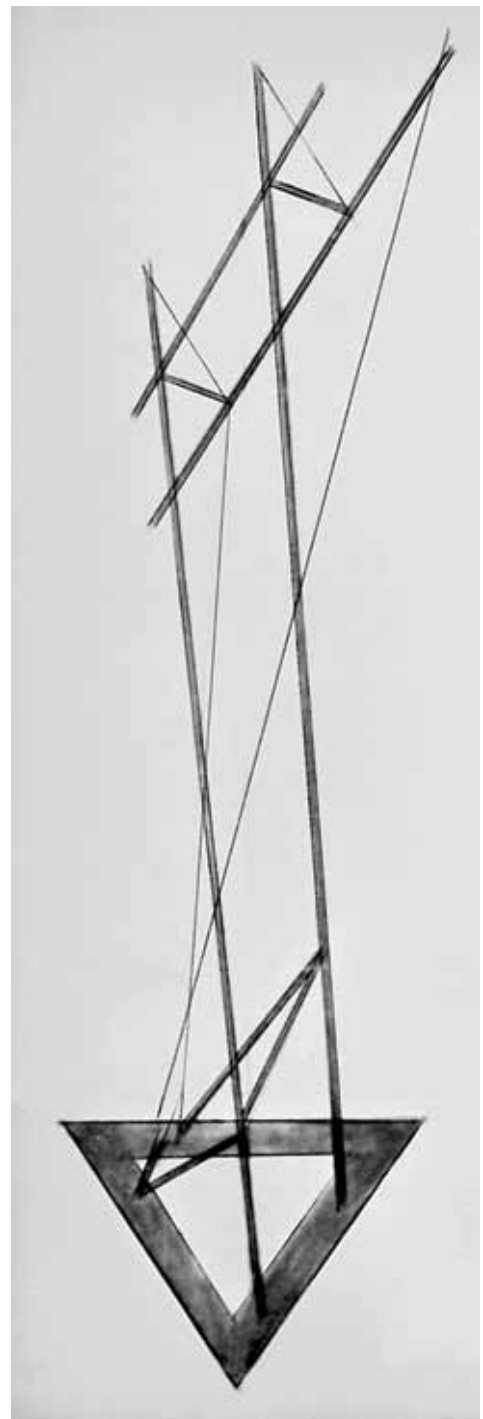


Plans for constructions.
1921



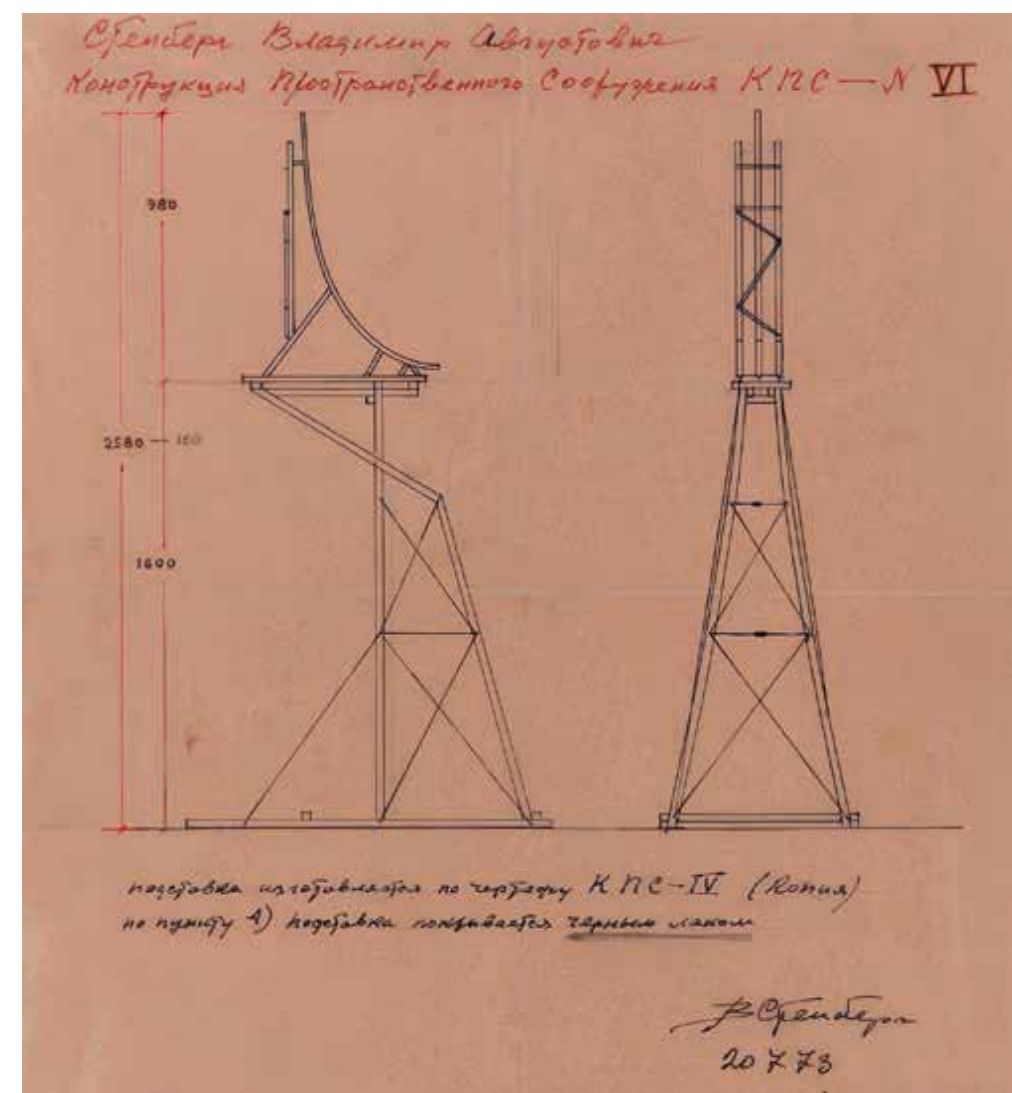
Plans for constructions.
1921





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Plans for constructions.
1921

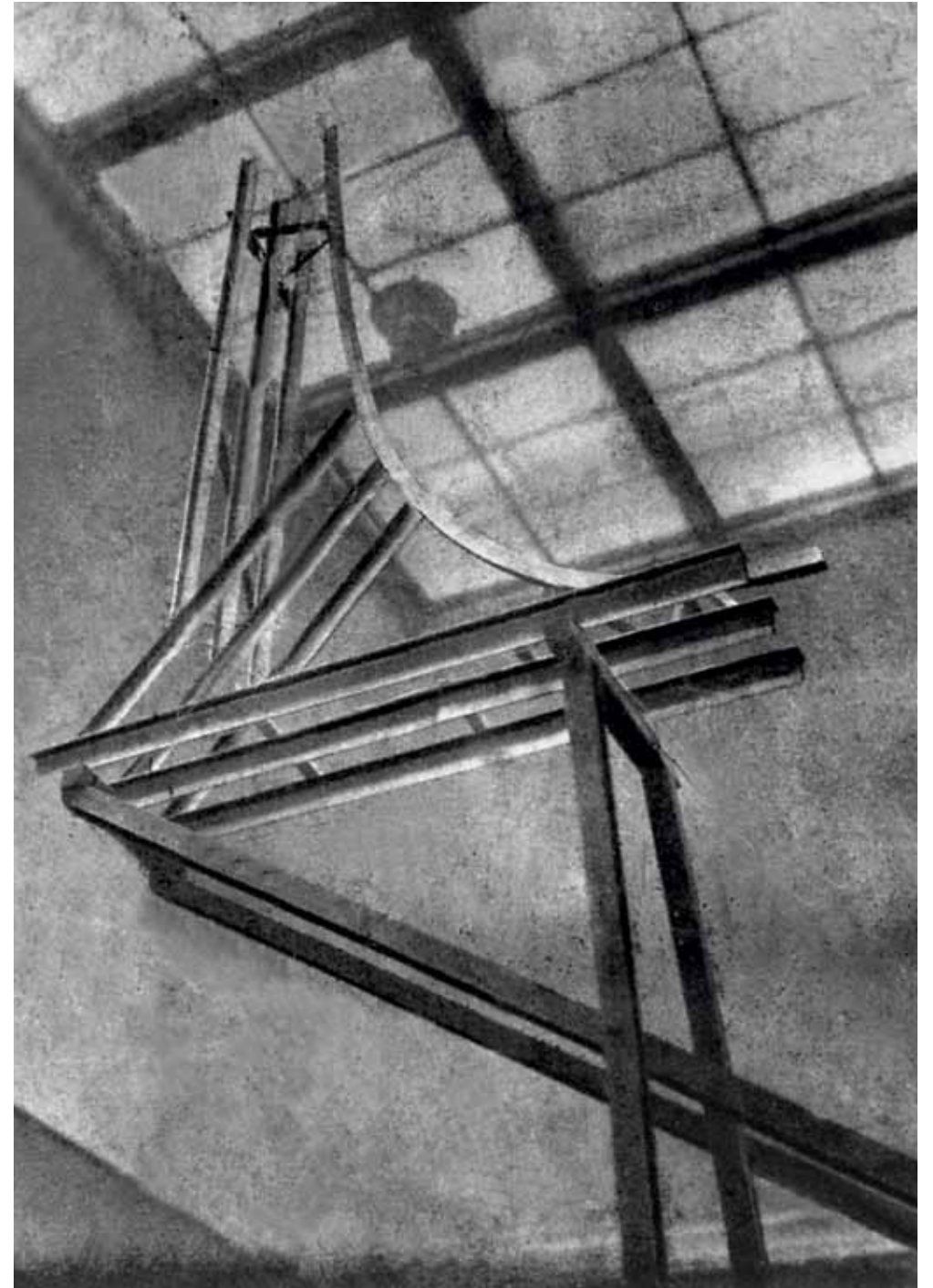
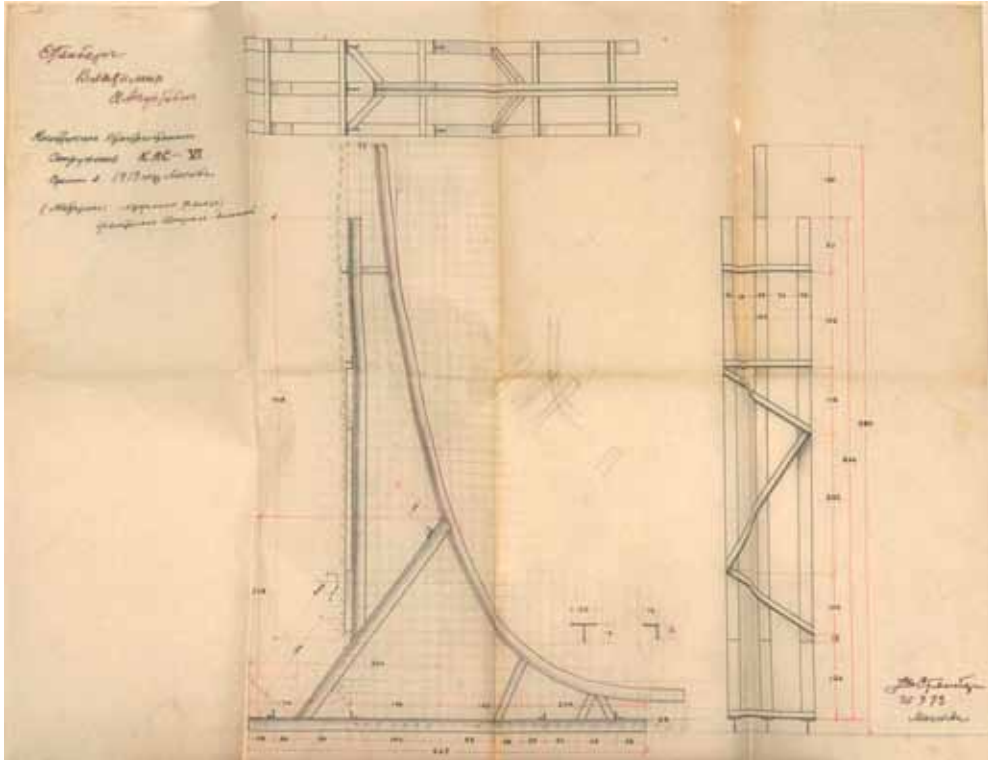
Plan for construction.
1919

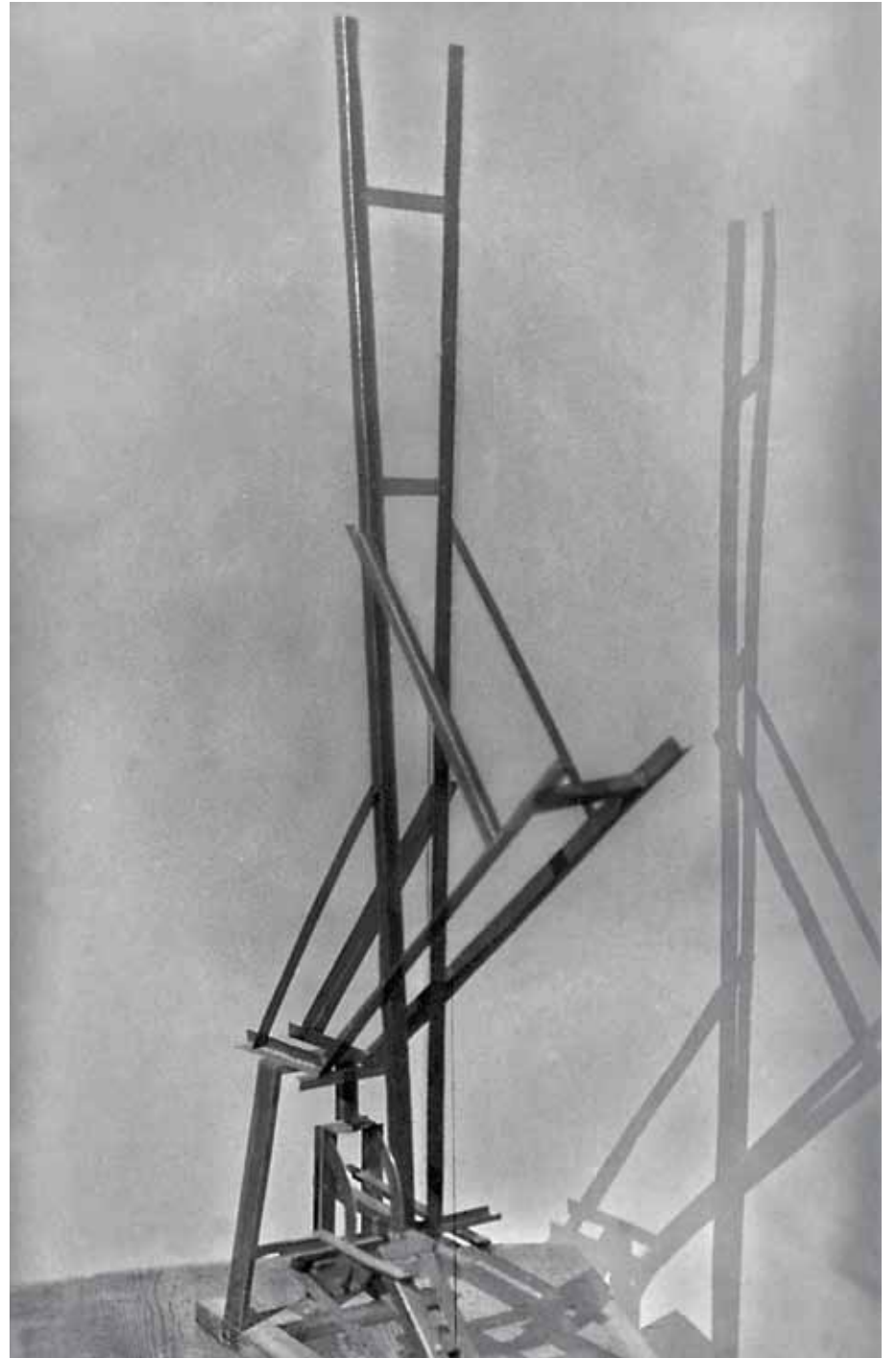
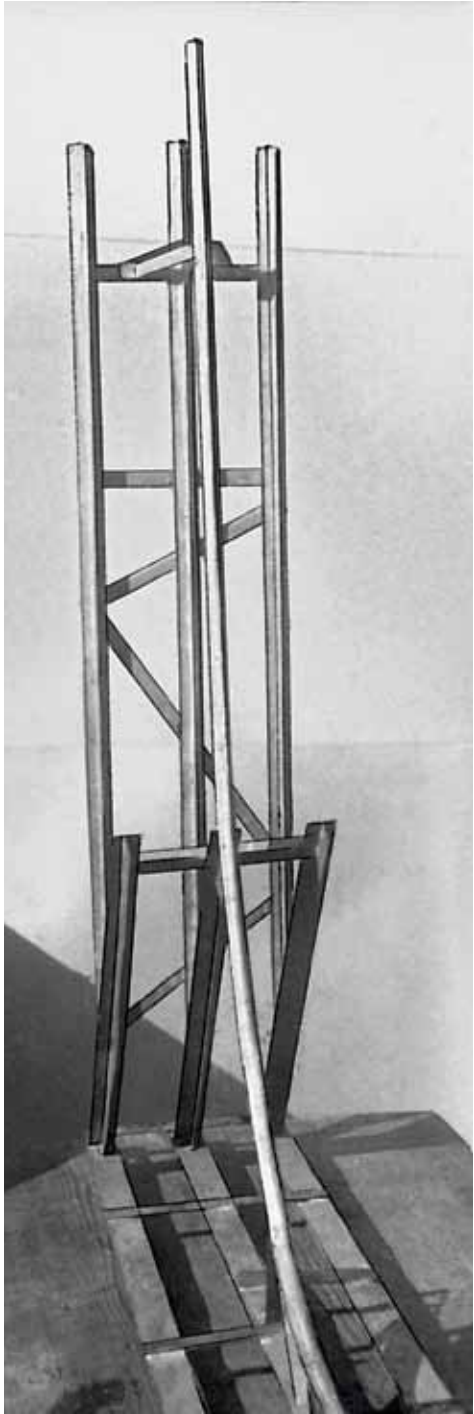


Untitled. (Plan for construction).
1919

→ (pp 91–92)

Spatial construction. 1921.
The construction is shown
from three points of view

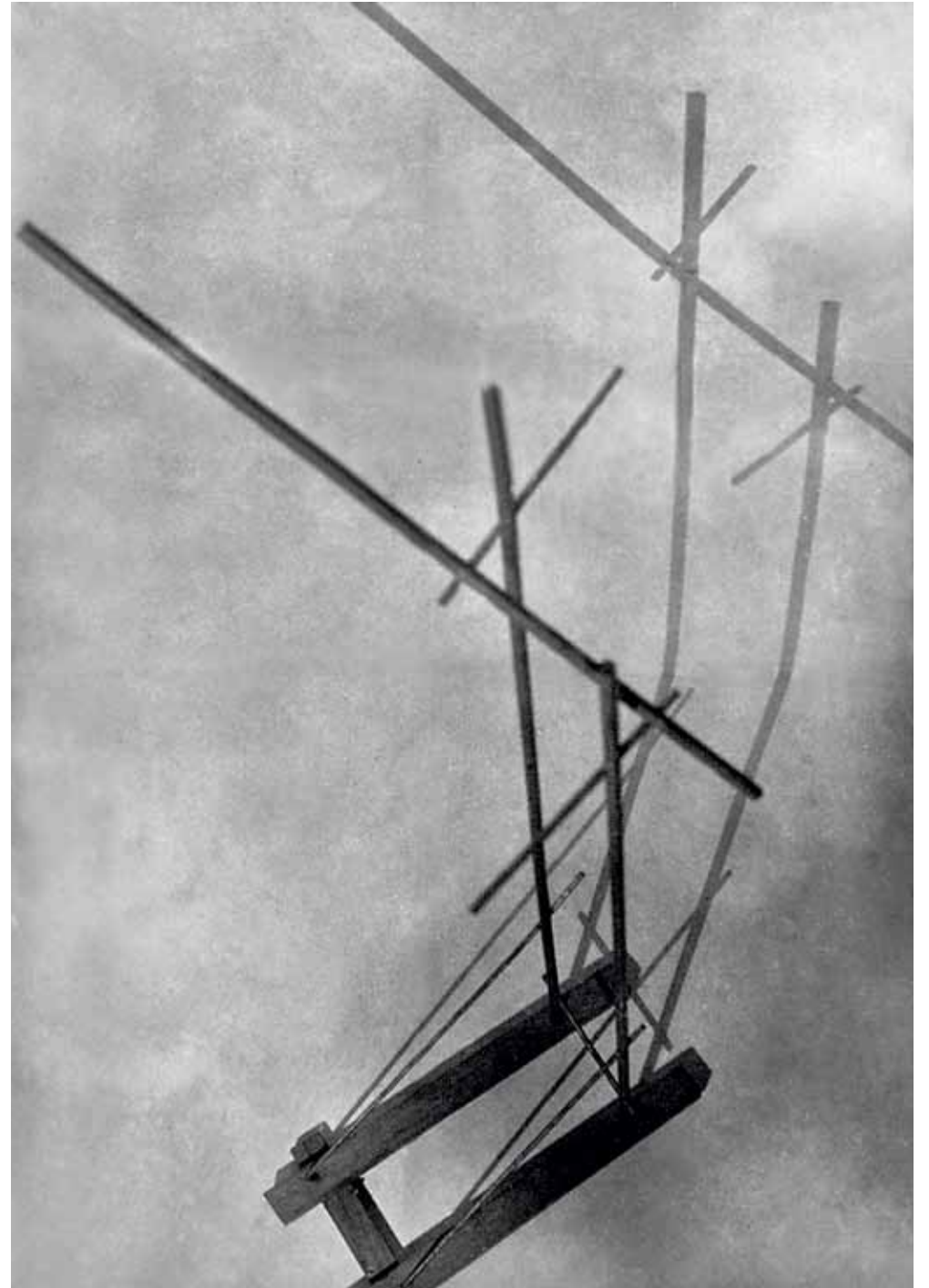
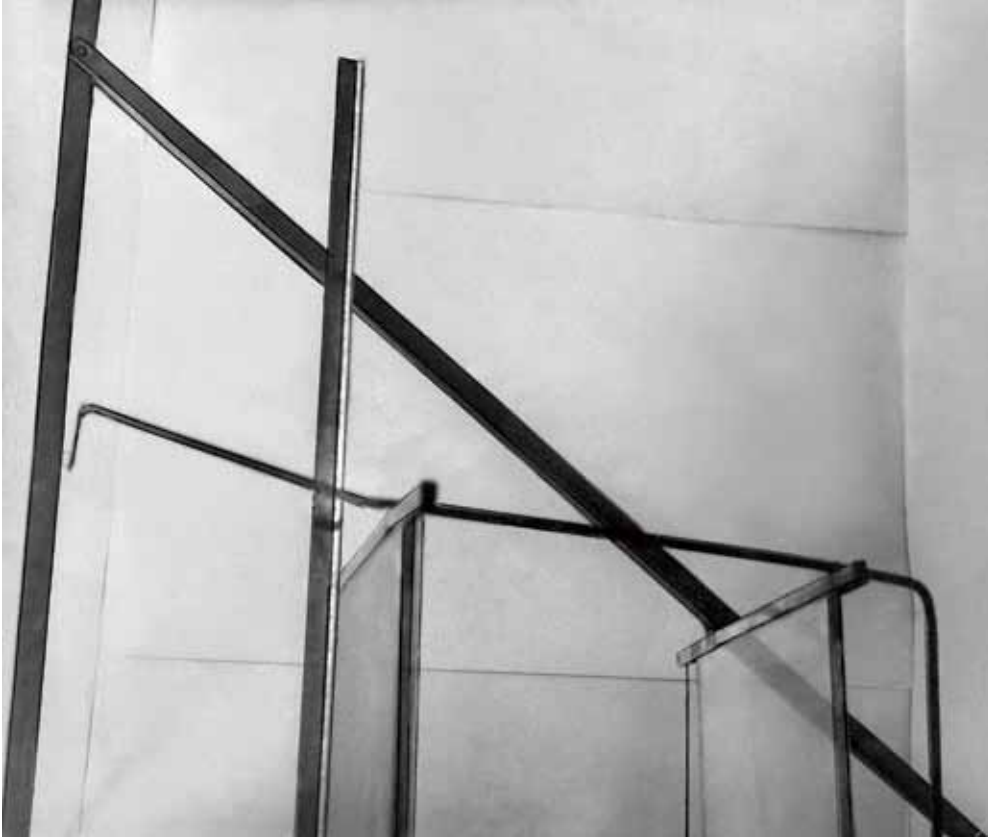


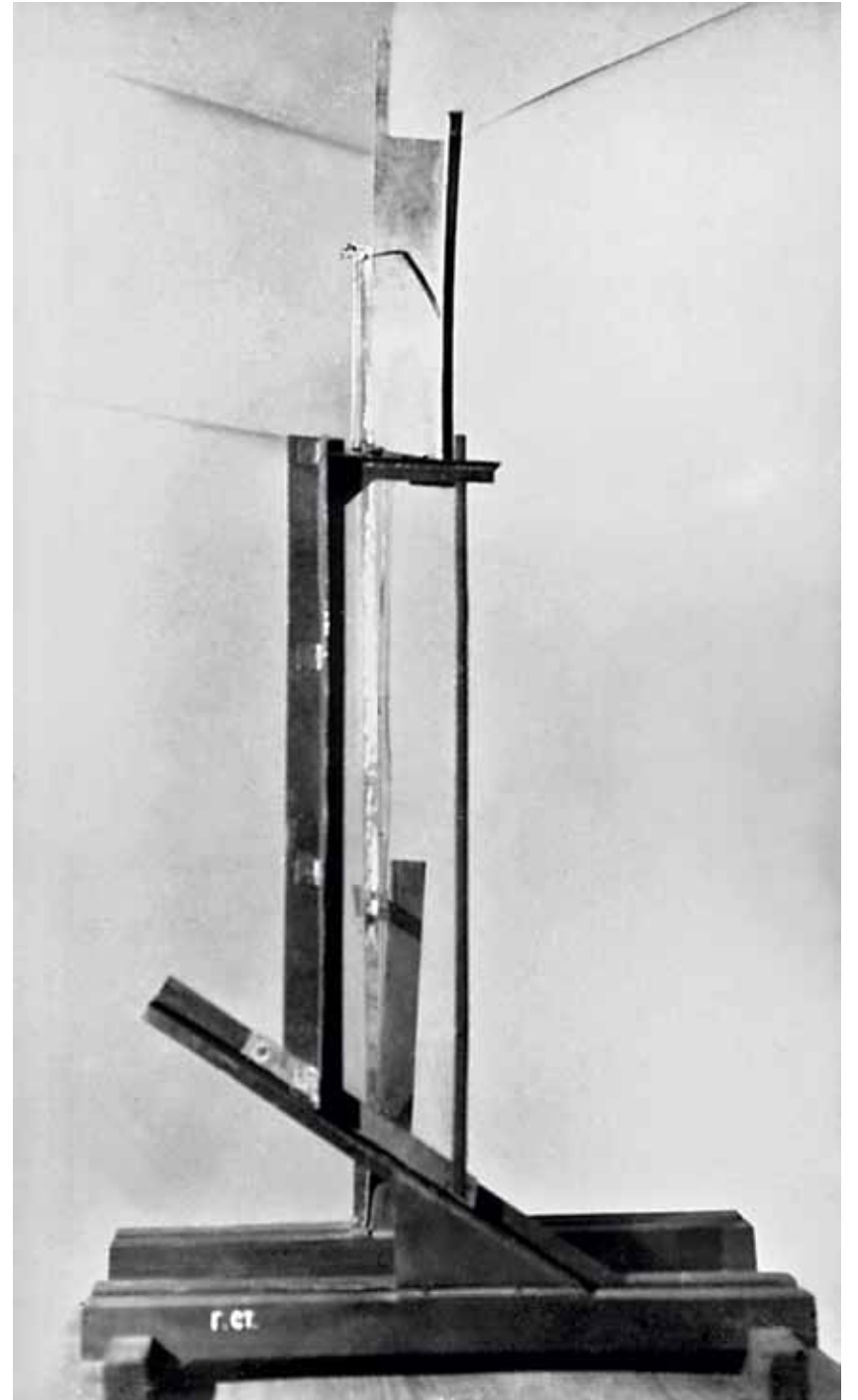
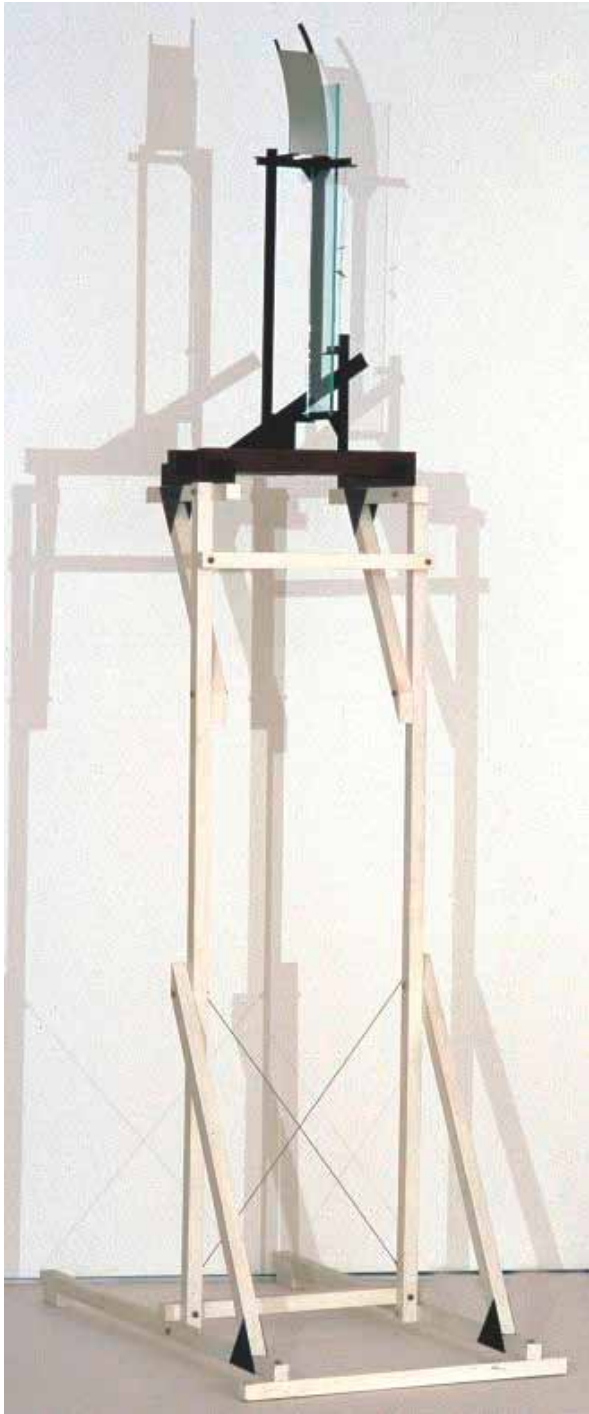


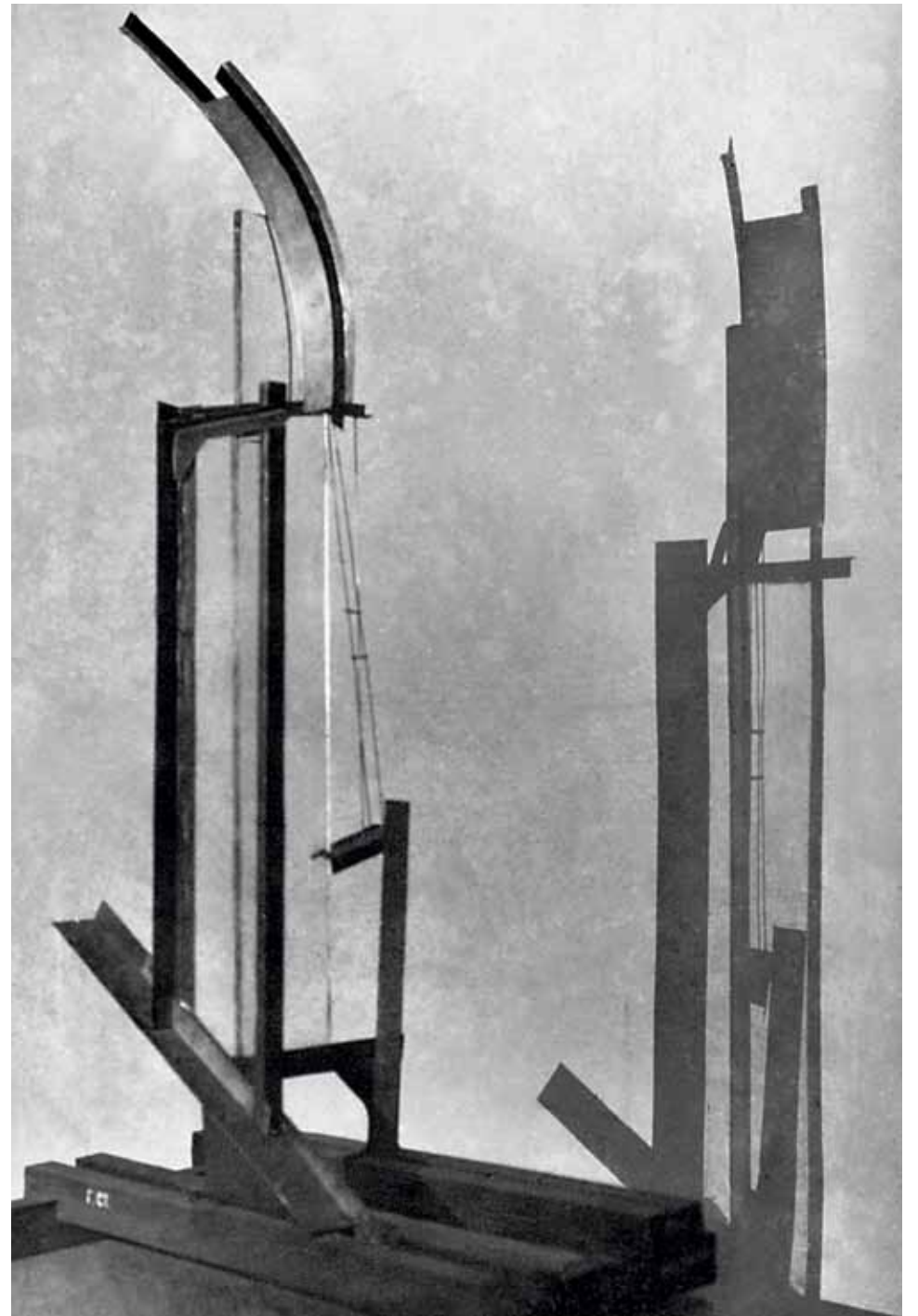
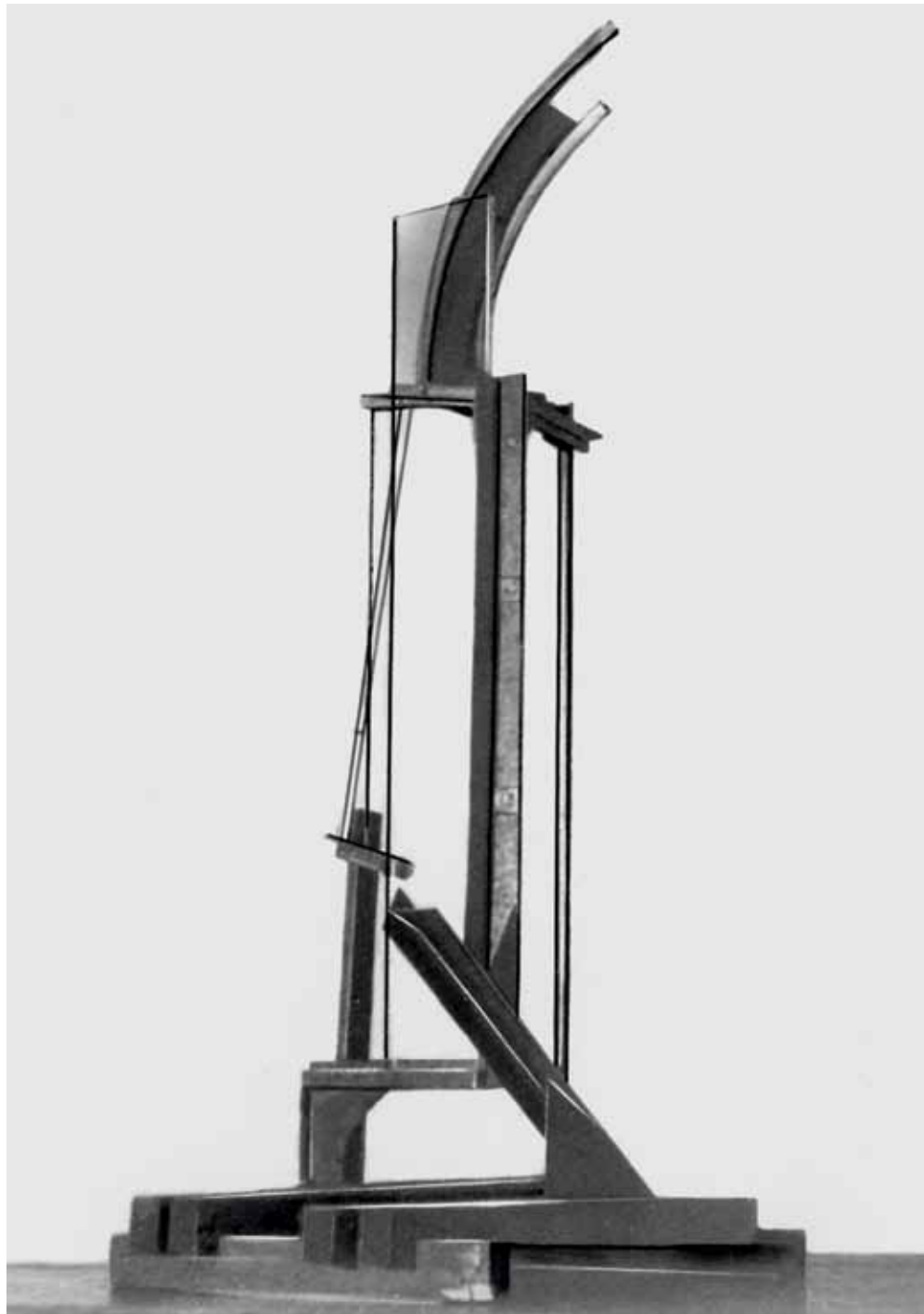
(pp 93–95)
Spatial constructions. 1921–1922

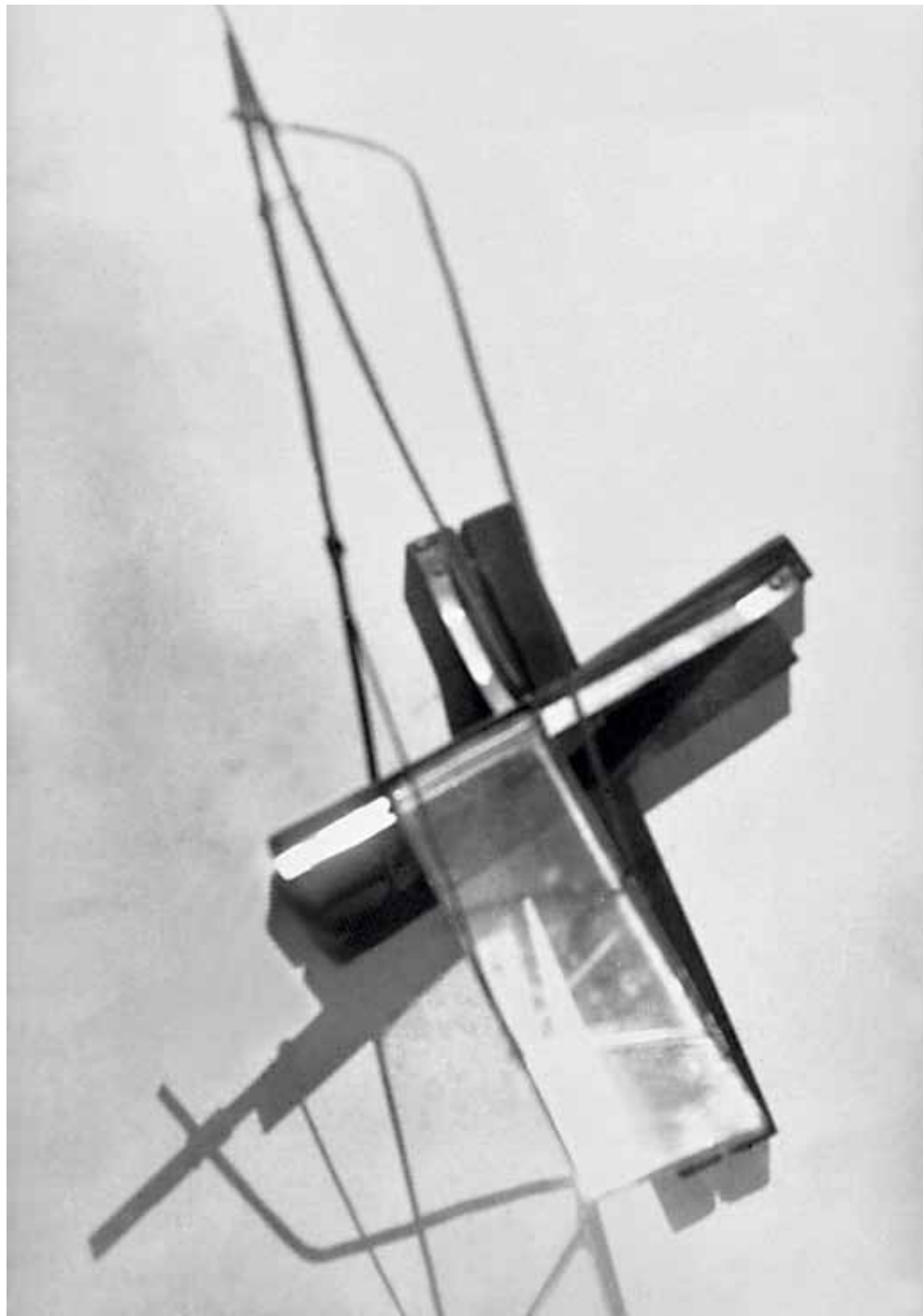
→ (p 96)
Spatial construction. 1919.

→ (pp 97–99)
Spatial construction. 1921.
The construction is shown
from three points of view

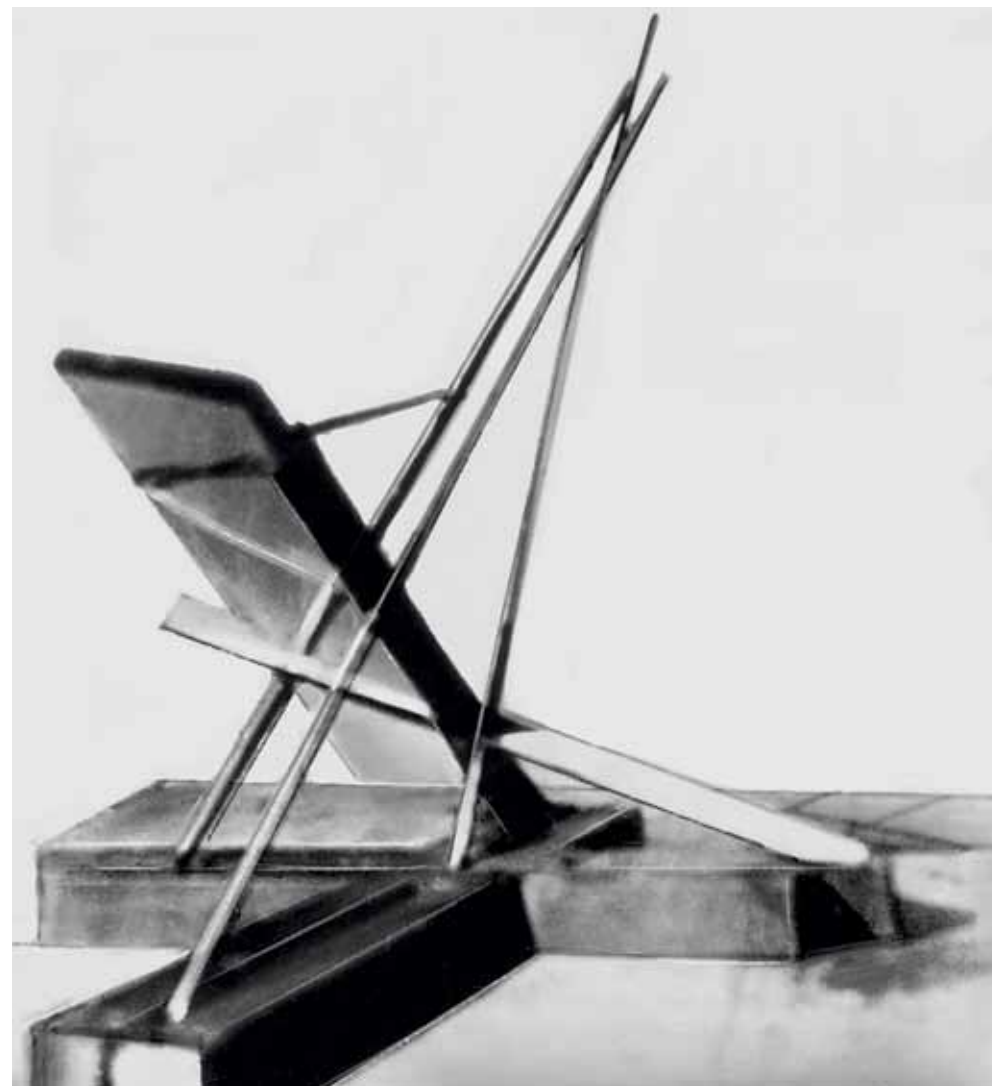








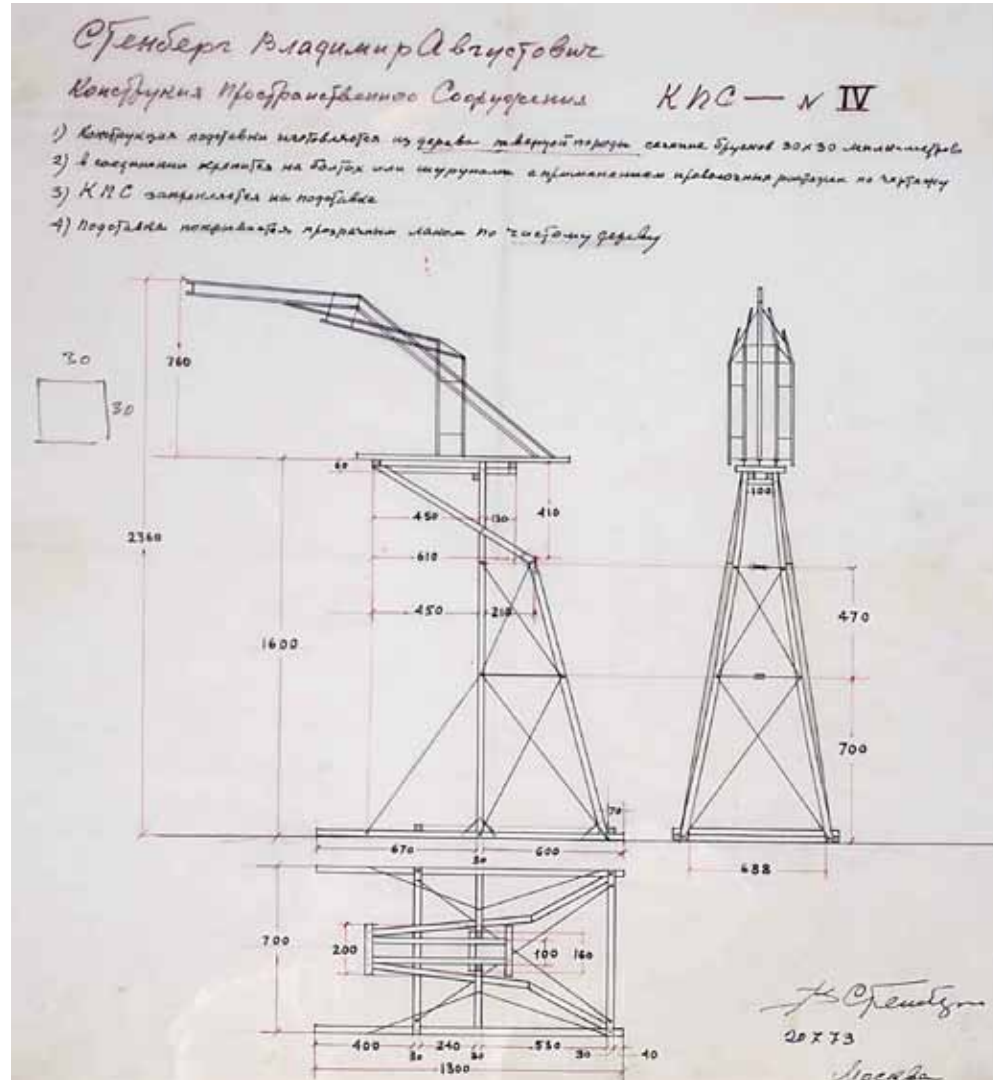
Spatial construction. 1921.
The construction is shown
from two points of view.



Plan for construction.

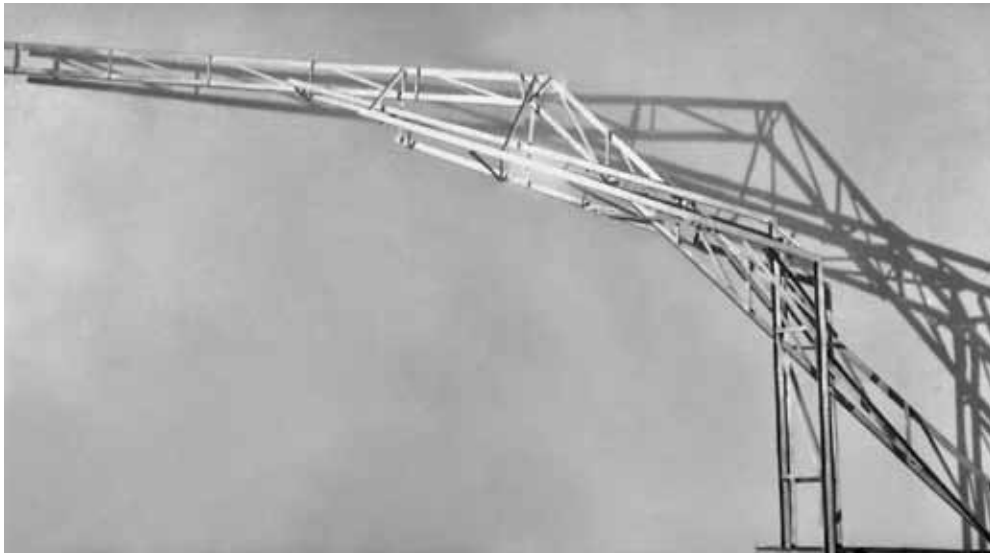
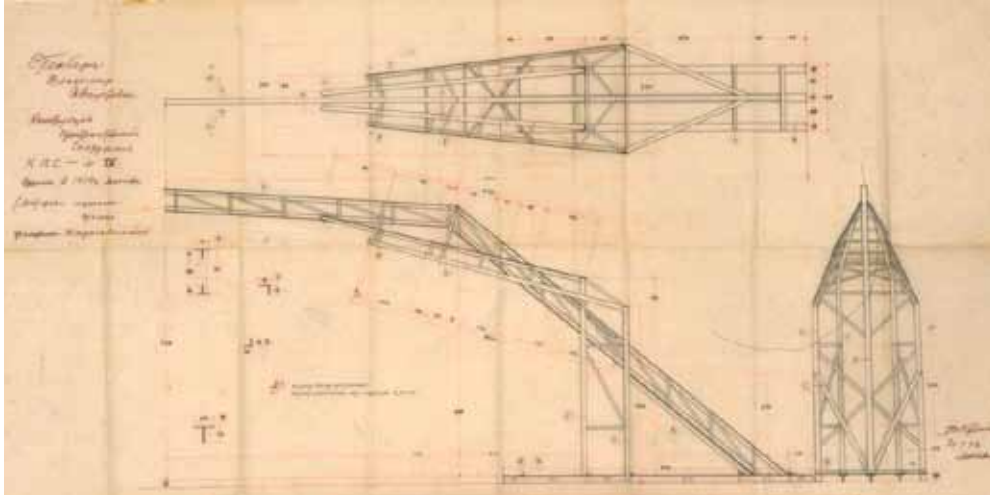
→

Spatial construction. 1919.



Untitled. (Plan for construction).
1919

→ (pp 104–106)
Spatial construction. 1921.
The construction is photographed
from six points of view (with
lighting from a voltaic arc — hence
the sharp shadows on the walls)



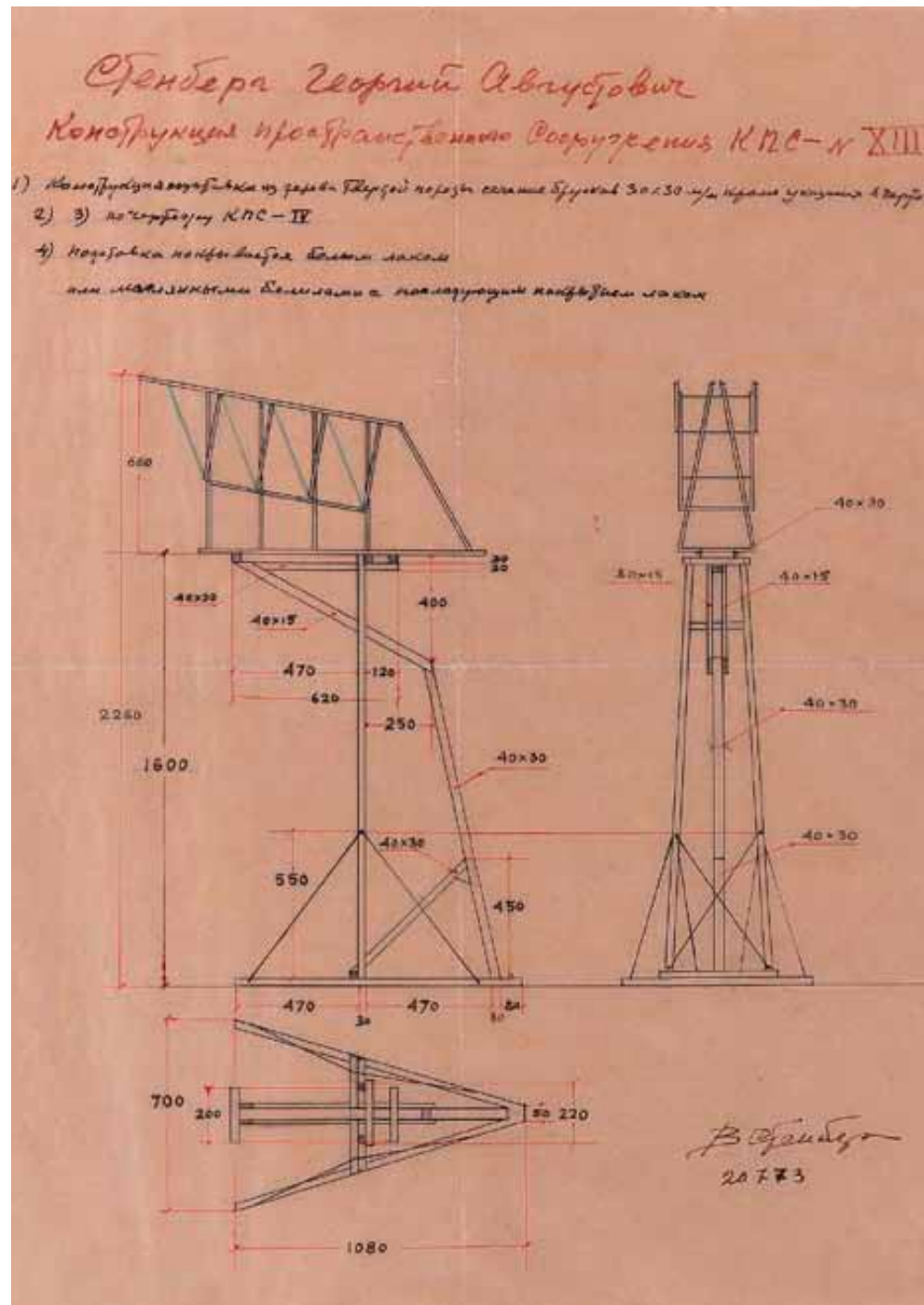
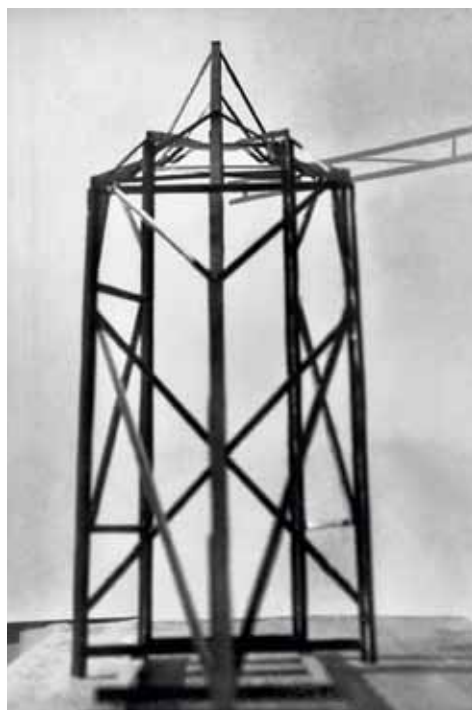
→ (p 107)
Plan for construction. 1919

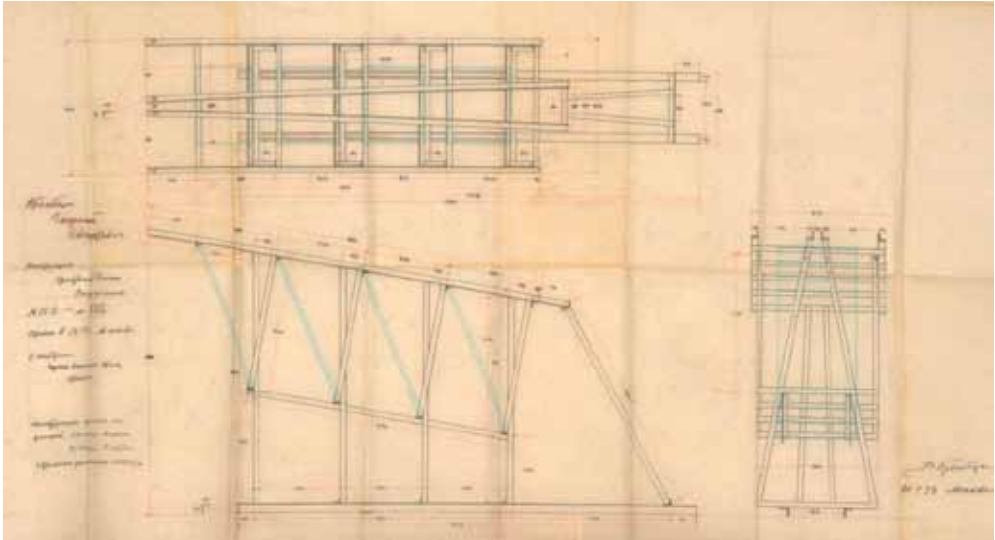
→ (p 108)
Spatial construction. 1919

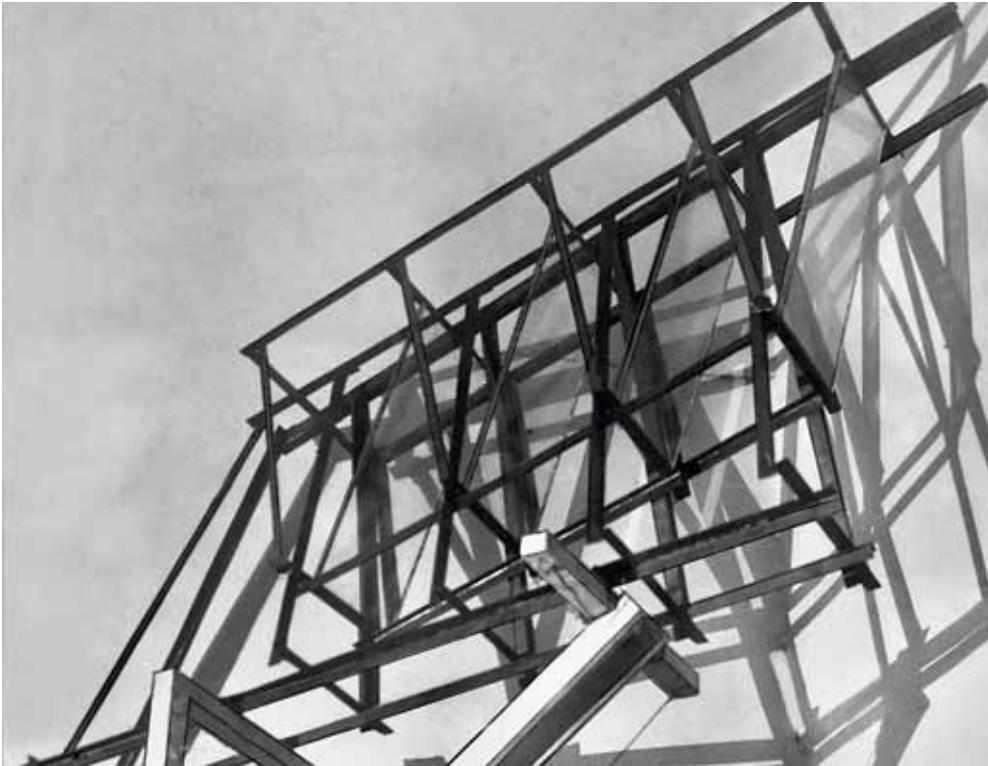
→ (p 109)
Untitled. (Plan for construction). 1919

→ (pp 109–110)
Spatial construction. 1921.
The construction is photographed
from four points of view









OBMOKHU CONSTRUCTIVISTS AND TATLIN

The unity of the theoretical positions and the artistic designs of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU (the Stenberg brothers and K. Medunetsky) made them into a real force at INKhUK. This small but very tight-knit collective of like-minded artistic collaborators was seen at that time at INKhUK as the most dynamic part of the group of artists who were finding their «way out» of painting into the object world by way of «construction.» The Stenbergs' and Medunetsky's youth and their behavior, typical of those still in the mind-set of their student «outlaw» days, not infrequently meant that even at INKhUK, they found themselves in the position of rebels. ■ On December 22, 1921, Varvara Stepanova gave a talk titled «On Constructivism» at the general meeting of INKhUK. Serious differences of opinion concerning the questions of assessing the stage «from representation — to construction» came out in the course of the discussion that followed the talk; in particular, they had to do with a lack of clarity concerning the role of experiments with spatial constructions. Due to this, it was decided to hold an extra (unscheduled) general meeting of INKhUK for a special discussion of the works created by the Constructivists from OBMOKhU. ■ The meeting took place on December 26, 1921. In attendance were B. Arvatov, O. Brik, N. Ladovsky, A. Lavinsky, N. Dokuchaev, G. Stenberg, V. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, N. Tarabukin, A. Yefimov, P. Lyamin, B. Kushner,

V. Kiselyev, V. Khrakovsky, A. Babichev, K. Ioganson, V. Tatlin, A. Kemeni, and G. Klutsis. A. Kemeni gave a talk titled «On the Constructive Works of OBMOKhU.» ■ In analyzing Russian Constructivism, A. Kemeni said that if it were to be compared to German Expressionism, it looks both constructive and utilitarian. But if one compares Constructivism with industrial production, with life, then it turns out to be materialist only «in its ideology, its tendencies, its wishes.» Speaking of «the founders of Constructivism,» Kemeni named K. Malevich, alongside V. Tatlin and A. Rodchenko. But Malevich's Constructivism, in his opinion, was «pure idealism» since «all the forms present an illustration of some sort of ideal.» In the works of Tatlin and Rodchenko, Kemeni saw naturalistic tendencies. He thought, moreover, that Tatlin combined naturalism with an aesthetic concept, whereas Rodchenko's works were «nothing other than ideas about mechanical instruments. In his wood constructions, we find the schematic transmission of already existing technical constructions.» ■ Kemeni praised works by Ioganson, Medunetsky, and the Stenbergs, who, in his opinion, aimed to provide constructions using material as such. Concerning the Stenbergs and Medunetsky in particular, the speaker thought that it was precisely «the Russian OBMOKhU that [was] the group of Russian Constructivists.» He separated out two stages in the works of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU. The first was made up of works of art; the second consisted of any kind of possible combinations («because that is the way OBMOKhU wanted it»). In a number of works, the material is subordinated to a stated goal, to a certain logic. «Here we see,» Kemeni said, «nothing other than the reiteration

in a somewhat altered form of already existing technical structures — cranes, bridges, etc. These works represent the death of art, the murder of art.» At the same time, the speaker thought that «these forms agitate for a future life ... since it is a holistic organized life.» What's more, if for the OBMOKhU Constructivists, their «previous works [were] agitational,» then their «most recent works demonstrat[ed] real interconnected strength and constructive use of the materials themselves.» ■ The main debate at the meeting centered around the questions of how the artistic experiments of Kandinsky, Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Ioganson, and the Constructivists from OBMOKhU were connected between themselves; who made contributions to Constructivism and what the particular nature of those contributions was; what were the tendencies to be found in the artistic searches of particular artists; and where in this «chain» of searching one could find clear boundaries to distinguish in principle the creative search of some artists from that of others. ■ Kemeni, while acknowledging the contributions of almost all the artists listed above to the development of Constructivism, saw three main distinctions among the experiments: the first was between Expressionism (including Kandinsky), on the one hand, and Malevich and Tatlin on the other; the second was between the artistic searches of Malevich and Tatlin; the third between Tatlin's and Rodchenko's works, on the one hand, and the constructions of Ioganson, Medunetsky, and the Stenbergs, on the other. What's more, he brought Malevich closer to Kandinsky in some cases and to Tatlin in others, and he variously aligned Tatlin at times with Malevich («his works are extremely important»), noting that Tatlin's and Malev-

ich's works «do not differ very much from the Expressionists,» and at times with the Constructivists from OBMOKhU, stressing that it was Tatlin who «pointed out that art should work with all materials and not just its own specific ones» and that this found «its realization if the works of OBMOKhU — wood is taken as wood without any falsification» or that «in these works, there is glass bound to iron.» ■ In the course of the discussion following Kemeni's talk, Osip Brik, who was, at the time, the head of INKhUK's Administration and who at that stage was also perceived as the main ideologist of the movement «into production» tried to figure out the foundational differences between the artistic searches of the artists of the older generation (Malevich, Tatlin, and Rodchenko) and the young Constructivists from OBMOKhU. As he saw it, the main difference lay in the fact that the former experimented within the limits of art and tried to find (or even establish) the general laws of form-making, while the latter deliberately went beyond the limits of art and created concrete things, emphatically not burdening their forms with any concepts. ■ By all appearances, Osip Brik was none too excited about the works of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU and, first and foremost, about their principled «nonconceptualness» and the desire to leave the sphere of artistic activity. It was precisely on this point that he did not support Kemeni. Brik did not think that a total departure from art and an orientation only towards technology were the deciding virtues of the works by Loganson, Medunetsky, and the Stenbergs. In criticizing Russian Constructivism for its romanticism and aestheticism, Kemeni, in Brik's opinion, did not take into consideration the concrete historical circumstances in which the artists

were conducting their searches. And these circumstances were such that what was most important was not the relative proportions of the aesthetic and the technological in the experimental works, but the artist's attitude toward working for industrial production. ■ It was, therefore, the analytical and conceptual work of the older generation of artists that seemed to Brik to be more significant for the general development of art than the young Constructivists' experiments with spatial constructions. However, in lauding the scientific and analytical approach to the problems of form-making in art and in urging artists to move into production, Brik, just like other theorists of production art, probably underestimated the style-forming role of experiments with constructions. Or, to put it more accurately, he had thought the least about this role of the experiments and, therefore, did not evaluate the artists' creative searches from this point of view. Like many others in those years, he simply did not see in spatial constructions of the young Constructivists any formal or aesthetic style-forming potential. ■ Moreover, it is also important to take into account the overall situation of the artistic searches. In the first years of the existence of the Soviet Union, practically every new artistic movement rushed to proclaim its own conceptual framework. People had gotten used to this and could no longer imagine evaluating the works of a new movement or school without a simultaneous analysis of their declarations. ■ In these conditions, the Constructivists from OBMOKhU made the impression of people who were not «playing by the rules.» ■ Firstly, they absolutely refused to give an expanded verbal explanation of their works, proposing, instead, that they should be evaluated

as they were, which was bewildering to many. As Khrakovsky put it, «I understand Tatlin's work; he posits a problem and solves it; but I do not understand OBMOKhU's work — they posit no problem.» ■ Secondly, they proclaimed that they worked outside the sphere of art, that they created engineered technological objects. And what was most paradoxical was that almost everyone believed this immediately, even though in analyzing the actual works of the young artists, many noted their aestheticism and artistic qualities while at the same time criticizing the Stenbergs and Medunetsky for «leaving» for the sphere of engineering. ■ By the end of 1921, the Constructivists from OBMOKhU had made a number of other spatial constructions, which looked now less like abstract sculptures and which, indeed, resembled cranes, bridges, and fragments of other engineered structures, even though all of their works without exception carried the stamp of artistic qualities. They were made by artists, and one could see that right away. The process of their creative work was of the kind that is generally characteristic of artists and not engineers — they went from form to construction and not the other way around. Their constructions captured precisely this — an artist's, rather than an engineer's, type of thinking. The spatial constructions of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU were nothing other than the artistic representation of their understanding of an engineering mode of thought. ■ It is important to note another characteristic quality of these spatial constructions. They «represent» not just any generic engineered construction, of which there were a great many in that period, but a quite specific type of latticed metal constructions (which were, as I noted above, far

from the most modern ones for their time and were already developed in the 19th century). Constructive forms were clearly selected with a specific stylistic attitude in mind. ■ Many at that time, however, did not see this, putting more trust not in the objects themselves, but in the sharply polemical proclamations made by the Constructivists from OBMOKhU. Osip Brik got so agitated and concerned during the discussion of Kemeni's talk that he seriously tried to defend art from the artists Medunetsky and the Stenbergs. ■ «The main task facing INKhUK,» he said, «is to stop ... mocking art and dancing the *danse macabre* upon it and to actually go into art rather than flirt with engineering.» ■ The December 26, 1921 meeting at INKhUK during which Kemeni's talk «On the Constructive Works of OBMOKhU» took place was significant not only because its participants tried to sum up the results of the first year of the development of Constructivism and understand the stage «from representation — to construction»; it was also important because the analysis and polemics took place in the presence of the main protagonists concerned with the subject at hand: V. Tatlin, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, and K. Loganson. And with the exception of Loganson, all of them spoke numerous times during the discussion. ■ But before I go on to their speeches, I shall cite the opinions of the artist V. Khrakovsky and the architect N. Ladovsky about the works of the Constructivists. ■ Khrakovsky evaluated the works of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU in a decisively negative way. He thought that in their works, «there is absolutely no dimension of art and no meaningful work. This is the naturalistic revolutionary word ... And, therefore, if one is to speak of an artist, one

has to turn his attention to the figure of Tatlin ... I believe Tatlin more than I believe OBMOKhU.» ■ Ladovsky said of the works of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU: «Having looked at the drawings, some say that this is romanticism and naturalism, but I say that ... there is also aesthetics here ... they, being romantics, are moving forward in ... their technique... By their nature, they are aesthetes and artists because every artist is an aesthete. This can be seen in many of their works. I think that the group is a healthy one ... Stenberg is right. He says, 'We have made the things while you are waxing philosophical.' They have to go into production and work there.» ■ How, then, did Tatlin and the Constructivists from OBMOKhU, who were themselves present at the meeting, react to all this? ■ In the shorthand report, there are no initials placed next to the last name «Stenberg,» so it is not clear which of the brothers said what (they spoke several times). Therefore, it becomes necessary to analyze their speeches as joint ones. Answering Kemeni, the Stenbergs said that they do not develop concepts around their work on principle (unlike Malevich, Tatlin, and Rodchenko). «We take material, work on the material relatively honestly, and do not erect any ideas ... We say: this is a coherent, finished thing. The material is taken: iron as iron.» They could not understand why their works could not be viewed and evaluated by those present at the meeting in and of themselves, without the introduction of concepts into them. «We ... build a thing relatively honestly from materials. Everyone has gathered here, everyone is talking. The thing has stirred some excitement. There is no idea. The thing itself has aroused excitement ... what needs to be figured out is whether to follow this path further,

develop these elements, or toss them aside and find a different basis ... This is our most recent object ... You will not deny the novelty ... we create new forms. How economically or appropriately is material used in this already existing thing? You have to look at it as at a given thing.» ■ Medunetsky, arguing against those who opposed Tatlin's works to the works of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU as things that existed, respectively, inside and outside the bounds of art, picked the design for Tatlin's *Tower*. He judged it to be «non-art» and, expressing an opinion about the utopianism of the project, said he thought that it was impossible to realize in real life. «We, on the other hand, treat our things much more honestly. We say, 'This is our thing.' We did not veil a veil of mist. We showed new forms ... We spoke about actual existing things and never spoke about anything else, whereas Malevich and Tatlin were always making veils.» Again and again, Medunetsky spoke in the name of all the Constructivists from OBMOKhU, urging that their spatial constructions should be evaluated as actually existing works («look at it as at a thing and the expediency of using it as a thing»). As for the transition from experimental constructions to concrete things, the Constructivists from OBMOKhU did not share the concern that artists would not be able to find their place in production. They themselves, at any rate, were prepared to establish links to industrial production. «If we are making such things now,» Medunetsky said about spatial constructive structures, «then we shall also make such things in the production process.» ■ When it came to their concepts or principles, Medunetsky stated that their unifying principle is Constructivism's slogan, which proclaimed, «Constructivism

will lead humanity to possess the greatest possible achievement of culture with the least possible expenditure of energy.» And he clarified the meaning of this slogan with a concrete example: «Here is a table with bent ornamented legs. Why was the energy of the man who made these legs expended? We would preserve this man's energy.» ■ Then, Medunetsky read aloud the joint declaration of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU: ■ «**Constructivists to the World** ■ «Constructivism will lead humanity to possess the greatest possible achievement of culture with the least possible expenditure of energy.» (one of the slogans) ■ Everyone born on the globe, before he leaves to go into its crust, could know the quickest possible path to the factory that produces Earth's unified organism. ■ To the factory of the creators of the greatest trampoline for the leap toward a panhuman culture; the name of this path is Constructivism. ■ The aesthetes and artists, those great defilers of the human species, destroyed the austere bridges of that path, replacing them with a heap of saccharine anesthetic — art and beauty. ■ The essence of the Earth — man's brain — is being wastefully used to fertilize the bog of aestheticism. ■ Having weighed the facts on the scales of an honest attitude towards the inhabitants of the Earth, the Constructivists pronounce art and its priests to be outside the law.» ■ Tatlin answered Medunetsky about his attitude toward material and about the plan for the *Monument to the Third International*. He said that he always took the material itself as his starting point. «I took glass and iron,» Tatlin said, «... I can look at the sky as at a certain kind of material, as I would look at a first- or second-class train carriage.» He said that he had designed the monument «for the

present day and had planned for the possibility of actual realization ... A group of engineers is currently working on the details of the monument.» ■ Tatlin noted that the problems connected to production work, to the creation of utilitarian objects could be solved by artists individually — they demanded the unification of efforts. «Three meetings in a row now, I keep hearing again and again pontification about old art, about the old understanding of yourself and of the younger comrades. Life has, in any case, posed new problems and everything that is behind us is the old,» but we, however, «do not take into account the fact that there are also healthy elements behind us which can be used for these new problems, for the future, [which is why] this is no time to put up divisions before each other ... Life forces us to do new things ... We have to come together and work jointly.» ■ Tatlin then expressed his opinion about the works of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU and about their declaration. He said that he did not understand what people were arguing about at the meeting and why some of those present «have ganged up against the comrades» from OBMOKhU. Indeed, he said, not everything in their statements was clear at the last meeting, «but now it is clear. They talked amongst themselves about how they think, how they understand it, and put forth a declaration. This declaration agrees with the declaration put forth by INKhUK. They talked about the smaller expenditure of effort and why it should be done this way and not another. And I understood the problem: in particular, not to create with a specific aim. There has to be the least possible expenditure of energy, material, and the least possible expenditure of time etc.» Tatlin saw no cause for argument

in these questions. What he considered disputable were the evaluations of the works of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU that they themselves offered. In his opinion, the constructive works created by Medunetsky and the Stenbergs were aesthetic objects and it still only lay ahead in the future to find the forms needed in real life. He also urged the meeting to solve these problems collectively. ■ The meeting of INKhUK at which the works of the Constructivists from OBMOKhU were discussed was very important at the stage of assessing the results of the first year of the development of Constructivism's stated conception. Having quickly become popular, Constructivism drew ever greater attention to itself. There came about the need to understand the methods of this movement, its predecessors, to understand its place in the general development of production art, and to gage the role played by the intensive experiments with abstracted spatial constructions. ■ One cannot say that at this meeting, much as at the meetings that preceded it in December of 1921, it was possible to come to an understanding about all the questions. ■ Thus, for example, the style-forming role of these spatial constructions was not, in the end, appreciated fully. It is, perhaps, the case, that in those particular circumstances, with INKhUK members' general attitude aimed at finding the «way out» into production, the style-forming role of the experiments of Constructivists from OBMOKhU could not be assessed properly. ■ At the same time, the Stenbergs and Medunetsky, having created in the second half of 1921 a number of new «designs» and spatial constructions, continued to show them at various meetings and exhibitions.

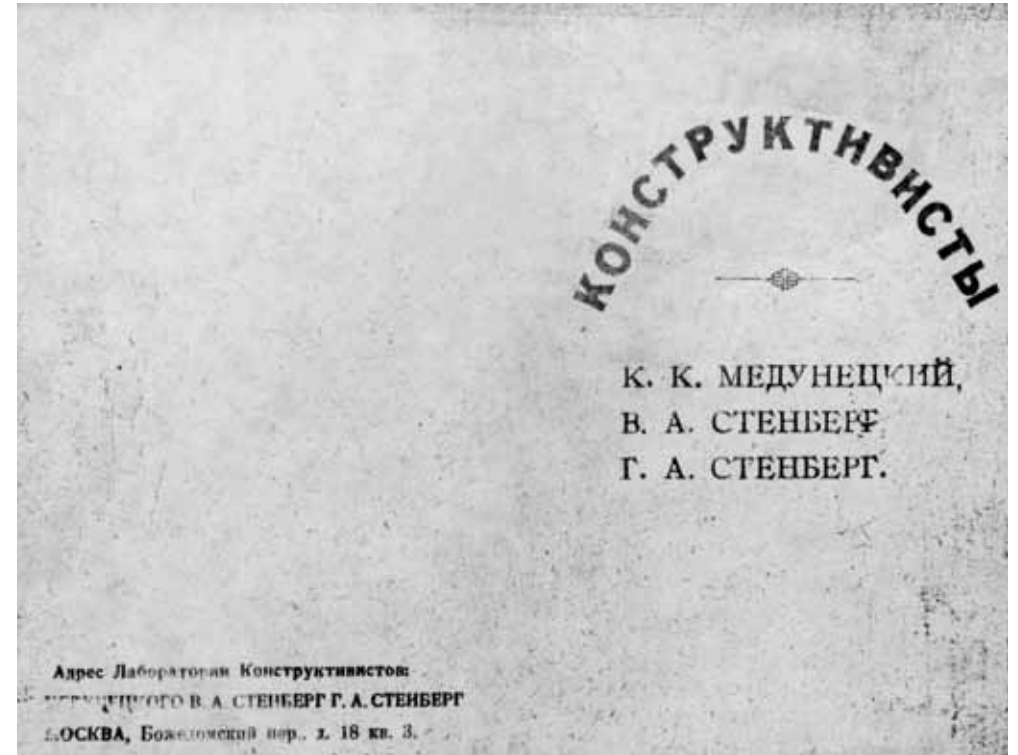
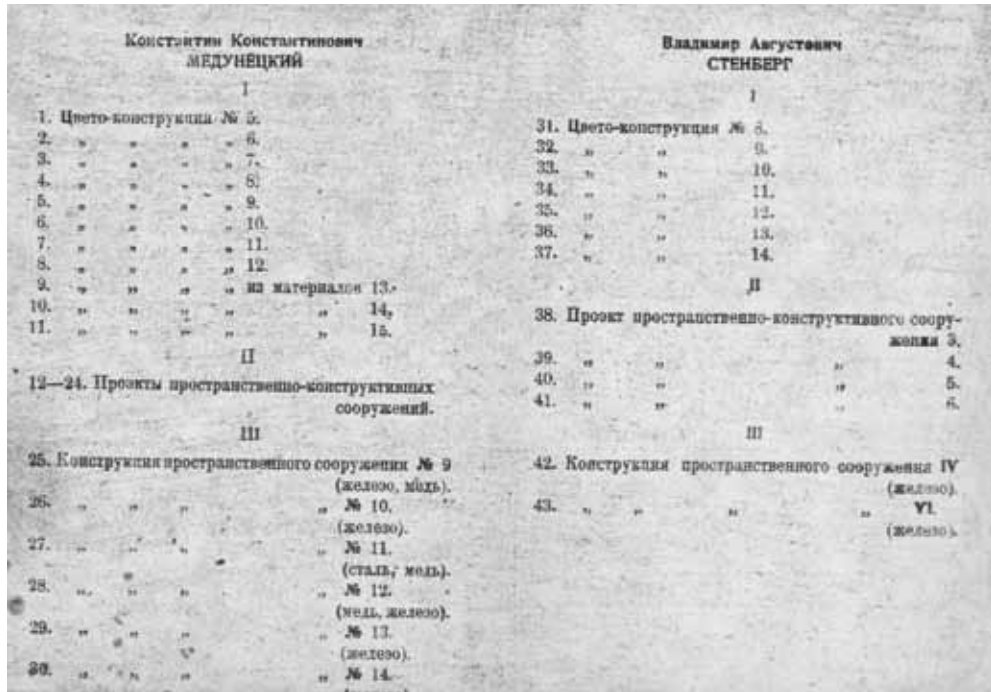
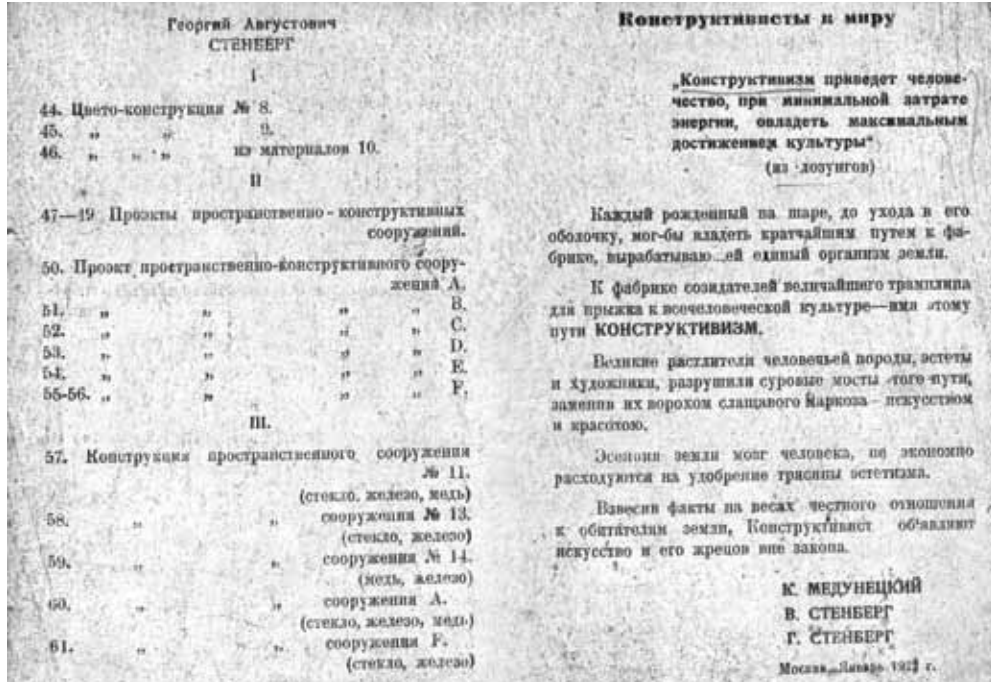
THE CONSTRUCTIVISTS EXHIBITION AND THE MAIN POINTS OF THE TALK «CONSTRUCTIVISM»

In January 1922 in Moscow, the exhibition Constructivists took place at which works only by Medunetsky and the Stenbergs were shown. ■ The catalog of the exhibition opened with the declaration «Constructivists to the World,» which Medunetsky had read out at INKhUK during the meeting of December 26, 1921. What then followed was a list of works¹² of each individual exhibition participant, with all the works divided into three types: 1) color constructions (including those made out of materials); 2) designs for spatio-constructive structures; 3) constructions of spatial structures (with an indication of the material or combination of materials used — iron, steel, cooper, glass). ■ At the meeting of INKhUK's Administration on March 20, 1922, the plan for «the scheduling of upcoming talks» was accepted; in accordance with it, an OBMOKhU talk titled «Constructivism» was scheduled for March 30th. On March 30th, however, B. Kushner gave a talk («The Role of the Engineer in Production»), delivering the next one, as well (April 6th — «The Artist in Production»); the next speaker was

¹² Altogether, sixty one works were shown in the exhibition: K. Medunetsky — eleven color constructions (including three made of materials), thirteen designs, and six constructions; V. Stenberg — seven color constructions, four designs, and two constructions; G. Stenberg — three color constructions (one made out of materials), ten designs, and five constructions.

O. Brik (April 13th — «What the Artist Can Do in the Meantime»). ■ The INKhUK archive contains a document with the main talking points of the talk «Constructivism» dated March 4, 1922 and signed by Medunetsky and both of the Stenbergs. It is not entirely clear why this talk never took place. One can only conjecture that the expanded work of assessing the results of the development of «construction» (a collection of texts, an INKhUK exhibition, etc.) that was planned in the Fall of 1921 no longer seemed relevant in the Spring of 1922 to the theorists of production art (O. Brik, B. Arvatov, B. Kushner) who had taken over the leadership of INKhUK. The talks given at that point were primarily connected with the problems of the artist's participation in production. Constructivism and everything connected with it, on the other hand, was seen as a stage that has already passed. The theorists of production art thought that at the current stage of the formation of production art, artists had to give up not only representation, but experiments with abstracted constructions, as well. ■ This might explain the fact that the talk prepared by the Constructivists from OBMOKhU was never delivered at any INKhUK meeting. In the meantime, it is of considerable interest as a document characteristic of that stage of the development of production art when artists were looking for ways to transition from experiments with abstracted constructions to the actual use of the principles and techniques of Constructivism. ■ I will cite here in full the main points of the talk. ■ «Main Points for the Talk on 'Constructivism' ■ Part I ■ Reasons for the Emergence of Constructivism ■ 1) Aesthetics as an element of dissolution of the inner essence of production culture. ■ 2) The distortion of the givenness of the formal properties of industrial and intellec-

tual material in general. ■ 3) Lack of economy in the moment of a construction's material figuration. ■ 4) Lack of functional action of the content of the material itself in the moment of the construction's figuration. ■ 5) Disorganization of the form of an industrial product in its utilitarian, everyday meaning. ■ 6) Asystematic work of the elements of engineering and rhythm. ■ Part II ■ Introduction to Constructivism ■ 7) The historical image of the culture of material structures. ■ 8) The moment of struggle with aesthetics and the aestheticizers. ■ 9) Victory of Constructivism. The principles proposed by Constructivism. ■ 10) Economy of space. ■ 11) Utilitarianism — the logic of everyday life. ■ 12) Expediency — the use of modern industrial material with the indissociable action of its content on the figuration of the construction. ■ 13) Rhythm — the elements of engineering in a construction are simultaneously the organizing principles of its rhythm. ■ 14) Fundamental change of inner and outer properties of material construction based on the main principles of Constructivism. ■ *N.B.* We use «inner property» to denote industrial material and space. The outer elements are volume, plane, surface, line, color, light, and texture. ■ Part III ■ The Path of Constructivism in Its Present and Future ■ 15) The first laboratory works and their agitational significance. ■ 16) Solution in the abstract of the main problems of Constructivism. ■ 17) Experimental figuration of the material-spatial construction and its relationship to utilitarianism. ■ 18) Achievements in the spheres of space, form, and rhythm. ■ 19) Communist expression of material-spatial structures. ■ 20) Russian industry under the sign of Constructivism and its importance on the world market. ■ March 4, 1922. ■ K. Medunetsky, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg.»



Catalog for the exhibition
Constructivists, 1921. Cover
and four pages

CONTACTS WITH VSEVOLOD MEYERKHOLD

In practical terms, the Stenbergs, much like their fellow Constructivists in the early 1920s, viewed Constructivism not so much as an artistic movement as a new kind of creative activity. In calling themselves Constructivists, it was as if they specified their profession, which is to say that at that time, the term «Constructivist» seemed to be a substitute for the term «designer»; it was only later that the terms «artist-creator» and «engineer-artist» appeared. ■ Even though the works shown by the Stenbergs in January 1922 at the exhibition *Constructivists* were more reminiscent of fragments of engineered structures than the works shown at the OBMOKhU exhibition (1921), they still clearly manifested the artists' striving for compositional ordering. The style-forming role of these spatial constructions, however, was never properly appreciated in that period when all the innovators were fighting against «style.» And yet these constructions exerted considerable influence on the processes of form-making at the stage of the new style's coming into being. The Stenbergs' constructions were published in domestic and international press and shown at numerous exhibitions. ■ In 1922, works by the Stenbergs and Medunetsky were shown at the *First Russian Art Exhibition* in Berlin, which was organized by Narkompros. They appeared in three of its sections: Painting, Sculpture, and Graphic Art, Architecture, Theater, etc. Medunetsky showed ten works at the exhibition, the Stenbergs eleven. These were

color constructions (including those made out of materials), designs for constructions, and spatial constructions¹³. From Berlin the show moved to Amsterdam. ■ Vladimir Mayakovsky, who was in Berlin during the time of the exhibition, wrote that, «The top floor is experiencing particular success since examples of the art of «left» artists are decidedly taken by Europeans as the truly authentic search for a new art, as an art characteristic of Soviet Russia ... Americans are buying the constructions, paintings, and industrial objects made by these artists.»¹⁴ ■ It was probably then that one of K. Medunetsky's constructions, which now belongs to the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery in the U.S., was purchased. ■ The Stenbergs conducted their experimental development of spatial constructions in conditions where many Constructivists and proponents of production art thought that form-making is connected, first and foremost, with the utilitarian purpose of form. In the engineered technical forms, they saw the ideal melding of form with the utilitarian constructive purpose. As a consequence of that, any «aesthetic» experimentation with engineered forms appeared to be a frivolous activity. ■ The experience of the further development of the processes of style-formation did show, however, that this «game» of «constructions,» independent of the verbal declarations by which it was accompanied, was happening at the center of style-forming processes. ■ The paradox lay in the fact that at the time, neither the architects nor those¹³ in the applied arts could yet «see» artistic possibilities in engineered forms. Which is why the style-forming processes in the object-space environment took unpredictable forms. Engi-

¹³ See the exhibition catalog *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung, Berlin, 1922*.

¹⁴ V. Mayakovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy v 14 tomah [Complete Collected Works in Fourteen Volumes]*, (Moscow, 1957), vol. 4, p. 262.

neered forms seen as artistically significant forms were brought in and implemented in architecture and design, which was just taking shape as a discipline at that time, by artists and by technical dilettantes. They were the first to see in the open-work engineered constructions those forms that could become an important component of the foundation upon which the style-forming processes of the 20th century would be built. ■ This also explains the careful attention paid to experiments with abstracted constructions by artists active in a variety of different cultural spheres and especially those who determined at the time the general direction of innovative movements' creative searches. One can cite as examples here the attitudes towards spatial constructions expressed by Vladimir Mayakovsky and Vsevolod Meyerkhhold. ■ In the memoirs of Rita Rait [Translator's Note: Rita Rait-Kovalyeva was a Soviet writer, acclaimed literary translator, and close friend of V. Mayakovsky], one finds the description of one of the exhibitions of the early 1920s where spatial constructions were shown. It is most likely that the exhibition in question was the 1921 OBMOKhU show. ■ «The exhibition of Constructivists... There are few people, Mayakovsky walks around the small exhibition hall. We come in as a crowd ... I take off my coat, near by there are crossed iron bars, on them to the side is a triangle, some kind of semicircles. My coat with someone's help finds itself hanging on the extended arrow of this sculptural structure. We are pleased; art has turned out to be «useful» — supposedly, that was the idea. But then Mayakovsky moves in on us and says, furrowing his brow, very sternly, but in a low voice so as not to attract the attention of the sculpture's creator who is standing a little ways away, 'Take it off this instant! What a disgrace! Do you

really not understand... ■ But seeing that we really do not understand anything, he explains, now softened by our embarrassment, how the artist wanted to show in his work new interrelationships and forms, the likes of which have never existed, and what is more important, wanted to teach the viewer to see things in a new way — it seems unfamiliar now, but in the future, it may help the new construction of things: bridges, buildings, cars.»¹⁵ ■ Vsevolod Meyerkhhold saw the works of Constructivists from OBMOKhU at the *Constructivists* exhibition in January of 1922. The spatial constructions attracted his attention, and he offered their creators, Medunetsky and the Stenbergs, to create set designs for the play *The Magnanimous Cuckold* [Translator's Note: This was the name under which Meyerkhhold staged Fernand Crommelynck's *The Magnificent Cuckold*]. ■ As Vladimir Avgustovich told it to me in a conversation, the Constructivists from OBMOKhU (Stenberg — Medunetsky — Stenberg, i.e. SMS) accepted Meyerkhhold's offer and went to him to hold preliminary talks. Already on the way there, SMS decided to resist any dictates, having heard rumors that Meyerkhhold imposes his will on the actors and artists. In their conversation with Meyerkhhold, SMS told him that they wanted to read the text of the play first and then offer their ideas for the sets for the play in the spirit of their «constructions.» If their ideas were not accepted, moreover, they would not take the job. Meyerkhhold said that the artists only needed to take into account his wish to have an abandoned, semidilapidated mill on the stage. SMS went back to Meyerkhhold a while later and described to him their ideas for the set designs, offering schematic draw-

¹⁵ Uchenye zapiski Tartusskogo universiteta. Trudy po russkoy i slavyanskoy filologii. IX. Literaturovedenie. [The Scientific Studies of Tartu University. Works on Russian and Slavic Philology. IX. Literary Studies], Tartu, 1966, p. 275.

ings on the spot. ■ The idea went as follows: in the most visible spot, at the height of two stories, there would be two identical doors placed side by side; a set of stairs and a chute would lead up to the doors. Below, there would be a bench with a queue of «lovers.» Above the doors, there would be a wheel. This set design would be used in the following way: the «lover» would go up the stairs, and once the door was shut on him, the wheel would start spinning. The rotation would accelerate until it reached maximum speed and would then suddenly stop; the door would open and stumbling, the «lover» would go down the slide while the next one would be going up the stairs. In this way, the idea of a mill was tied in with the plot and not just with the play's setting — it was as if the «lovers» were «milled up» and sent down the chute like sacks of flour. ■ Meyerkhhold really liked SMS's idea. He offered them to create the stage designs in the spirit of this proposal. They said they would start working on the maquette, but wanted to come to an agreement about their pay beforehand. The negotiations on the theater's side were conducted by I. Aksyonov (the translator and author of the staging of Fernand Crommelynck's text). The artists wanted to receive rations rather than money for their work. The theater was not giving them an answer, however, and while waiting for an agreement about the form of payment, SMS were not doing anything. By accident, they ran into Meyerkhhold at a movie, and he asked when the maquette would be ready. To this, Medunetsky answered with an expressive gesture of his fingers, signifying «What about the pay?» Soon after, the artists got a letter from the Meyerkhhold Theater which said that if the theater did not receive the maquette within three days, it would give the commission to another artist. SMS

got angry and did not respond in any way. ■ Meyerkhhold gave the job to Lyubov Popova. SMS went to the opening of the play *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, whose set designs used the general scheme of their idea. In those years, there was a custom to discuss the play after the premiere (sometimes until 2 or 3 a.m.) with the participation of the audience. The artist Yakulov was at the premiere (he was the Stenberg's teacher at the Stroganov School) and knew the whole story of SMS's dealings with Meyerkhhold. He spoke up during the conversation and made the statement that that kind of set design could only have been proposed by such people as the artists from OBMOKhU. They were technicians, fitters, woodworkers, and they made everything with their own hands. This was their idea. The «Soviet mademoiselle» Popova could not have invented this set design. ■ Alexander Vesnin got very upset with SMS on Popova's behalf, and they had to spend a long time explaining to him that Yakulov's outburst was his own idea and not a «collective conspiracy.» ■ What, then, actually happened? ■ Meyerkhhold liked the idea proposed by SMS, and he probably started to think of it as almost his own. When he invited Popova, he shared it with her, having «forgotten» to say that the authors of the idea were the Constructivists from OBMOKhU. ■ And yet, what is important for the history of Constructivism is the very fact of Meyerkhhold's turning to the Constructivists from OBMOKhU and the point that the appearance of Constructivist installations in the theater was clearly connected with experiments with abstracted spatial constructions. The Constructivists from OBMOKhU made their contribution to the appearance of the first classic Constructivist installation (the play *The Magnanimous Cuckold*).



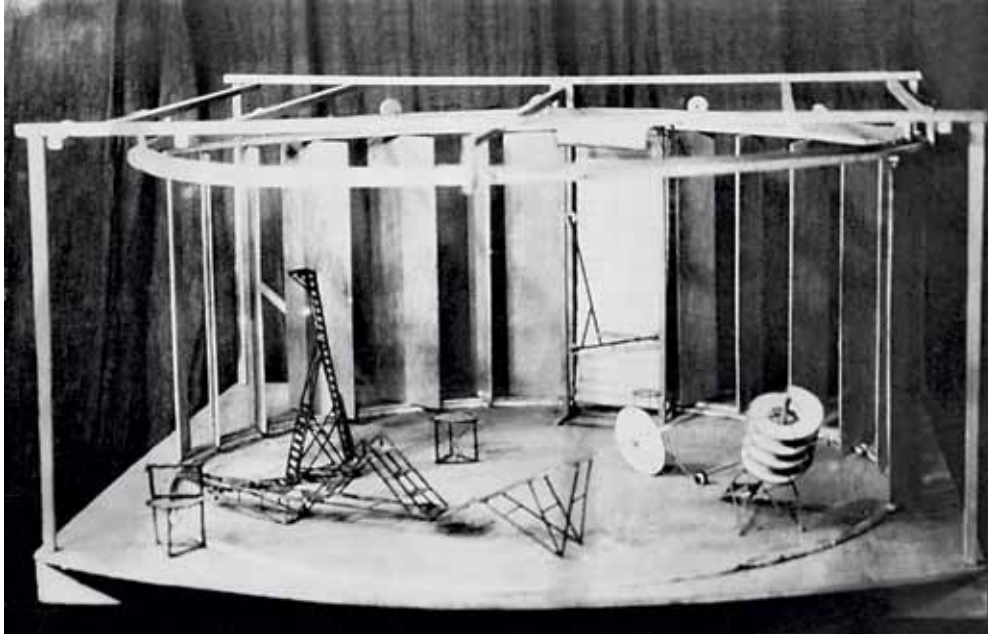
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Poster for the Kamerny Theater's
foreign tour, 1923

WORK AT THE KAMERNY THEATER

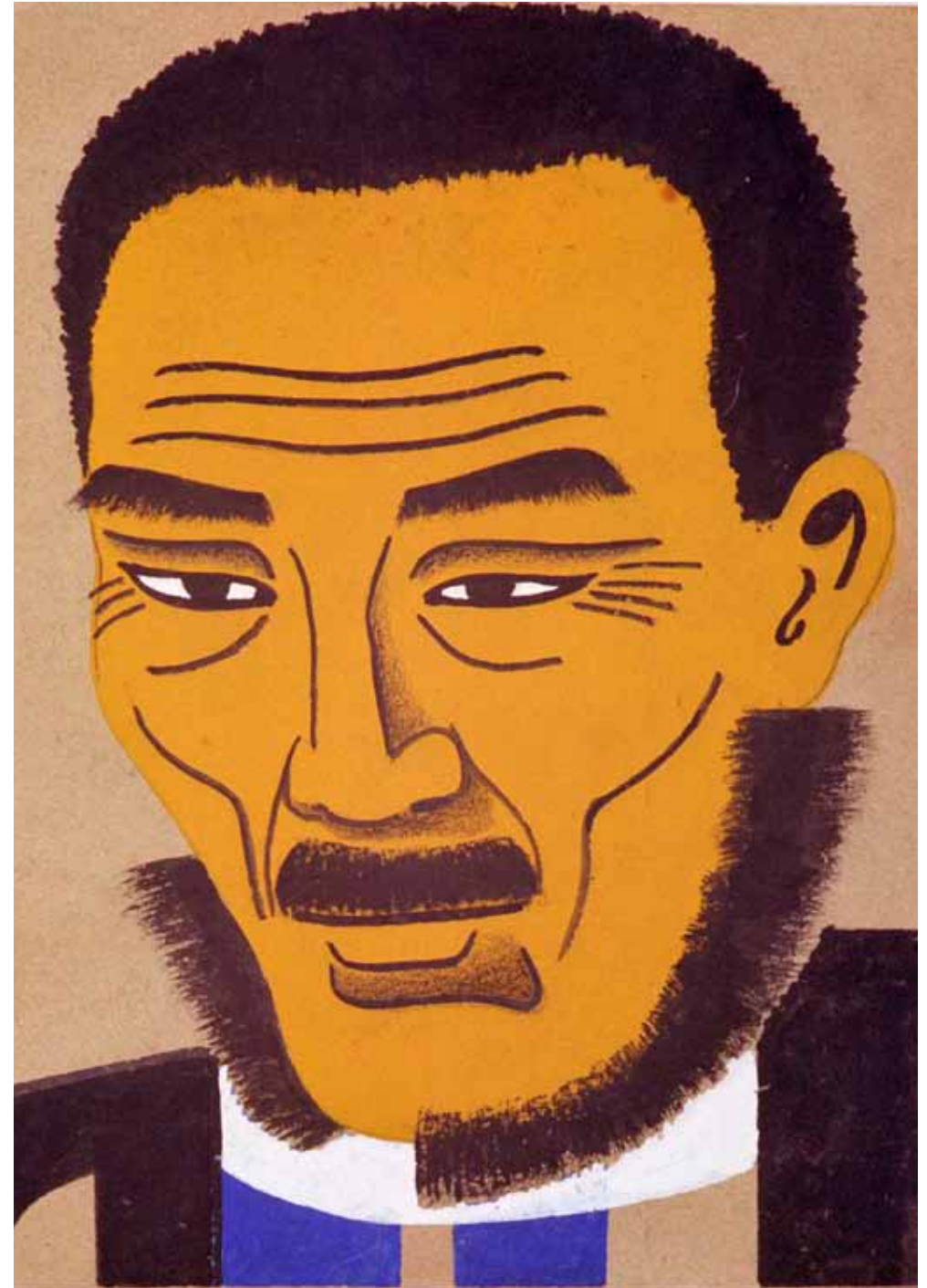
In 1922, the Stenbergs got jobs at the Kamerny [Chamber] Theater as set designers. Their first job for this theater (done in collaboration with Medunetsky) was creating the stage sets for the play *The Yellow Jacket*. Already by the end of 1922, they had worked out a detailed maquette of a stage design in which the young Constructivists used open-work latticed metal constructions. Some elements of this stage set were designed to be transformable, rotating, outfitted with a movable platform, collapsible, etc. One can view this project in the context of the series of the earliest Constructivist theater installations executed by L. Popova, A. Vesnin, V. Stepanova, A. Lavinsky, and V. Shestakov. The play *The Yellow Jacket* was never realized due to the Kamerny Theater's foreign tour, but during the touring, the maquette was shown alongside other works by the theater's artists. ■ The first production whose sets were designed by the Stenbergs at the Kamerny Theater was Alexander Ostrovsky's *The Storm*. ■ There have always been questions about the disappearance of Medunetsky from the tight-knit collective of SMS. Why, given that a short time prior, the three of them had been making the maquette for *The Yellow Jacket* together, were the Stenbergs suddenly left on their own when they started work on the maquette for *The Storm*? ■ It was, moreover, public knowledge that when Tairov first invited them to the

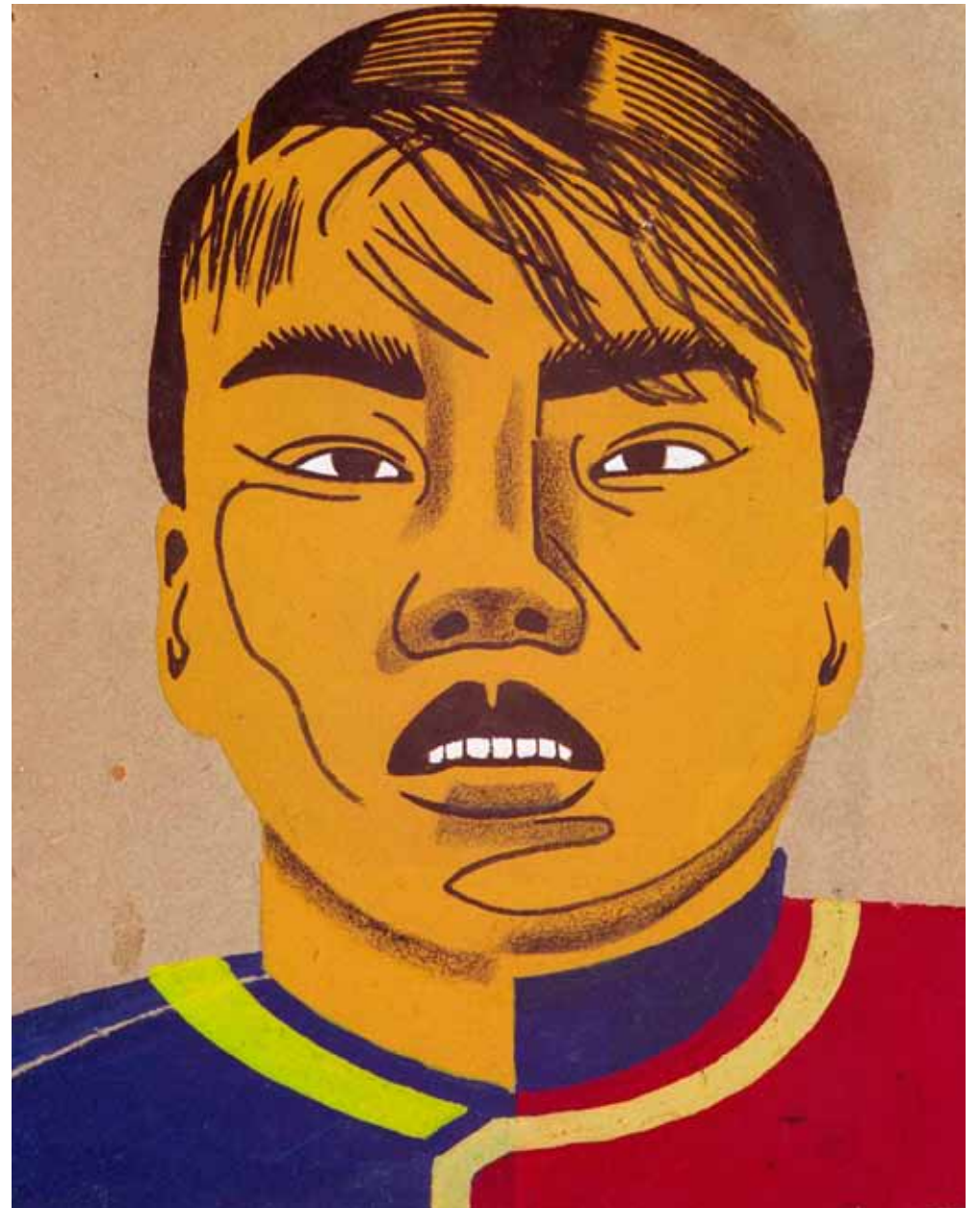
Maquette of the stage sets for the unrealized play *The Yellow Jacket* (in collaboration with K. Medunetsky). 1922

→ (pp 137–141)
Sketches for the masks for the unrealized play *The Yellow Jacket*. 1922



Kamerny Theater, the Constructivists from OBMOKhU gave him only one condition — they would come as either all three or none. ■ What, then, happened? Why did this unique artistic unit fall apart? Why did the Stenbergs not leave the Kamerny Theater together with Medunetsky? ■ Everything turned out to be quite simple and even vulgarly primitive. ■ Tairov called all three artists to his office and this time, he was the one giving them rigid conditions. He told the Stenbergs in the presence of Medunetsky that their «loyal» friend proposed to him (Tairov) behind their back his own version of the set design for *The Storm*, stating that the Sten-







Sketches for the masks for the unrealized play *The Yellow Jacket*. 1922



bergs were not Russian (until 1933, they had Swedish citizenship) and would not understand a Russian play. Tairov stipulated his condition — either only the two Stenbergs stay or all three leave. The Stenbergs stayed. Medunetsky left. For the Stenbergs, this was a harsh psychological blow. They would no longer have any contact with Medunetsky. The Stenbergs decided not to make public the reason for the disintegration of their artistic collective, but something, by all appearance, must have gotten out, and Medunetsky felt the negative reaction of his colleagues. In telling me about the reasons for the disintegration of the SMS collective, Vladimir Avgustovich said that it might become appropriate to tell this story at some point, but not at that time (our conversation took place in 1970); the time, rather, could be right when a new generation will have come. I think that the new generation has already come, and it is up to it to try and understand on its own the psychological reasons for the disintegration of a unique artistic collective. This is the first time that I personally have made public that which Vladimir Stenberg told me almost four decades ago. ■ The question also arises of who is to be believed. ■ The Stenbergs came to a theater where before them, the stage designs had been done by such artists as N. Goncharova, S. Sudeykin, A. Exter, B. Ferdinandov, G. Yakulov, and A. Vesnin. The success of the Kamerny Theater was inextricably connected with the names of artists who were able to turn plays into colorful spectacles. In the mid-1920s, however, a new period in the development of the Kamerny Theater had begun — the period of «the battle for the repertoire.» Tairov was looking for artists who would not distract

Sketches for the masks for the unrealized play *The Yellow Jacket*. 1922



audiences from the actors and their acting. ■ «The Stenbergs came to the big stage,» D. Aronovich wrote, «at a time when a surprisingly large amount of work had already been done in the sphere of «left» theater design in our country... They brought with them to the theater three essential qualities. Firstly, due to their past activities, they knew painting poorly and did not love it. On the day when they first set foot backstage, false thinking about a **sketch** for a set design was already completely alien to them. The Stenbergs came to the theater as representatives of a new generation who were only able to think **spatially**, only by means of a maquette. Secondly, the Stenbergs did not have the attitude of loving the theater but not wanting to get their hands dirty. They were devoted to it completely and selflessly. For them, to design a new system of stage wings, to build a hoist, to rig a complex mechanical system of lifts or rework the system of stage lighting was equally as interesting and important as to invent the set design for a play. The Stenbergs were professionals rather than touring visitors at the theater. Thirdly, following in the wake of several pretentious «stars» and their provocative masterpieces, the Stenbergs brought to the stage, for the first time after many years of purely spectacular theater, the intelligent modesty of their individuality ... The Stenbergs served the theater «honestly» rather than by showing themselves off.»¹⁶ ■ The Stenbergs' arrival at the Kamerny Theater seems to have inaugurated a new era in the artistic design of the theater's plays. For over eight years, the Stenbergs practically had a monopoly on the artistic design of the Kamerny Theater plays, working as art-

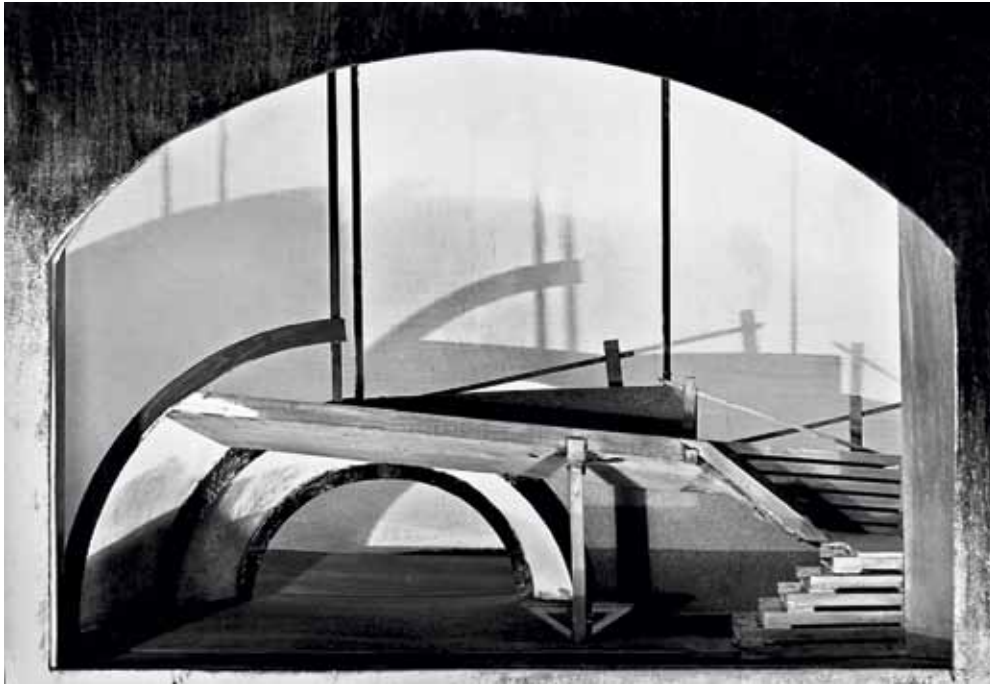
¹⁶ D. Aronovich, «2 Stenberg 2,» *Krasnaya Niva* [The Red Field], 1923, # 40, p. 20.



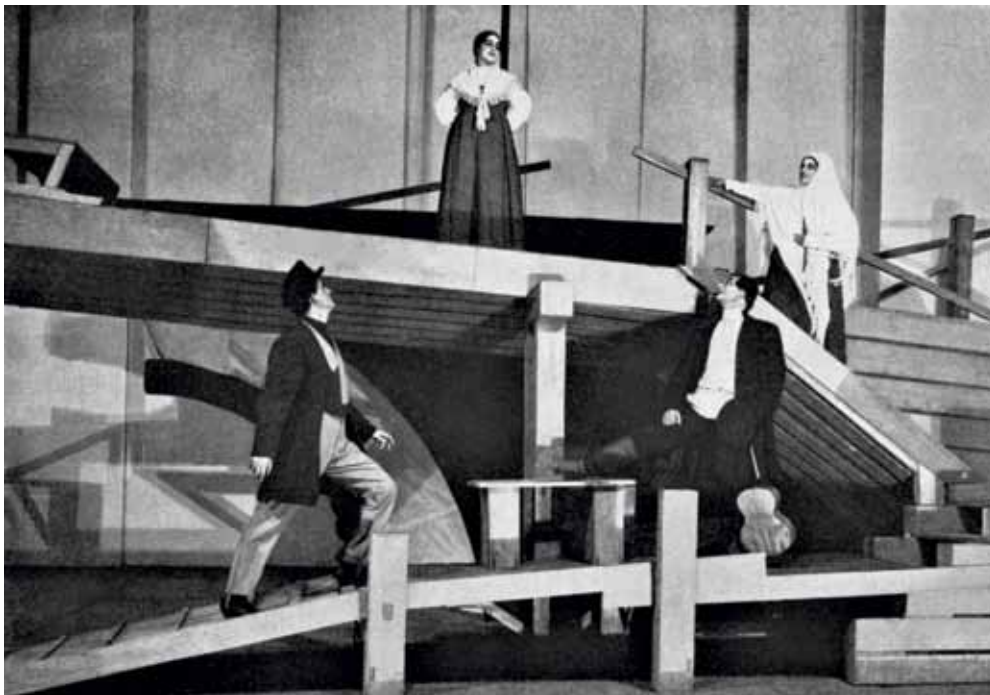
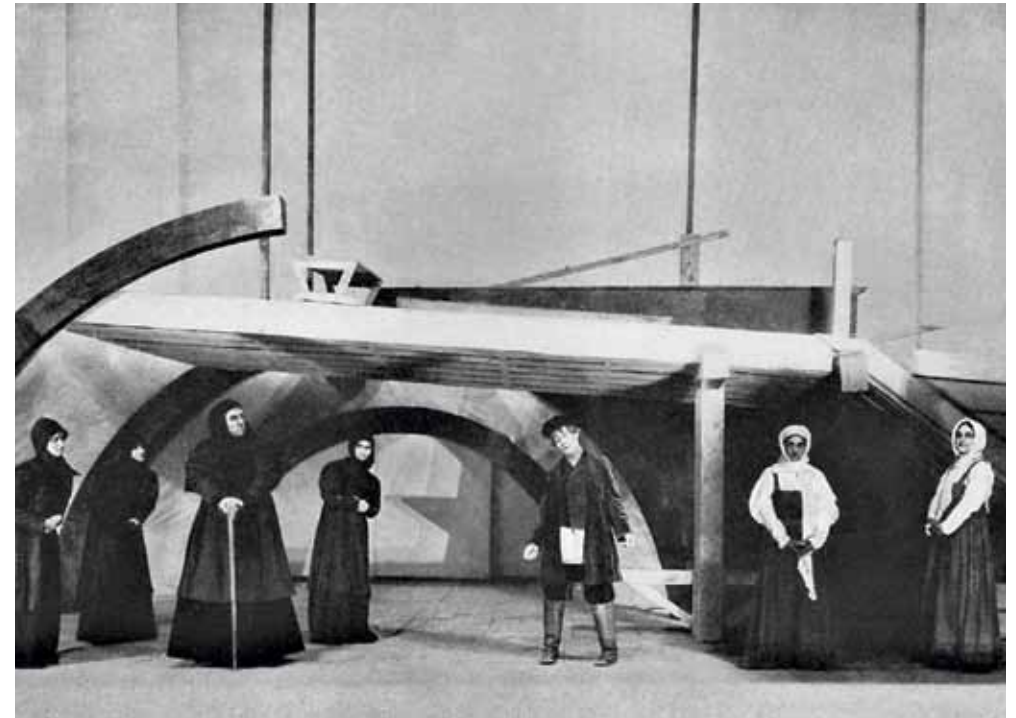
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Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *The Babylonian Tawen* (Anatoly Marienhof). Sketch for the costumes. 1922

ists on twelve productions, among which were several watershed ones for the theater. ■ This is how the theater historian Abram Efros described the beginning of the new period in the artistic design of Kamerny Theater's plays: «Tairov had changed direction sharply. *The Storm* — the Stenbergs' first production, which ran in the 1924 season — amazed its viewers by being the opposite of everything that had customarily been seen at the Kamerny Theater. It was decidedly restrained in its form. In its parsimony, there was even something reminiscent of starving minimalism ... But this was ... not a dry skeleton, but a laconism of formulation. What was most fascinating was the search for defining characteristic qualities. It manifested itself in the sets, the costumes, and the make-up. This corresponded precisely to the director's vision... The sets were Constructivist, the costumes were made for recognizable character types. The whole stage was filled up by a single bridge or, more accurately, a schematic of a bridge — a symbol of sorts for the passage from one of life's shores to another.»¹⁷ ■ The plays for which the Stenbergs created artistic designs at the Kamerny Theater included *Saint Joan* by Bernard Shaw, 1924; *Kukirol* (a revue), 1925; *The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neill, 1926; *Desire under the Elms* by Eugene O'Neill, 1926; *Day and Night* by Charles Lecocq, 1926; *The Negro* by Eugene O'Neill [Translator's Note: It was under this name that the play *All God's Chillun Got Wings* appeared in Russian translation], 1929; *The Beggars' Opera* [Translator's Note: It was under this name that *The Threepenny Opera* appeared in Russian translation] by Bertolt Brecht, 1930; and *The Line of Fire*

¹⁷ D. Aronovich, "2 Stenberg 2," *Krasnaya Niva* [The Red Field], 1923, # 40, p. 29.



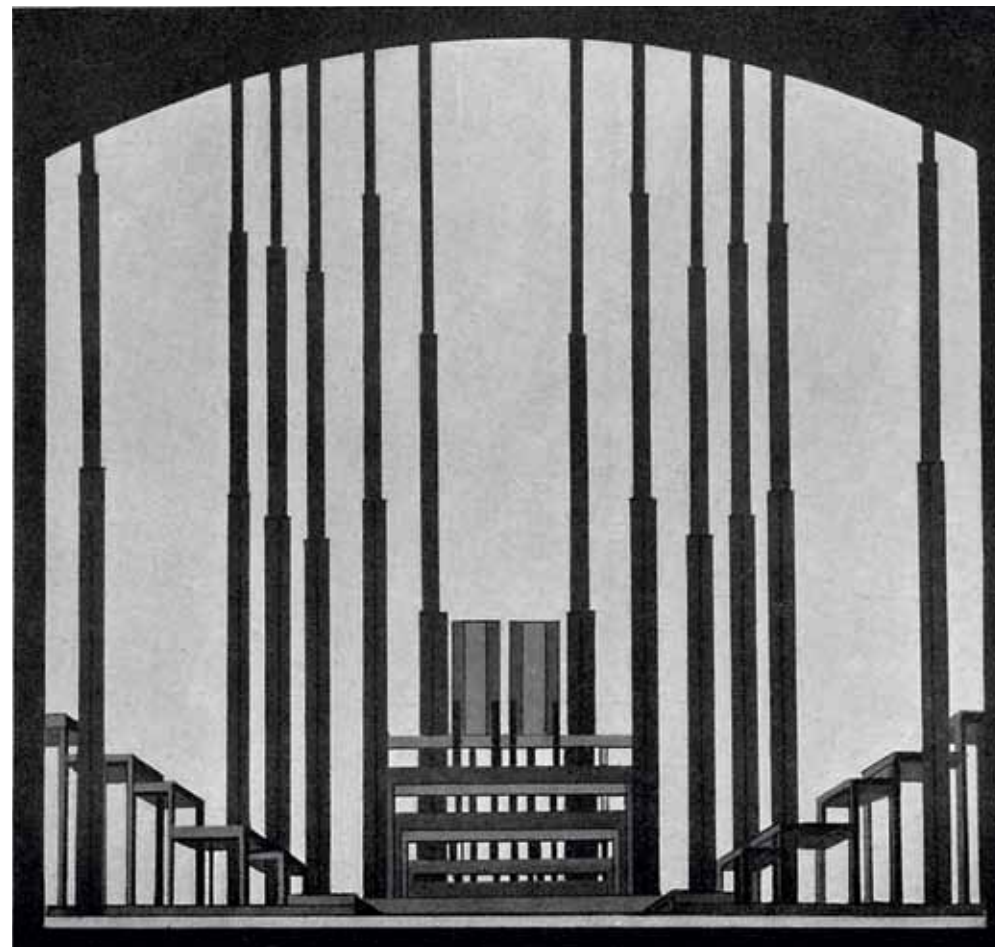
Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *The Storm* (play written by A. Ostrovsky). Maquette, scenes from the play. 1924



by Nikolay Nikitin, 1931. ■ In all the stage designs executed by the Stenbergs, one sees either the artists' pursuit of Constructivist inventiveness or the search for new but also necessarily laconic artistic solutions. Thus, for example, as the basis of the stage design for the operetta *Day and Night*, they used two concave parabolic surfaces painted in different colors and arranged to meet at an angle at the back of the stage; to match those, the costumes were also made up of two different halves. In *Saint Joan*, the set

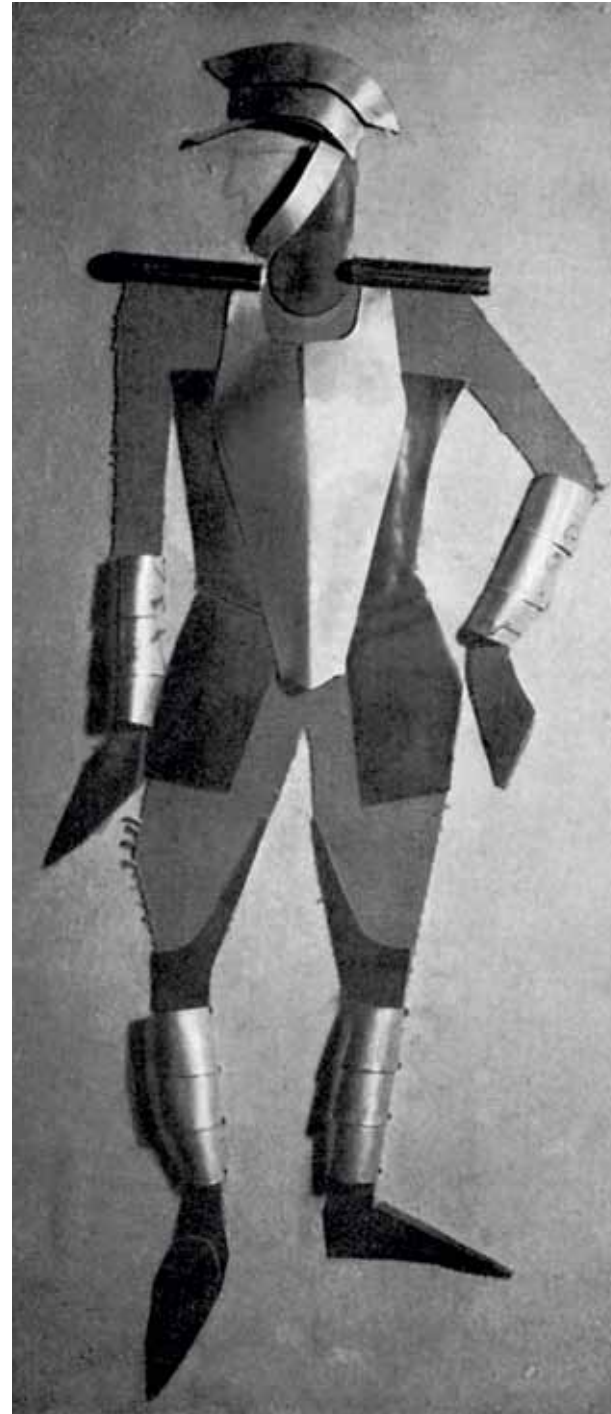


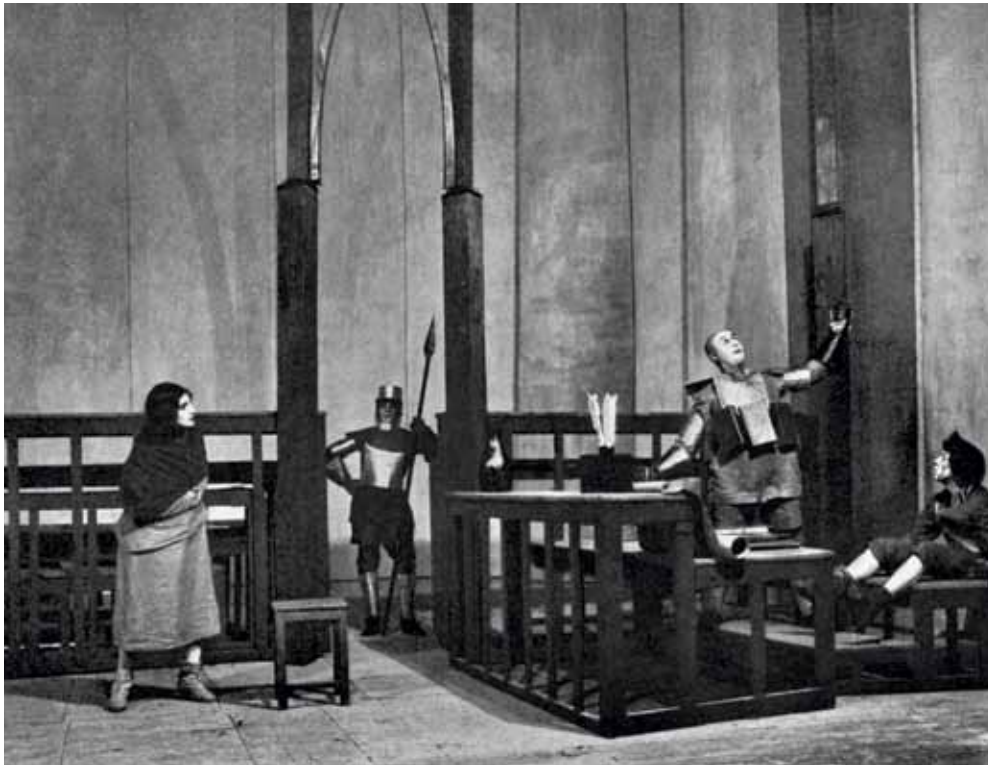
Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *Saint Joan* (Bernard Shaw). Maquette of the stage sets, sketch for the costume (Joan). 1924.



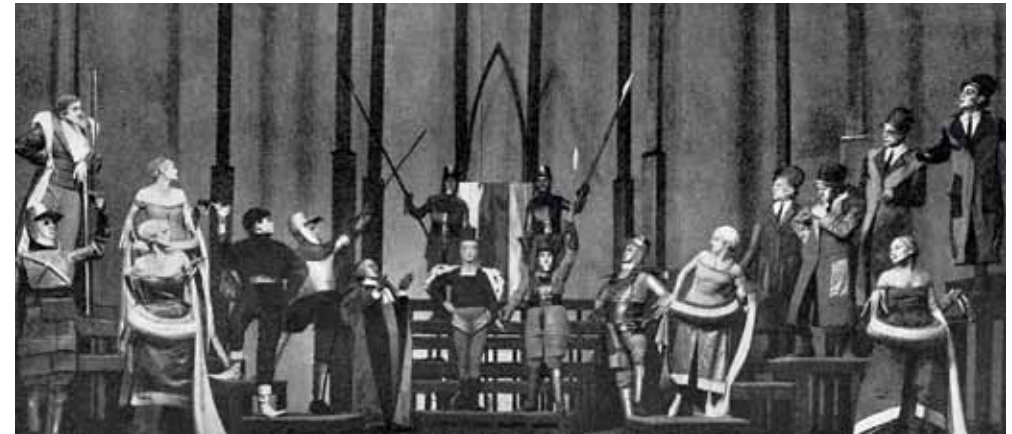


Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *Saint Joan* (Bernard Shaw). Sketches for the costumes (English soldier). 1924





Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *Saint Joan* (Bernard Shaw). Scenes from the play (with Robert de Baudricourt, at the palace of the Dauphin, military council). 1924.



consisted of a forest of multilevel racks that got thinner toward the top. The racks were constructed telescopically, which allowed for compact storage of the whole set. «The key to the design,» Eφος wrote, «was architectural transparency: French Gothic architecture rose up in the lightest rhythm of thin bars. They represented columns. Their see-through forest stood open to air and light. At the bottom, they were crisscrossed with similar horizontal bars. These formed balustrades, benches, platforms, and latticed structures which could, with equal comfort, serve as a courthouse, a cathedral, or a palace. It was very inventive and captivating.»¹⁸ ■ Eugene O'Neill's plays had a prominent place in the Kamerny Theater's repertoire. «Sarcastic bitterness, harsh passion, an angularity in the molding of characters and plots,» Eφος wrote, «demanded 'big' and simple techniques of acting, characterization, and

¹⁸ A. Eφος, *Kamerny teatr i ego khudozhniki* [*The Kamerny Theater and Its Artists*], Moscow, 1934, p. XI.



design. This was a wonderful school of neorealism — the best of what the Western repertoire could give in those years. ... The entire trio of O'Neill plays was performed to growing acclaim and finished with an exemplary production.»¹⁹ The Stenbergs made their considerable contribution to this success of the theater. In *The Hairy Ape*, what invariably provoked a burst of applause from the audience was the visual design of the stage — the workplace of the stokers

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. XIII.

Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production *Kukirol* (a revue). Scene at the office, scene of the diplomats' entry. 1925



in front of the furnaces (lit with crimson light, the half-naked stokers covered in dirt rhythmically heaved coal into the maws of the furnaces). In *Desire under the Elms*, the artists placed on the stage a certain «formula for a dwelling» — a laconic and easily visible construction, which represented the farm (verandas, stairs, rooms, cupboards). The third O'Neill play, *The Negro*, became a watershed production for the Kamerny Theater. «The Stenbergs' stage sets were magnificent. The American city — a kingdom of skyscrapers

Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *The Hairy Ape* (Eugene O'Neill). Fragments of stage sets (reconstructed by V. Stenberg), scene in the stokers' mess room, scenes on Fifth Avenue. 1926



and narrow, perpetually darkened streets — was convincing for the first time... Two corridors made of walls that met at an angle on the apron made up the avenue and the intersection. A wide contrast in lighting and the difference in the depth of the passages imparted monumentality to the buildings and rapidity to the street traffic. The staging was characterized by the laconism of the streets. Everything was three-dimensional, balanced, and appro-

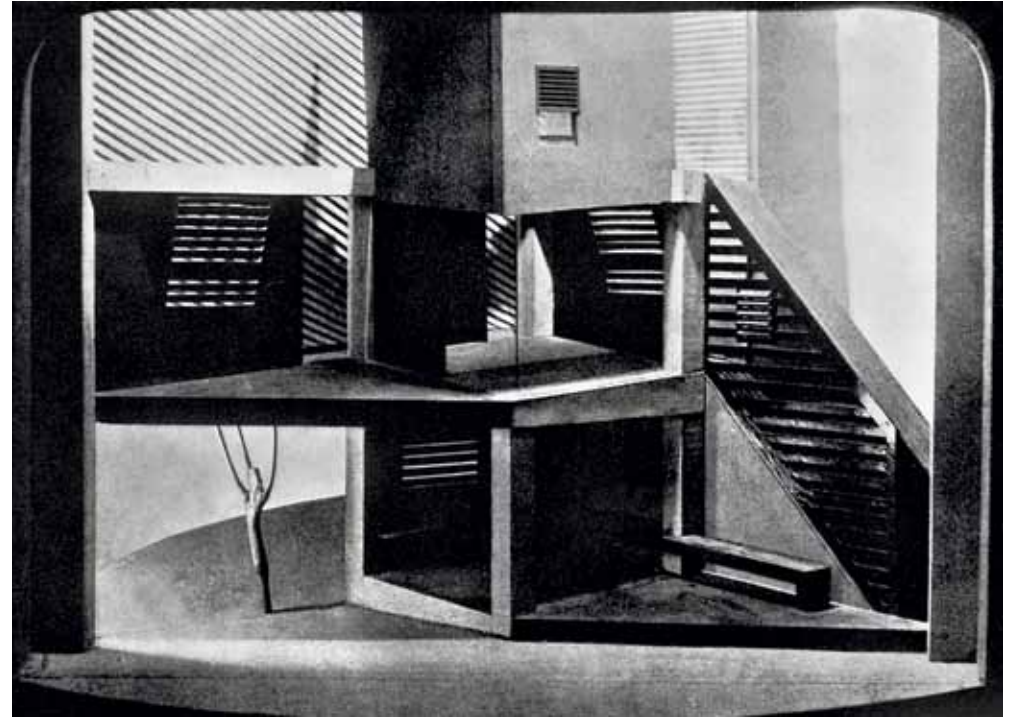
²⁰ A. Efros, *Kamerny teatr i ego khudozhniki* [The Kamerny Theater and Its Artists], Moscow, 1934, p. XIV.



priate.»²⁰ ■ In *The Negro*, the Stenberges used a transformable stage set («moveable installation») designed for two main positions. The artists saw as very significant their experiments with «moveable installation,» aiming, as they wrote, to «find out what possibilities can be achieved with a construction that synthesizes architecture, movement, and color.»²¹ ■ Likewise, the success of *The Beggars' Opera* was not inconsiderable, and, according to Abram Efros, «the ²¹ *Rabis*, 1927, #10, p. 8.



Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *Desire under the Elms* (Eugene O'Neill). Maquette of the stage sets, sketch of a male costume. 1926



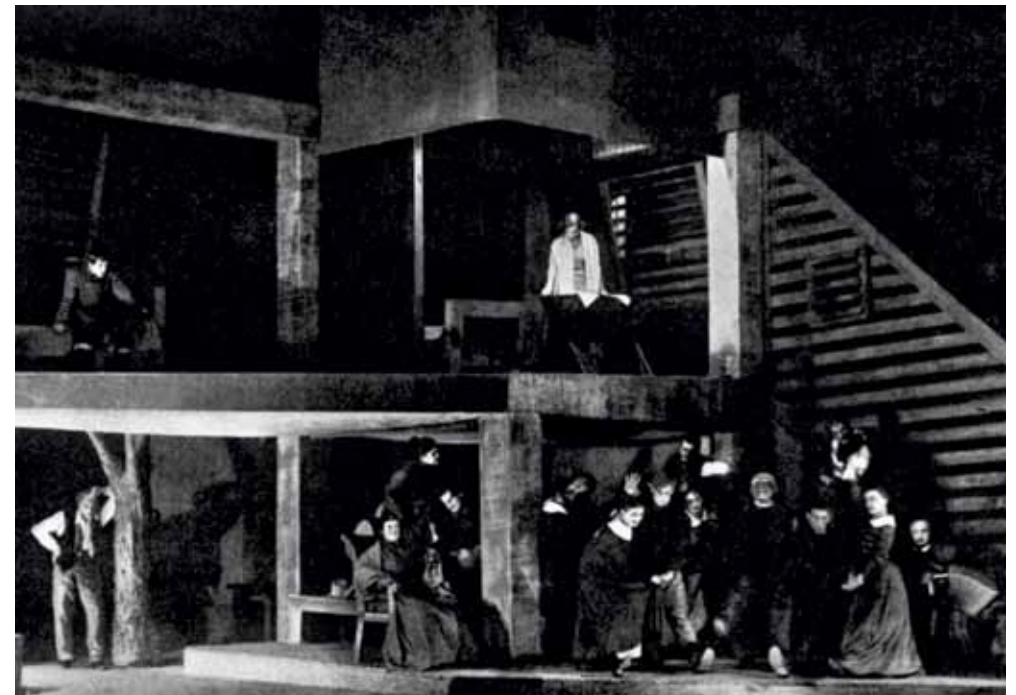
Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *Desire under the Elms* (Eugene O'Neill). Scenes from the play (Cabot's dance, at Cabot's christening). 1926

→ (pp 164–165)

Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *Day and Night* (Charles Lecocq). Sketches for costumes, scene with servants, end of Act Two. 1926

Stenberg's share [in it] ... was great, especially with the costumes and the beggarly outfitting. The constructive decorations were transparently moveable.»²² ■ The Stenberg's last project at the Kamerny Theater, *The Line of Fire*, was connected with the theme of industry. The artists created on the stage a transparent, graphical, almost silhouette-like construction on the basis of a generalization of real engineered and technical factory elements. ■ In 1931, already having created the design for the play *The Line of Fire*, the Stenberg's wrote the following about the role of the theater in propagandizing new technology: «The man of our age has created and mastered the machine. ... Many perceive Constructivism as if it were just stage props: here, a machine, a windlass, a crane appear in the stage design as ornamental decorations. ... We, on the other hand, think that the windlasses, electric parts, and cranes, which serve their technical functions, are among the elements of stage design. We certainly **do not want** to fetishize the machine ... we take as our **point of departure the architectonic and rational, constructive principles** for the creation of the atmosphere of the action on the stage. ■ The theater, along with all other forms of modern art, must **agitate for high technology** ... The artist today has to operate not through the illusionism of painted cardboard characters, but through strictly calibrated constructions that impart to people a sense of pride and self-assuredness ... To determine the right place for things, the relationship to material, to the *faktura* of the material, to create the atmosphere of a technological culture — it is in this that the agitational significance of Constructivism

²² A. Efros, op. cit., p. XIV.

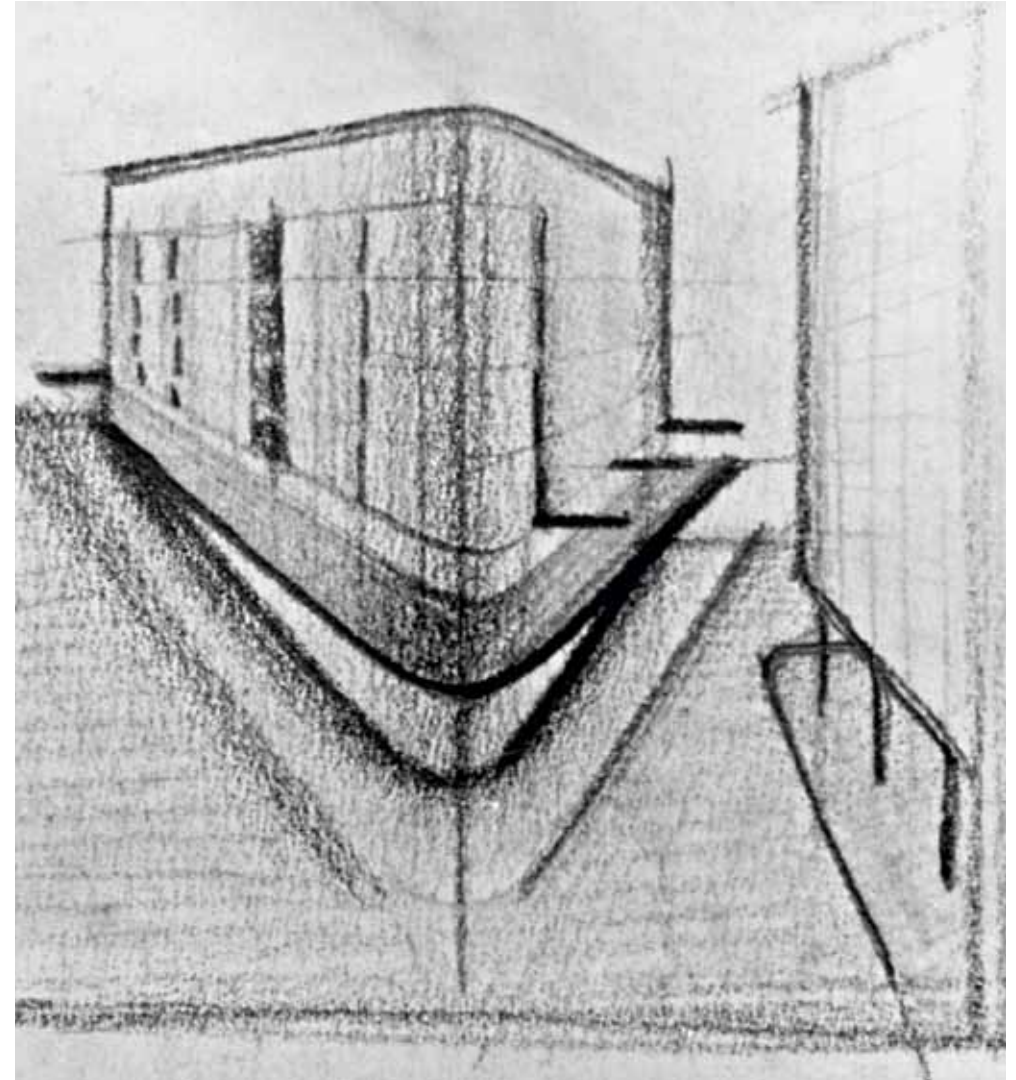


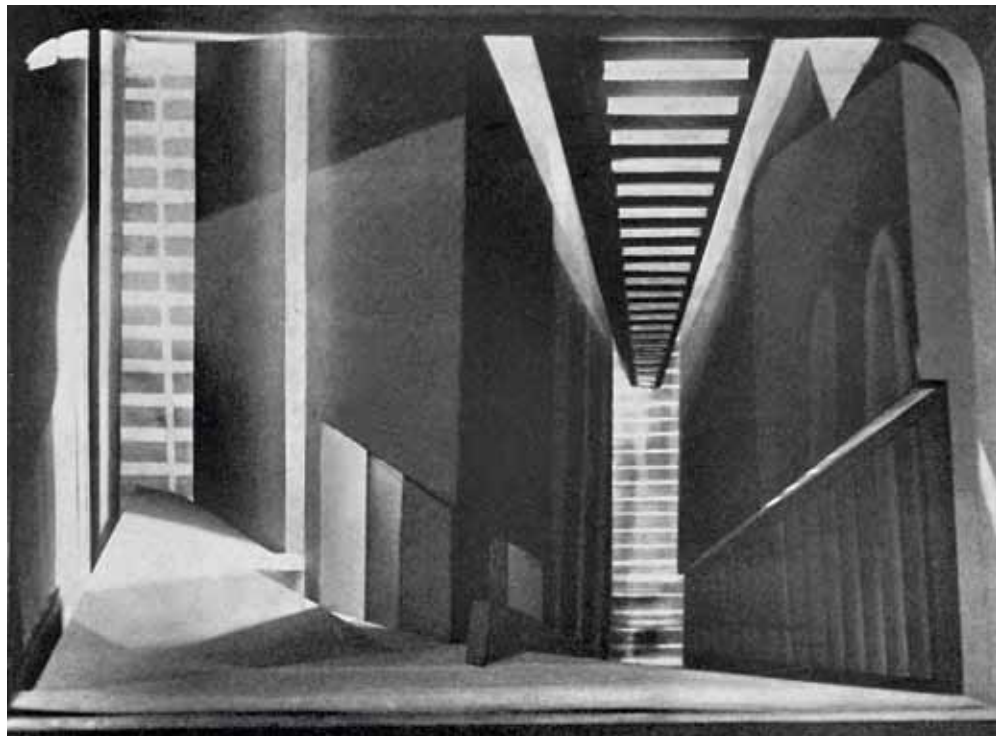
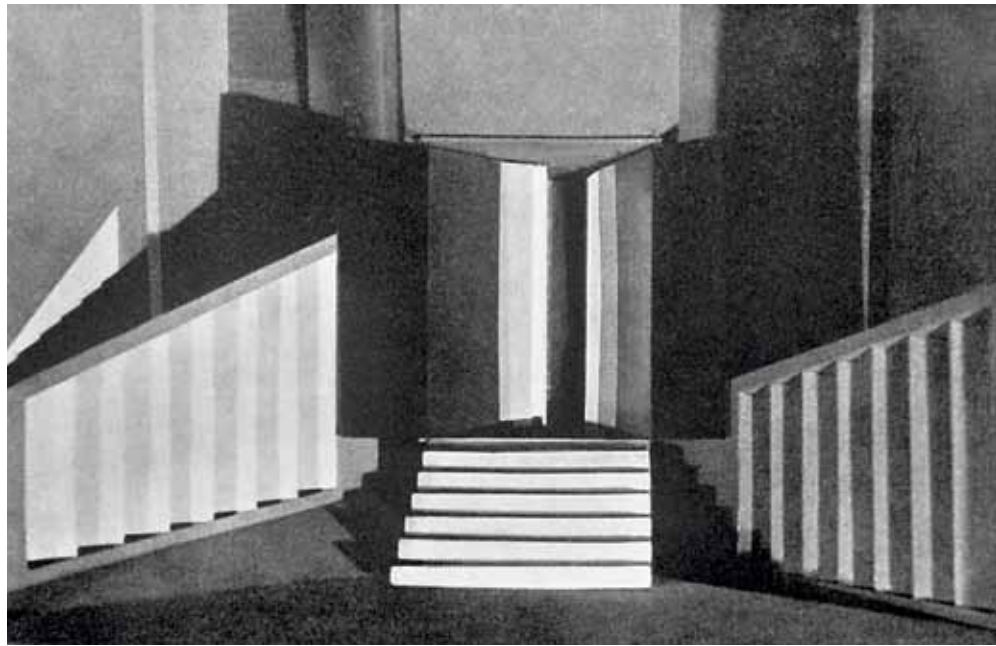




Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *The Negro (All God's Chillun Got Wings)* (Eugene O'Neill). Sketch for stage sets. 1929:

→ (pp 168–169)
Maquette — two possible transformations of one installation, scene from the play. 1929:



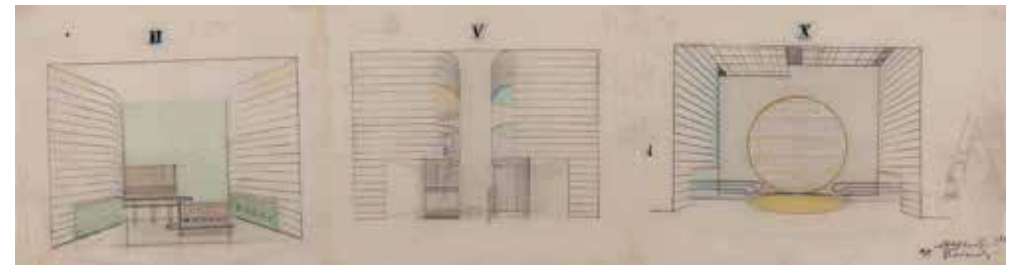
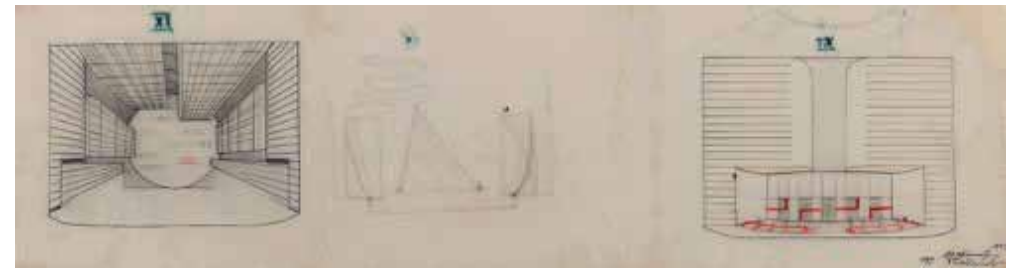
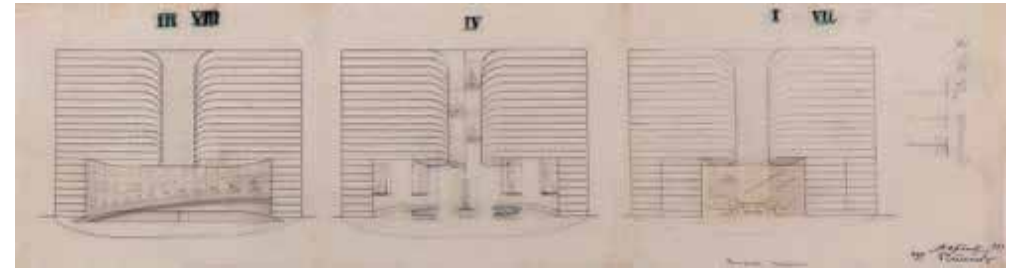




Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *The Beggars' Opera* (*The Threepenny Opera*) (Bertolt Brecht). Scenes from the play. 1930

is found.»²³ ■ As one can see, in the early 1930s, the Stenbergs saw Constructivism as a new form of activity, which clearly was coming closer to that sphere of creativity that we now call design. ■ Concurrently with their artistic design work, the Stenbergs also filled the roles of both architects and engineers at the Kamerny Theater. Thus, during the reconstruction of the theater, they designed the new facade of the building. They also developed the plans for the stage lighting and made the lanterns for it based on their own original design. ■ In 1927, the Stenbergs, who, by that point, were already well-reputed theater designers, got invited to the Moscow Music Hall. They designed the plans for the refitting of the auditorium (a decorative «cupola» aimed at improving acoustics) and of the stage (they removed the portal and suggested the construction of a «backdrop» with easily changeable coloring adaptable for the changes of numbers in the programs). In 1928, the Stenbergs created for the Music Hall a constructive installation for the play *The Salon of Saint Magdalene* (Nikolay Erdman); it was a double latticed wheel placed on its edge and with projecting horizontal platforms on which the action took place. ■ In 1926, the Stenbergs created several sample proposals for costumes based the principle of applique for the play *The Blue Blouse*.

Architectural designs for *The Beggars' Opera* (*The Threepenny Opera*). 1929

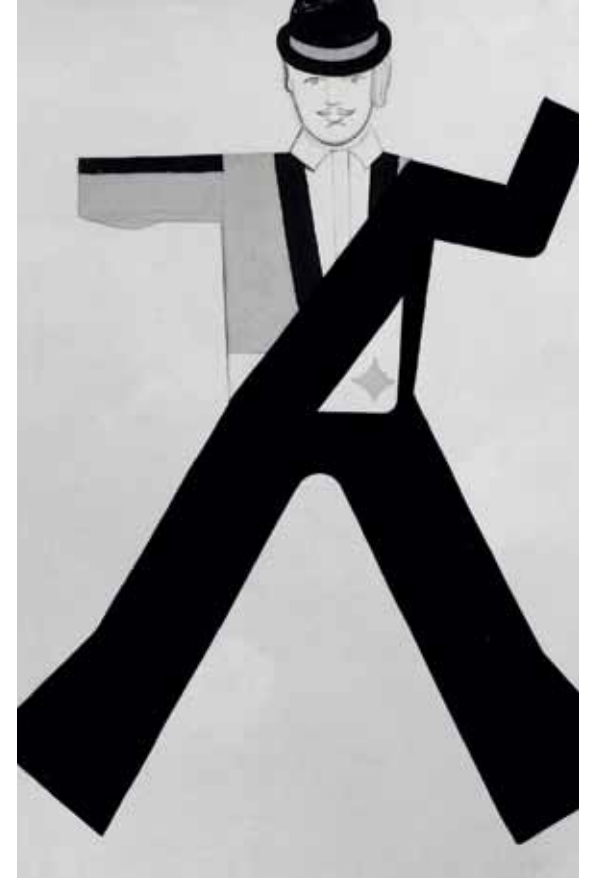
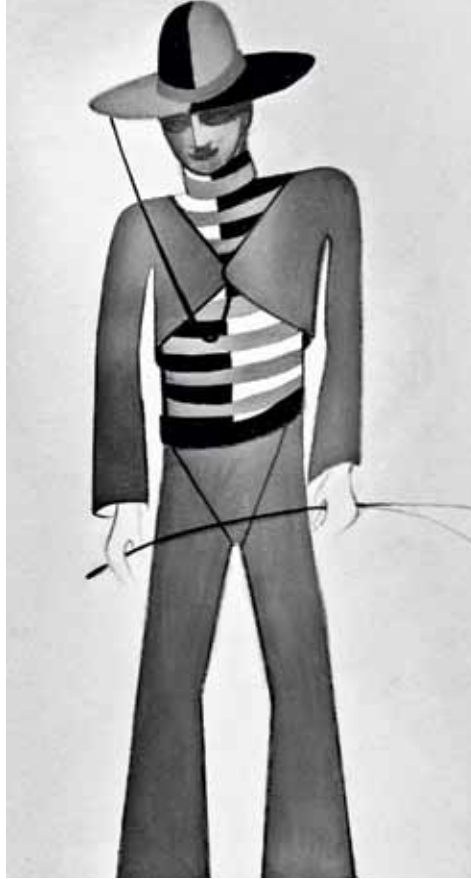


²³ *Artists' Brigade*, 1931, #7, p.14.



Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *The Beggars' Opera* (*The Threepenny Opera*) (Bertolt Brecht). Sketches for the stage sets and costumes. 1930

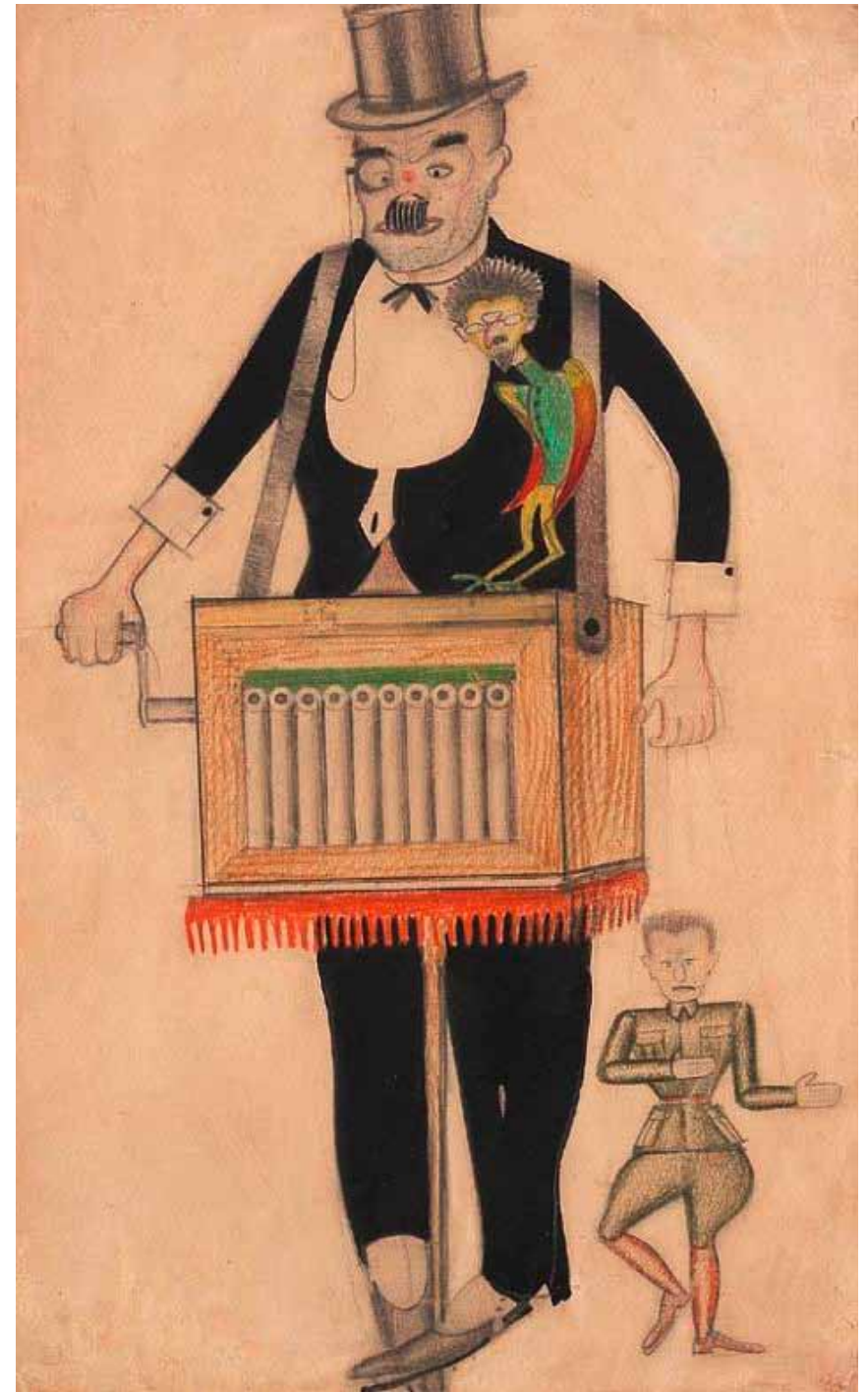




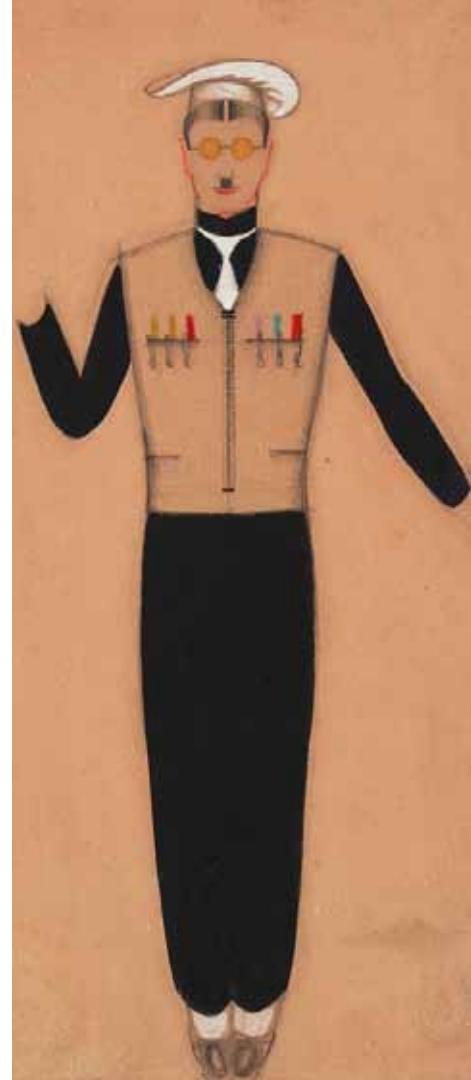
Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *The Beggars' Opera* (*The Threepenny Opera*) (Bertolt Brecht). Sketches for the costumes. 1930

Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *The Beggars' Opera* (*The Threepenny Opera*) (Bertolt Brecht). Sketches for the costumes. 1930

→ Sketch for the costume. (Organ grinder). 1928



Sketches for the costumes. 1928
(pp 178–181)



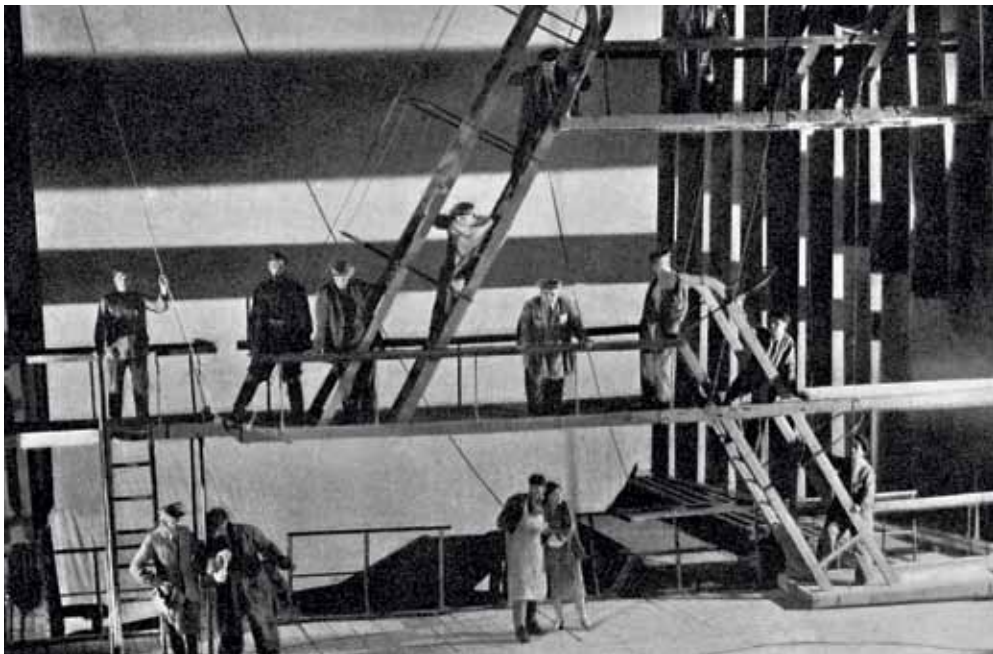
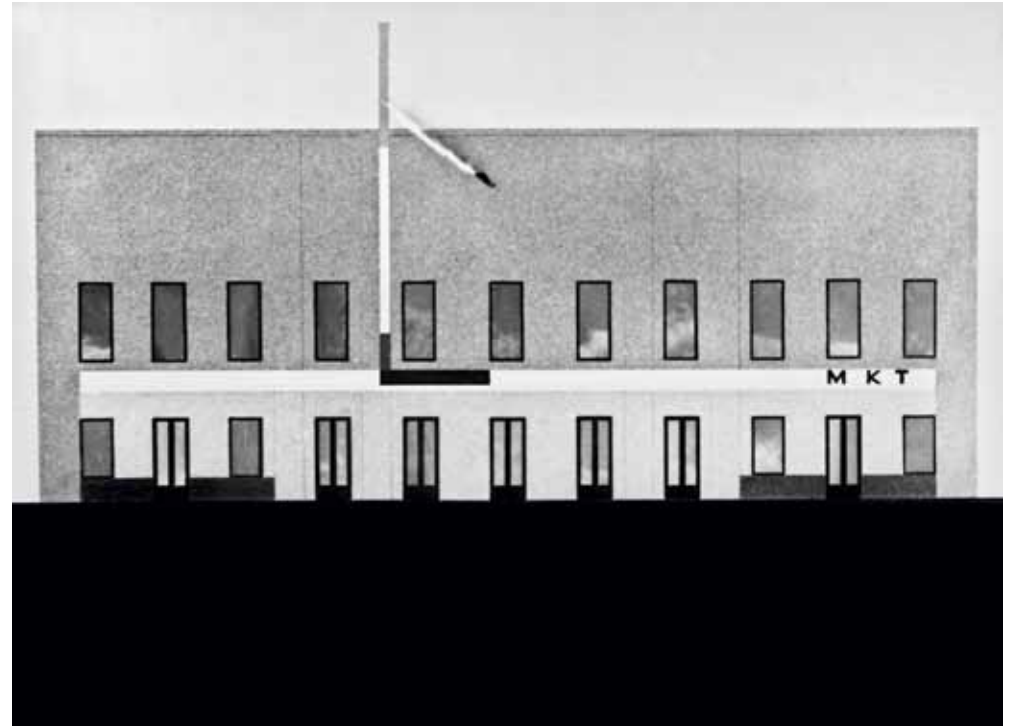
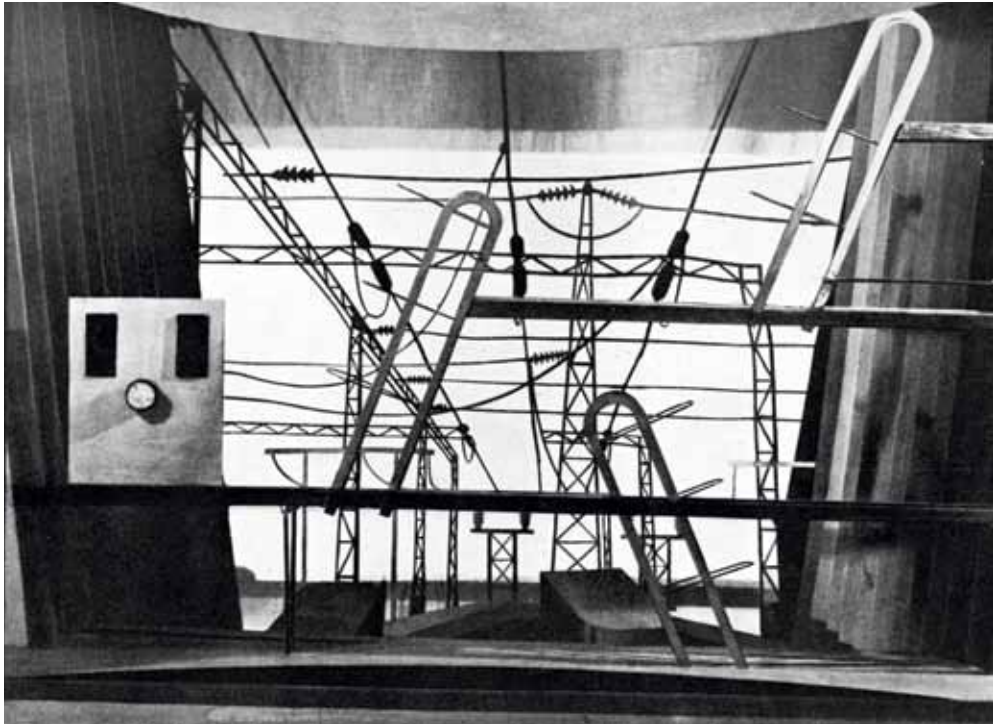


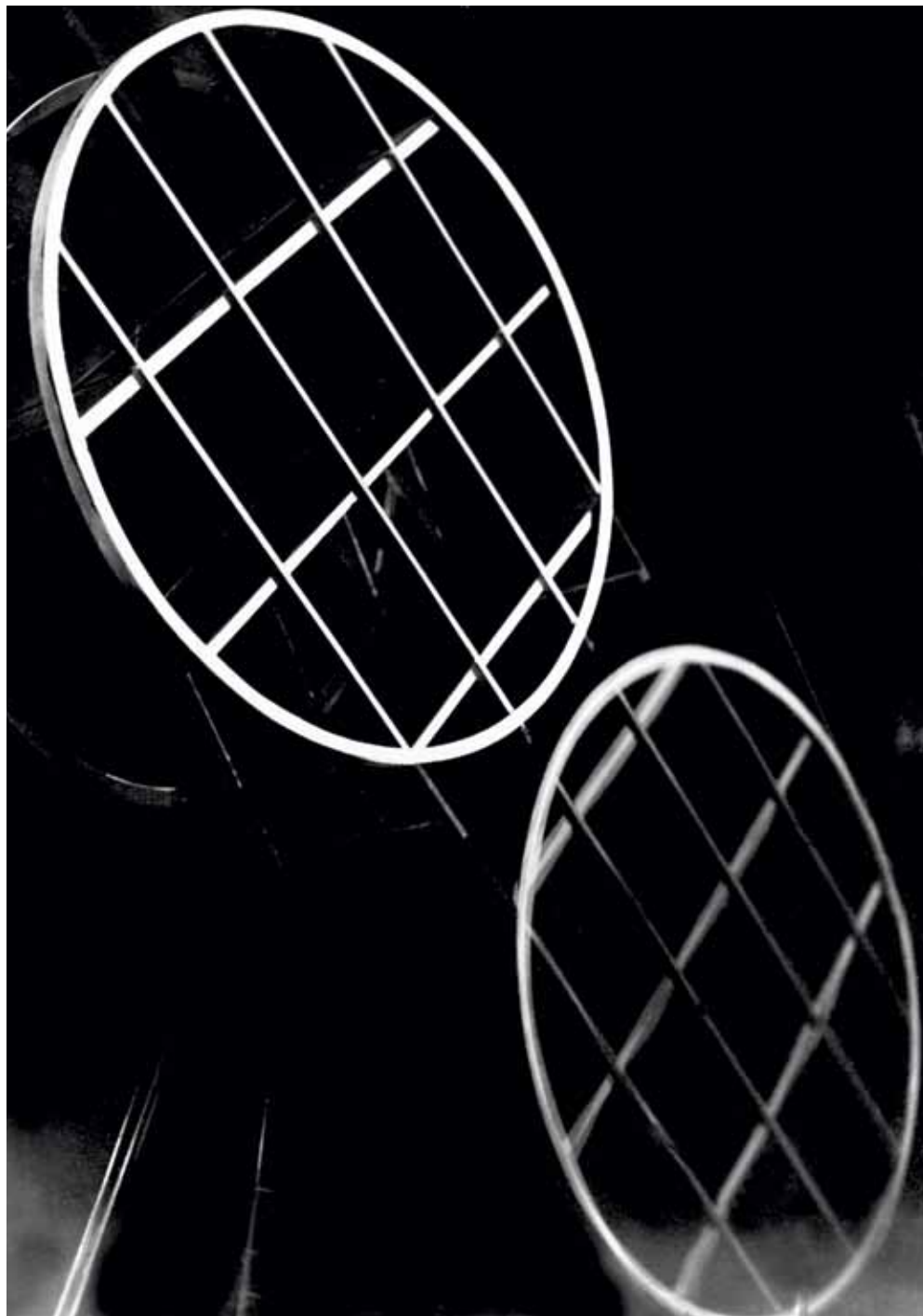
→ (p 182)
 Designs for the Kamerny Theater's production of *The Line of Fire* (Nikolay Nikitin). Maquette of the stage sets, scene from the play. 1931

→ (p 183)
 Facade of the Kamerny Theater (plan of reconstruction — realized). 1927

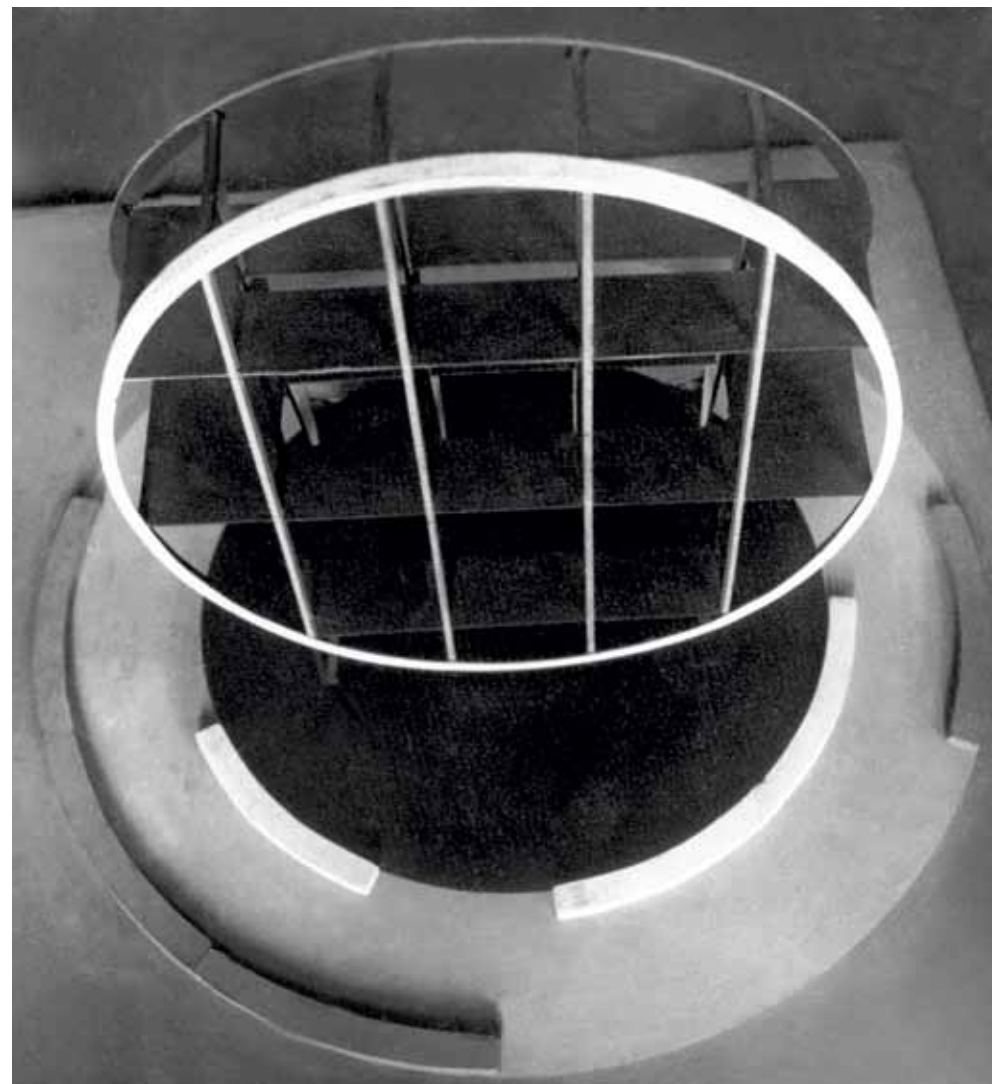
Plan for the refitting of the auditorium and stage of the Moscow Music Hall (mostly carried out). 1927







Constructive installation for the play *The Salon of Saint Magdalen* in the Moscow Music Hall. Maquette. A latticed circle stands vertically; it is narrower towards the top (photographed from above and on a reflective surface). 1928



→ (pp 187–201)
Movie posters

VIRTUOSOS OF THE FILM POSTER AND BOOK DESIGN

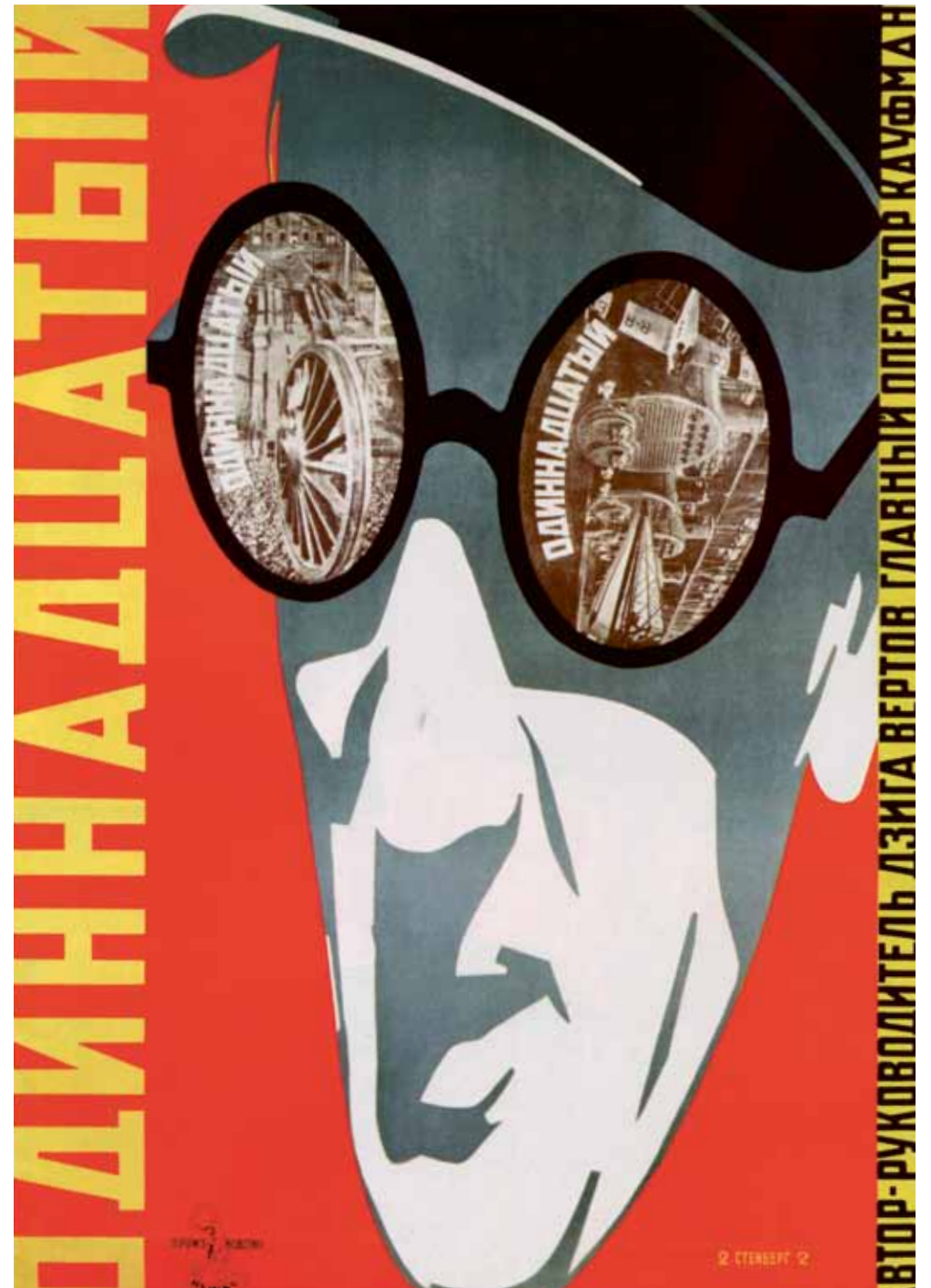
Posters, particularly film posters, were the second (after theater) main sphere of the Stenbergs' artistic activities in the second half of the 1920s and early 1930s. In those years, they were practically beyond competition in that area. What is more, if in their theater work, they stood out in comparison with many others by virtue of their constructive restraint in the use of the means and techniques of artistic expressiveness, then in poster design, they were probably among the most «spectacular.» «We produce,» they said in 1928, «a poster that is noticeable, that could, as they say, hit the viewer over the head, grab his attention, which is what's primarily expected of a poster. To reach this aim, we treat material with total freedom (which is also spurred on by the size of the poster), do not preserve proportionality either between several objects and figures or any of the individual details within them, flip figures, etc. — in a word, we use everything that could stop even a hurrying passerby.»²⁴ It was also on film posters that the «2 Stenberg 2» sign, which would subsequently become a familiar staple, first appeared. ■ From 1925 on, the Stenbergs created over 200 film posters. ■ In the making of posters, as Abram Efros wrote, the Stenbergs «knew no equals. They combined the pure play of forms with

the specific purpose of the poster by bringing together colorful voids, letters in various scripts, and a healthy number of objects. This height-

²⁴ «V masterskoy brat'yev Stenbergov»
[«In the Studio of the Brothers Stenberg»],
Rabis, 1928, #48, p. 8.

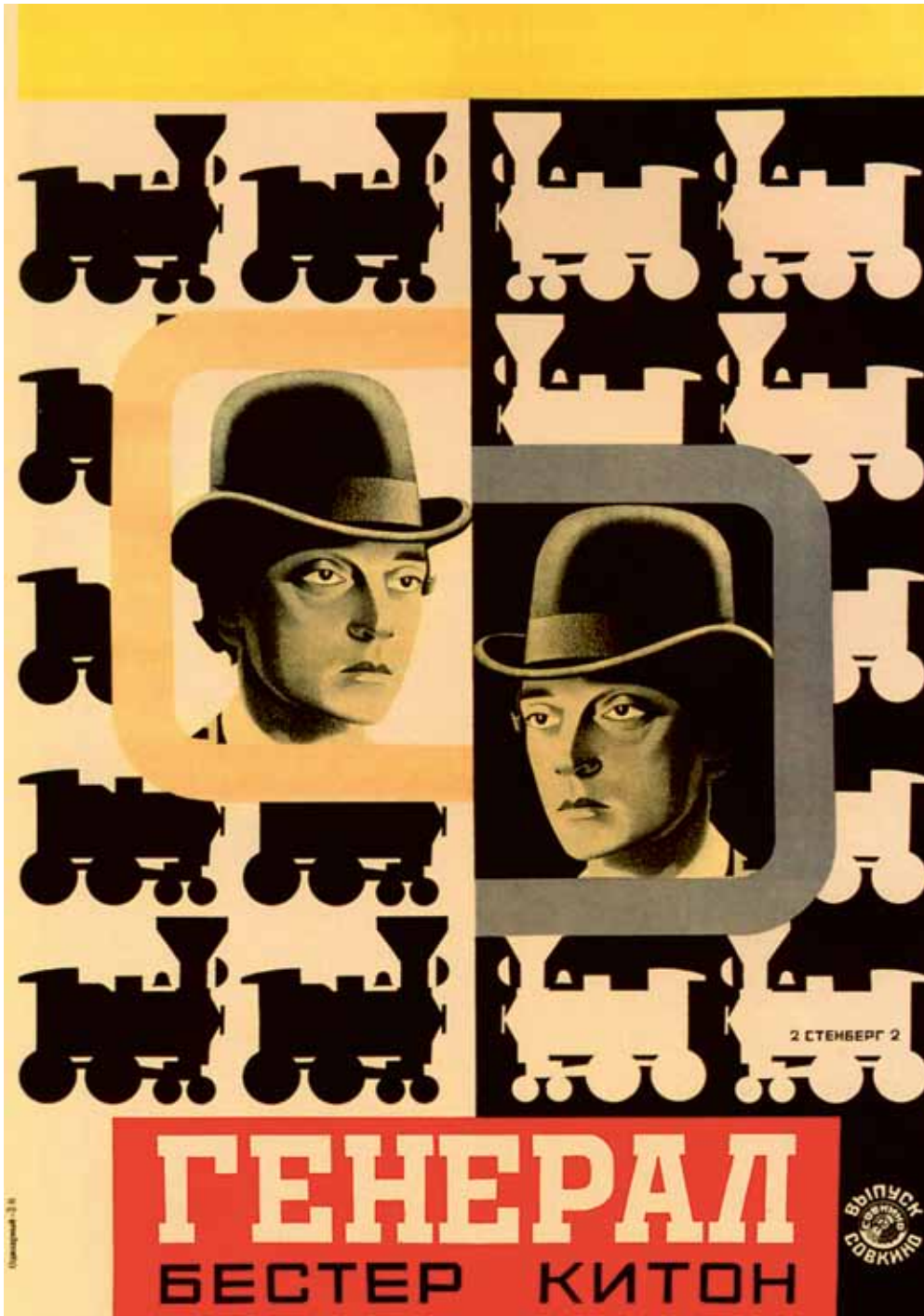


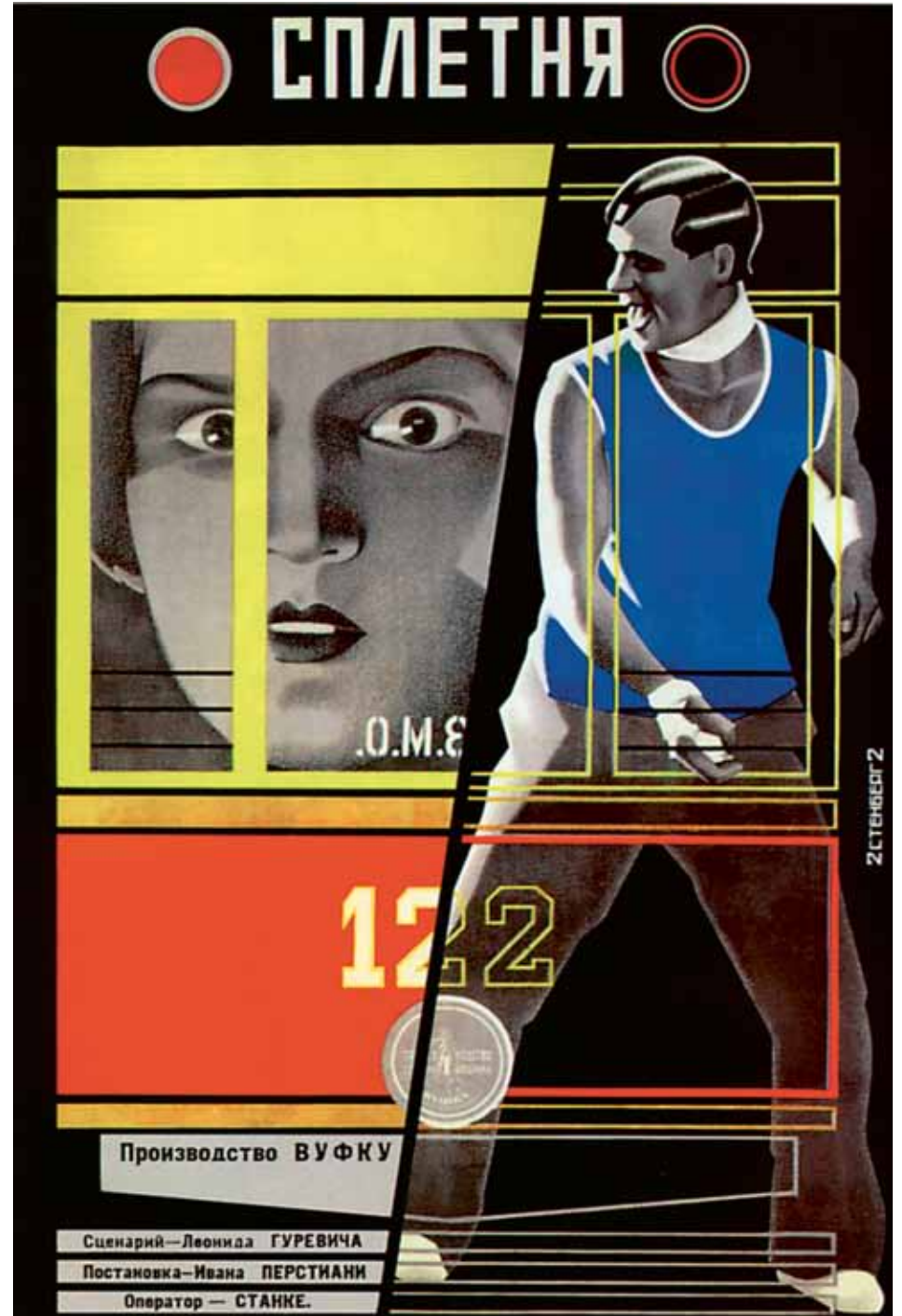
















← (pp 202–203)
Circus posters announcing the tour
visit of the *Negro-Operetta*.

Movie poster



ened the attention of passers by terrifically through the use of contrasts and coincidences.»²⁵ ■ «From these darkened sheets of paper,» Yu. Gerchuk wrote in analyzing the retrospective exhibition of the Stenbergs' film posters, «...what we see bursting through to us is the fast-paced and schematic, contrast-filled and naive world of silent cinema. The brothers Stenberg loved this world ... The conventional type-casting of silent cinema is three-dimensional to the greatest extent of poster naturalism, the sharp gestures of on-screen pantomime are stylized to the point of cartoon

²⁵ A. Eφος, *op. cit.* p. XI.





Exhibition poster. 1932

Political posters



clarity. The artists did not put themselves above the film and its viewers. They were such viewers themselves and watched it the same way that everyone else — through the flickering of the alluring patchwork of frames, not shying away from the plot, not frowning on either straightforward comedy or melodramatic sentimentality. One of the reasons their posters became classics lies in this straightforward democratism of their approach to the task. The atmosphere of the

films, the naive romanticism of silent cinema were conveyed from within, with excitement and liveliness.»²⁶ ■ In 1972, the Stenberg's film

²⁶ Yu. Gerchuk, «Klassiki plakatnogo iskusstva» [«The Classics of Poster Art»], *Dekorativnoye iskusstvo SSSR* [Decorative Art of the USSR], 1971, #11.

Sketch for a poster — Bull



Political poster

posters were exhibited at the Studio for Applied Graphics at the Moscow Workshop for Graphic Art. And again, writing for the same magazine as above (*DI*), Yu. Gerchuk responded to the exhibition: «The yellowing, worn posters of the silent cinema era are the famous works of the brothers Vladimir and Georgy Stenberg. And they have preserved their qualities as advertising to this day — after the exhibition, one really wants to see all of these forgotten films. The Stenbergs' posters are remarkably multifaceted. They astound with their freedom, their lack of inhibition connected to any compositional, color, or plot clichés. Their very clear overall image is created not through the repetition of a technique, but through a common feel for material, what one could call 'the feel of cinema.' The photographic believability of the actor and the schematic dynamics of the action, both so particularly characteristic of old silent films, found a surprisingly precise correspondence in the visual structure of the Stenbergs' posters.»²⁷

■ In the arena of film posters, the Stenbergs, in the opinion of D. Aranovich, «created not just their own style, but also a whole epoch of completely unique and invariably artistic posters, which have already received worldwide acclaim.» The Stenbergs were «the creators of a whole school.» From among the central techniques that the Stenbergs used for their posters, Aranovich emphasizes four: photomontage; «dissolve» («the superimposition of one transparent representational surface on another»); schematic images and color; and the use

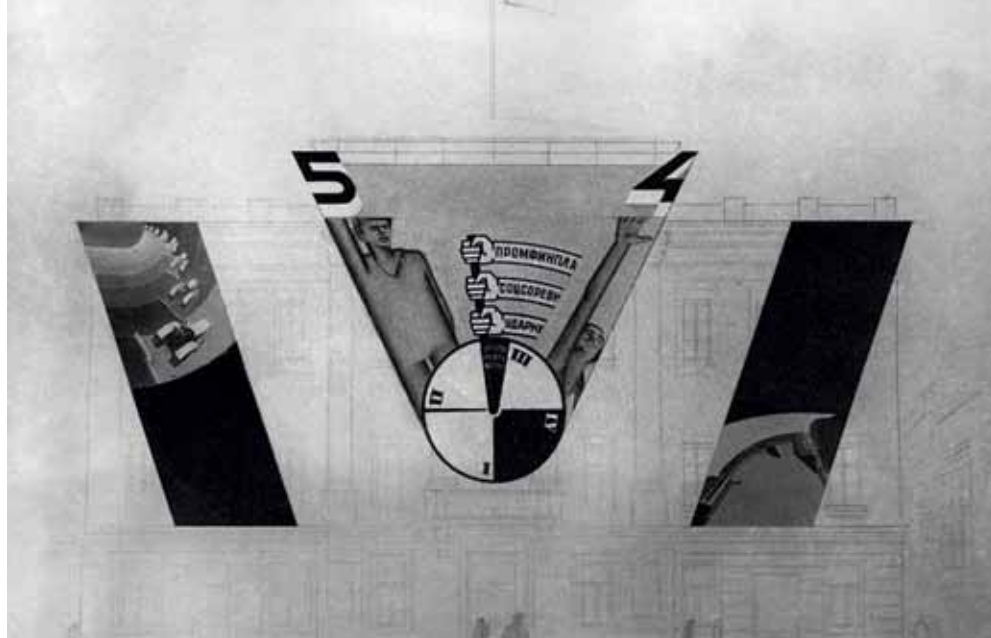
of Expressionist techniques.²⁸ The Stenbergs also executed political, theatrical, and exhibition posters, making a considerable contribution to this sphere of artistic activity. A research-

²⁷ Yu. Gerchuk, «Klassiki plakatnogo iskusstva» [The Classics of Poster Art]; *Dekorativnoye iskusstvo SSSR* [Decorative Art of the USSR], 1971, #11, p. 22.

²⁸ D. Aranovich, op. cit., p. 20-21.



Holiday decorations for the city on the theme «The first five-year plan in four years.» Facade of the House of Unions. 1930



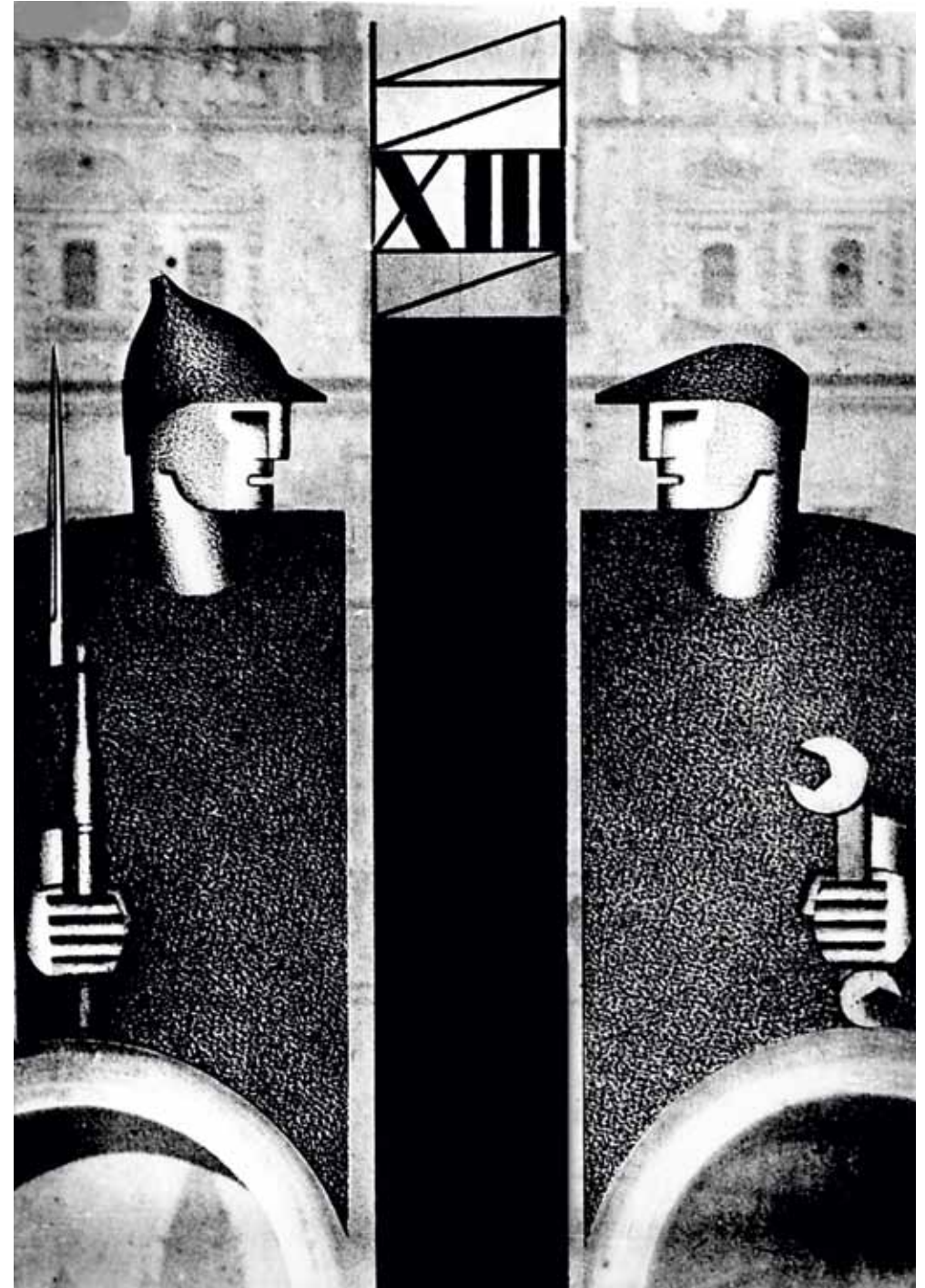
→
Sketch for holiday decorations of the city

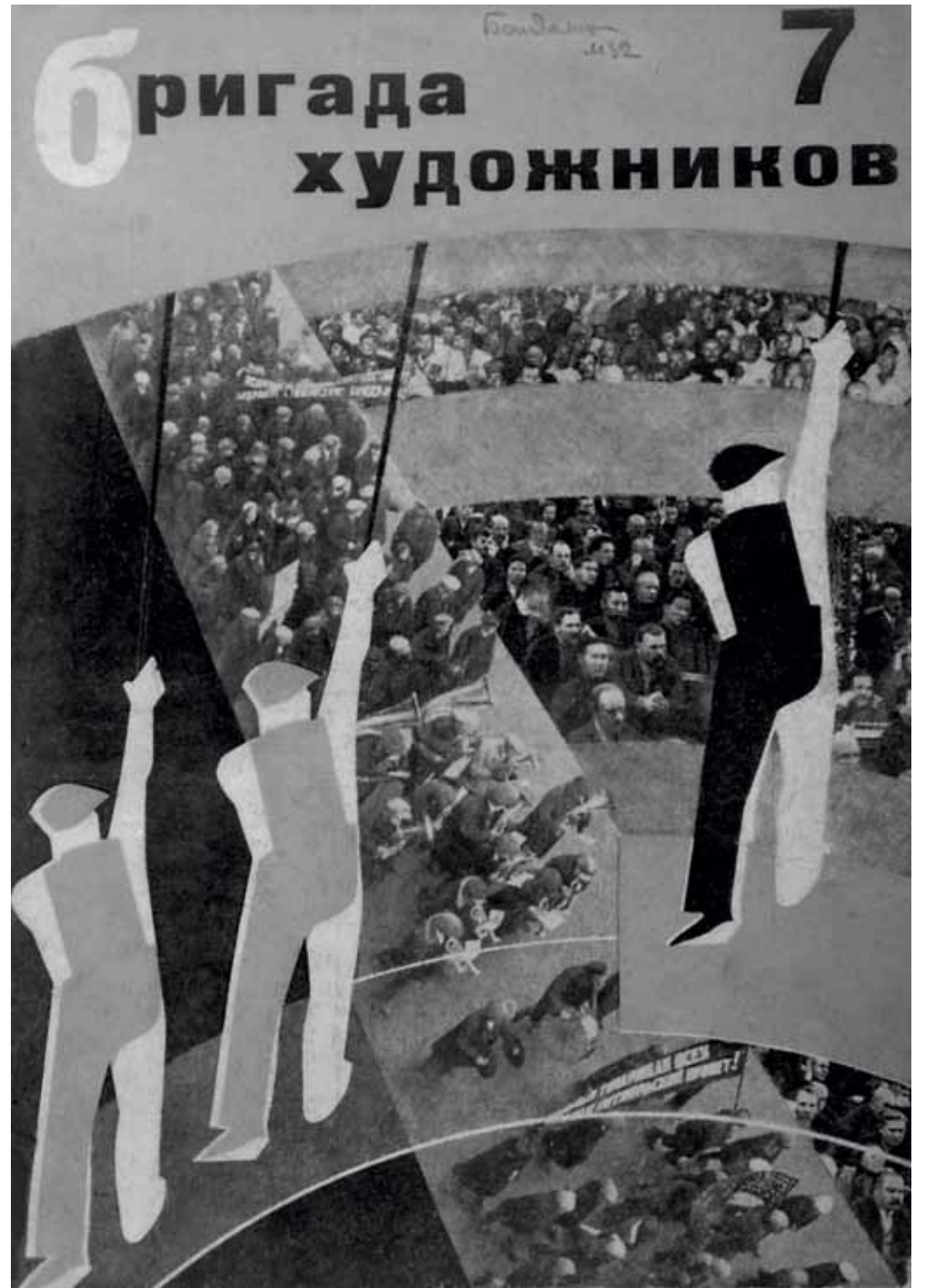
→ (p 212)
Preparatory photo template of the poster for the film [Hygiene of a Woman](#)

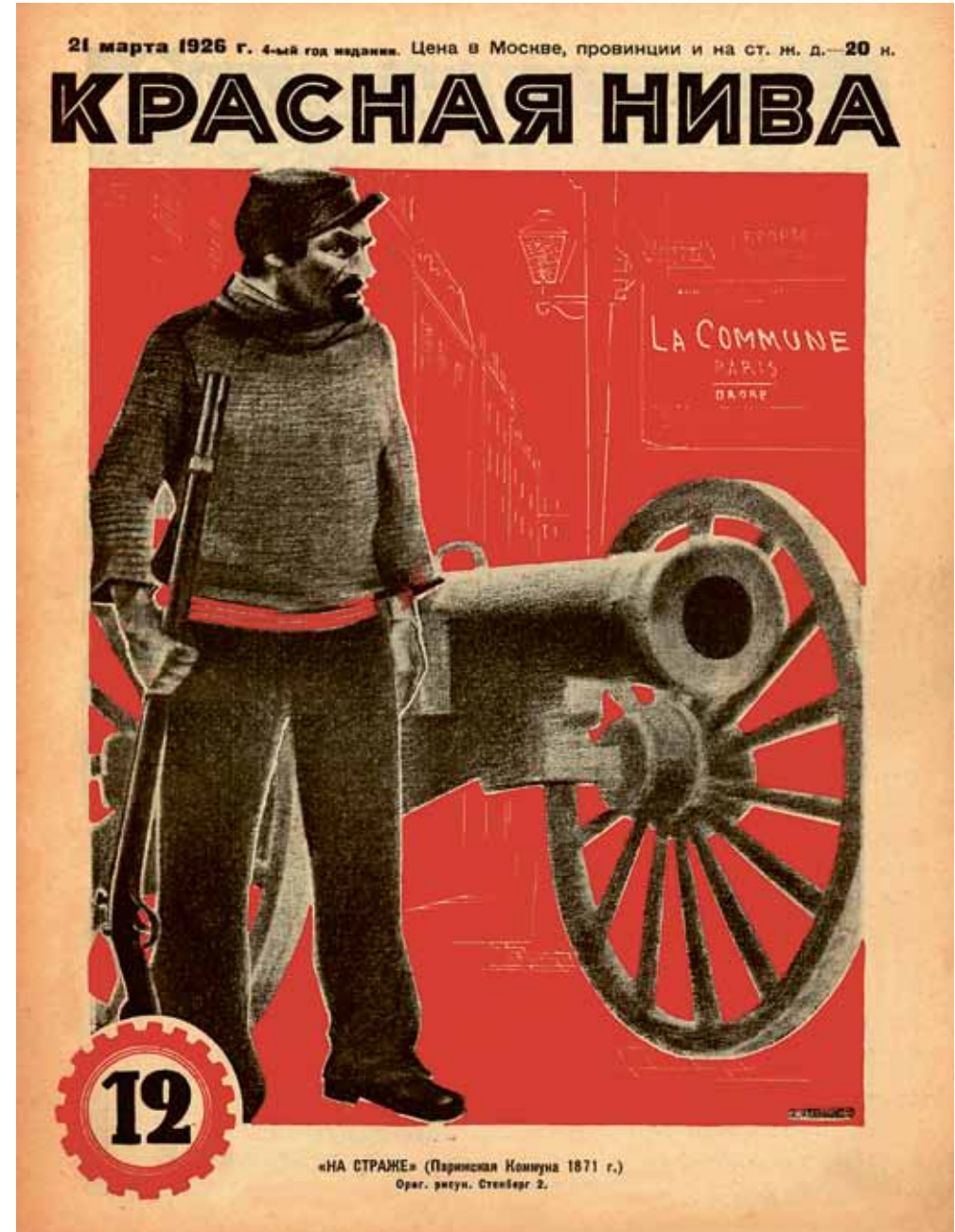
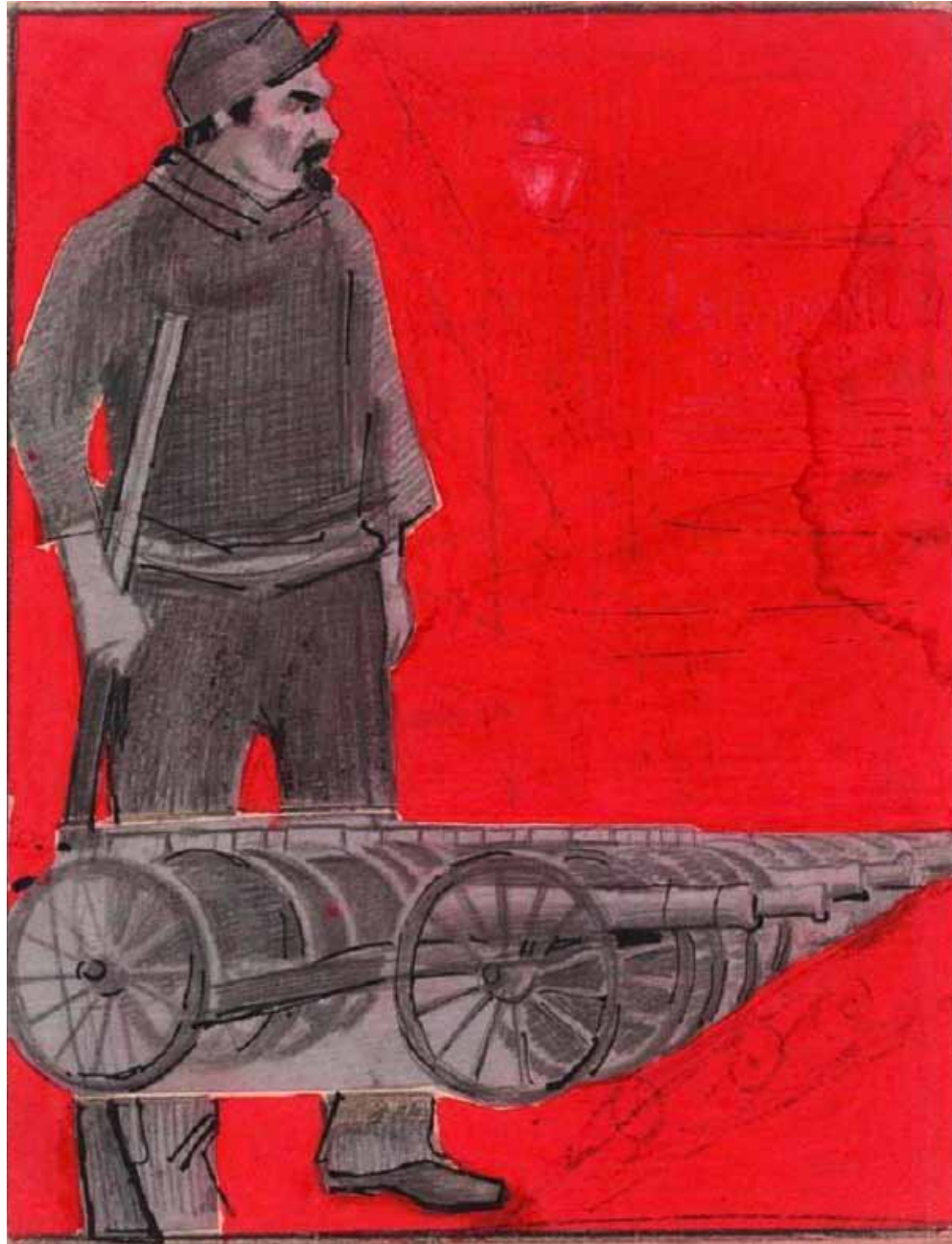
→ (p 213)
Covers of the magazine *Brigada khudozhnikov* [Artists' Brigade]

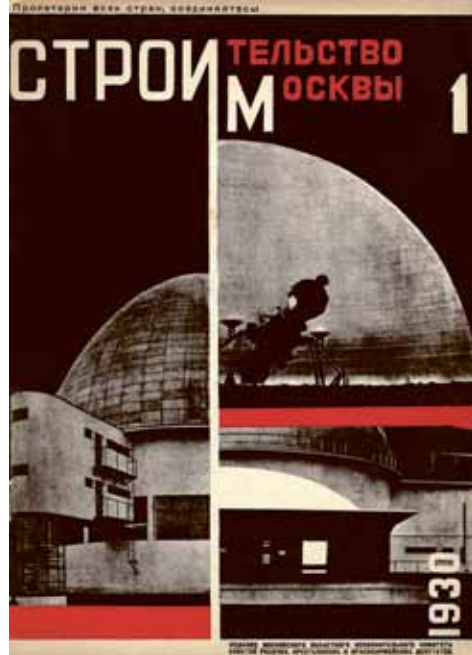
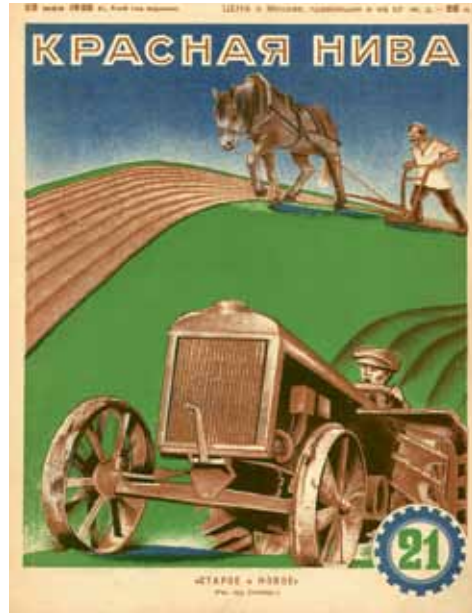
er working in our days, V. Lyakhov, judged this contribution thus: «The work of the brothers Vladimir and Georgy Stenberg is the most significant oeuvre in the history of the establishment of Soviet cinema and theater poster art of the 1920s and 30s. What characterizes all of the Stenbergs' best works are the numerous inventive finds in the sphere of poster composition, exciting subjects, and decorative expressiveness. Young artists worked alongside them, and many of them experienced the positive influence of the talent of the brothers Stenberg.»²⁹ ■ Also close to this sphere of the Stenbergs' artistic activity was

²⁹ [Sovetskiy reklamnyy plakat 1917–1932 \[Soviet Advertising Posters 1917–1932\], Moscow, 1972, p. 11.](#)









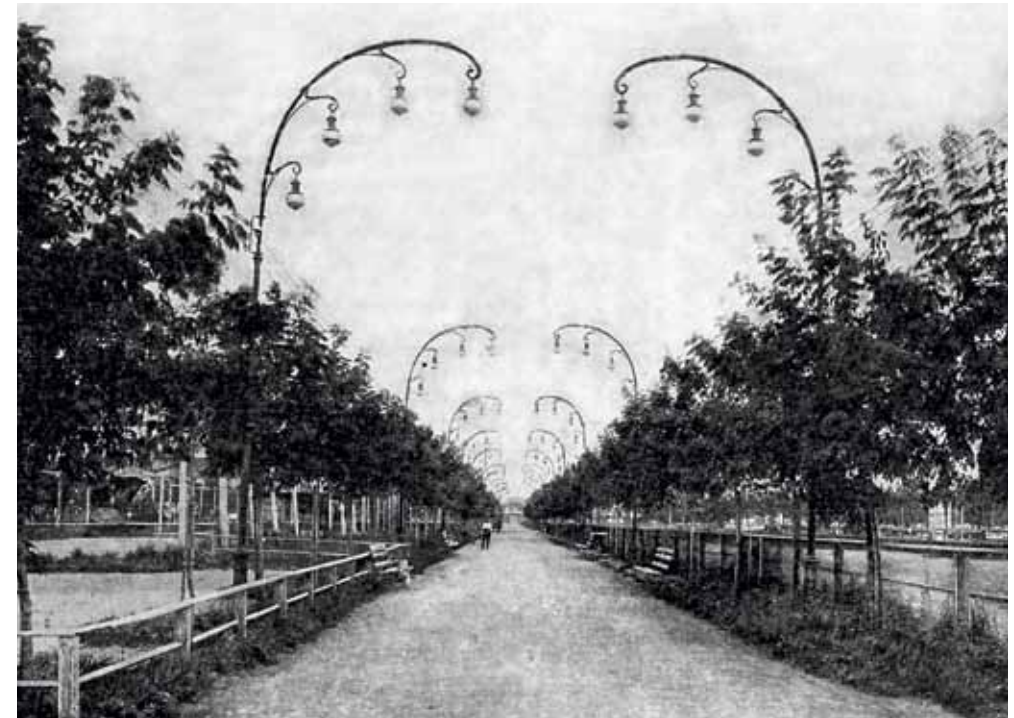
← (pp 214–215)
 Scetch and cover of the magazine
Krasnaya niva [*The Red Field*].

← (pp 216–217)
 Covers of the magazines *Krasnaya niva*
 [*The Red Field*], *Stroitel'stvo Moskv*
 [*Construction of Moscow*],
 1929–1930

their graphic design for publications, primarily magazine covers (for example, the cover of the magazine *Brigada khudozhnikov* [*Artists' Brigade*], more than ten covers of the magazine *Stroitel'stvo Moskv* [*Construction of Moscow*] in 1929–1931, and the covers of the magazine *Krasnaya niva* [*The Red Field*] in 1926–1928). ■ The spectrum of the Stenberg's artistic decoration work was broad. They took part in creating the design for the Central Park of Culture and Leisure [Gorky Park] in Moscow. For the Park's opening, they decorated pavilions left over from the 1923 Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy, painting murals on the facades, adapting the interiors of the pavilions for new functions, developing proposal designs for the fountains and lamps in the Park (Lily-of-the-Valley Alley), and decorating the territory of the Park for special occasions (Railroad Workers' Day, etc.). ■ One of the spheres of the Stenberg's activity was connected with the outfitting, decoration, and color scheme design for the interiors of new buildings, for instance the VEO [Vsesoyuznoye elektrotekhnicheskoye ob'edinenie (All-Soviet Electrotechnical Association)] complex in Moscow. As was noted in the magazine *Stroitel'stvo Moskv* [*Construction of Moscow*], «this work had the strongest of influences on all Soviet architects and artists working on interiors.»³⁰ The Stenberg's also designed the interiors of the newly built Moscow Planetarium. ■ A job that the Stenberg's worked on for many years was the decoration of the Red Square for public holidays. They first designed decorations for it in 1928, and then for the next thirty five years (until 1963), the Stenberg's plans (and, following Georgy Avgustovich's death in 1933, Vladimir Avgustovich's plans) were used to create dec-

³⁰ *Stroitel'stvo Moskv* [*Construction of Moscow*], 1933, #10–11, p. 38.

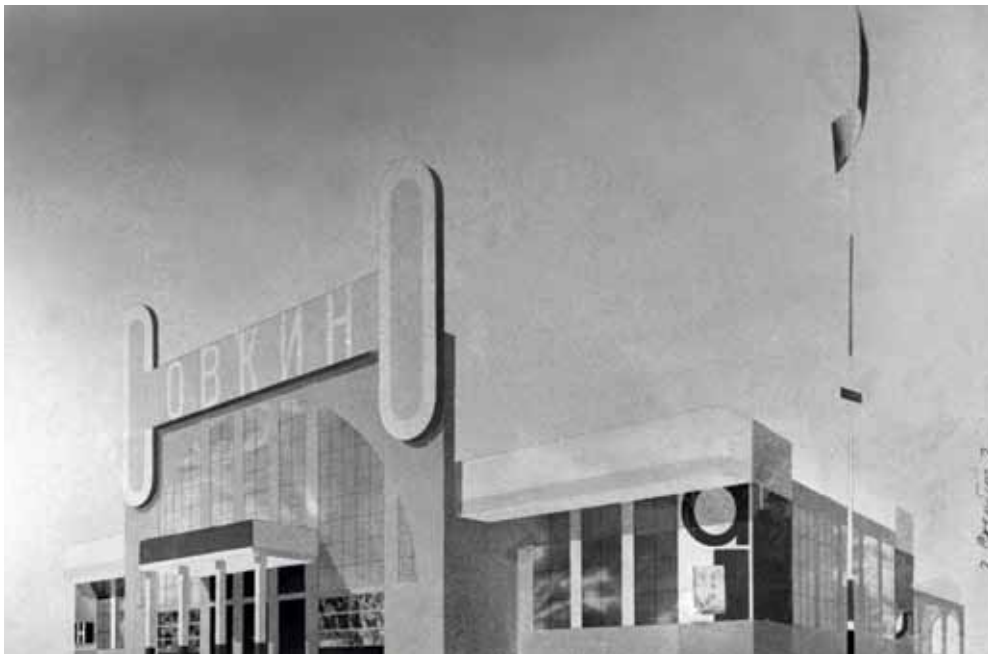
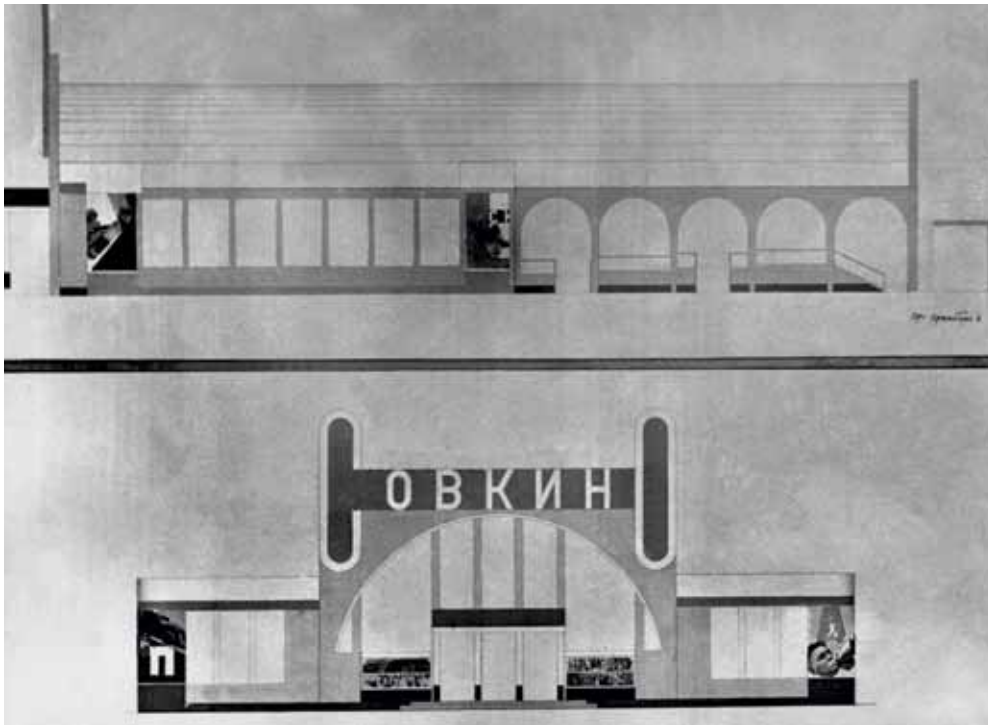
Lily-of-the-Valley Alley in TsPKIO
 [Central Park of Culture and
 Leisure or Gorky Park] in Moscow



orations for the May Day and October celebrations, as well as for other public events (the welcoming of the survivors of the SS Chelyuskin expedition, International Youth Day, Moscow's 800th anniversary, Victory Day parade, and others). It was the Stenberg's who proposed moving the main decorations from the side of the Kremlin wall to the facade of the GUM department store and developed the spatial silhouette and color and light structure of this decorative scheme, which subsequently became traditional.



Plan for the reconstruction of a building (a hangar) into a cinema in the town of Rybinsk. Facades, perspectival view. 1930



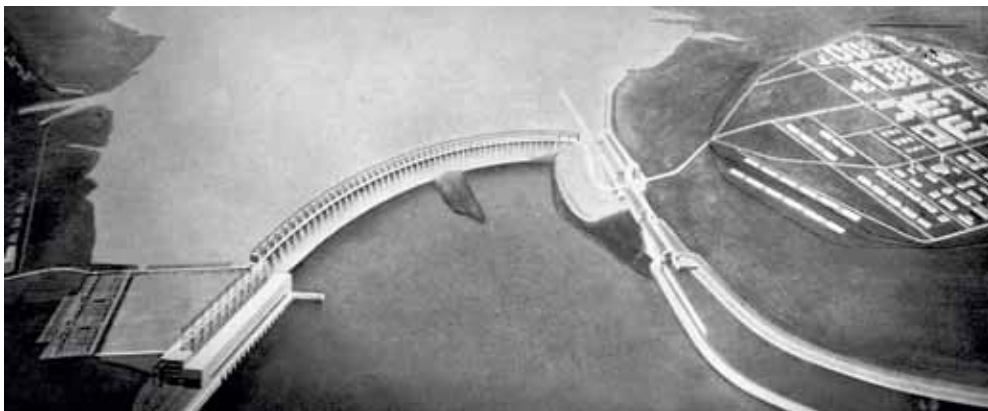
THE CLASSICS OF MODERN ARCHITECTURAL GRAPHIC ART

Yet another separate sphere of the Stenberg's creative pursuits was their work in the field of architecture. At first collaborating closely with architects when working on outfitting and decorating interiors and building complexes, already by the second half of the 1920s, the Stenbergs began to test out their skills by first designing facades of buildings undergoing reconstruction (Kamerny Theater, a cinema in the town of Rybinsk). They then began to take part in architectural planning as such (the competition project for the Palace of the Soviets). ■ In the sphere of architecture, however, what is of greatest interest is the Stenberg's work on developing techniques for architectural graphics. Here, they introduced much that was new and original. ■ Already at the stage of the emergence of modern architecture (in the 1920s), it became evident that the new architecture demands a new graphic language. Major architects (Le Corbusier, Leonidov) or artistic movements (Constructivism, Rationalism) were developing their own graphic language. But it still was, nevertheless, a language useable only for those inside the profession. It clearly lacked the means and techniques that would help one see by looking at the drawn plans what a building with predominating simple volumes, extensive

glazing, and large, decor-free wall surfaces would look like in real life. The Stenbergs, who received already finished blueprints from architects, tried to find such techniques of visual presentation that would make it clear even to a non-professional what the building would look like in real life. They aimed to give the full illusion of a real building, which, in effect, focused and sharpened their attention on the specific graphic qualities of the new architecture and the role of certain of its particular expressive means. The Stenbergs sensed a different role for light and shadow, the texture of surface and plane, and the glass screen, which was unlike the role of these materials in traditional architecture. The Stenbergs, for example, were the first to notice that the place of the play of light and shadow is taken over by reflection. In making the perspectival views for the Vesnin brothers' competition designs for Dnieproges [Dniepr Hydroelectric Station] and a theater in Kharkov, the Stenbergs montaged into the glass screens of the facade photographs of a sky with clouds, thus bringing the impression produced by the projection closer to the real impression made by the erected building. ■ In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Stenbergs executed perspectival and axonometric views for the competition and commissioned projects of the Vesnin brothers, N. Ladovsky, I. Nikolaev, A. Mordvinov, N. Kolli, and others. The Stenbergs' perspectival and axonometric projections stood out among the other architectural drawings of that time due to their veracity in conveying the future appearance of the building. This was particularly important in a situation when the new architecture had not yet developed techniques of graphic presentation of its

projects suitable for a non-professional viewership, which was becoming of utmost significance when entering into competition with the proponents of traditionalist movements who already had perfected techniques of dramatic project presentation at their disposal. ■ The Stenbergs connected their work in the field of architectural graphic art with the general tendency of the introduction of scientific and technological achievements into artistic activity. They urged others to use the new representational means in order to propagandize that which was yet to be created in accordance with the first Five-Year Plan. «Why should we not have an impressive document in art production, a culture-film [i.e. film — Translator] of a kind » they asked. «We will be told that photography or those very same culture-films, for that matter, will make more accurate documents. But the problem is that both a photograph and a culture-film can only fix something that has already been finished, i.e. already created and ready, whereas through representational means, one can present something that does not yet exist, that is only planned. An example of such a picture can be seen in our «perspective-picture» *Dnieprostroj*, in which we depicted what the finished Dnieprostroj [dam] will look like based on the existing construction plans and projections.»³¹ ■ The perspectival view of Dnieproges — a birds-eye view panorama — was the height of the Stenbergs' architectural graphic art. It was executed in record time and utilized original techniques of constructing perspective that the Stenbergs invented themselves. ■ In a conversation with me, Vladimir Avgustovich told the story of how it happened. ■ A. Vesnin created numerous

³¹ V. and G. Stenberg, «Umri, mol'bert» [«Die, easel!», *Rabis*, 1930, #8, p. 10.



Architectural graphic art by V. and G. Stenberg. Perspectival views of Dnieprostoi and of a car factory and a sotsgorod [socialist city] attached to it in Nizhny Novgorod

sketches; then, the version most suitable for a perspective drawing was chosen. For Dnieproges, the Stenbergs used their own methodology for constructing perspective. The Vesnins had asked them to create a perspective from a bird's eye view. All there was to work with was the blueprint with the overall plan. This turned out to be sufficient for the Stenbergs. They spread the blueprint on the floor and looked at it through rectangular openings, looking for a point of view. They marked out on the blueprint the contour visible through the opening and distributed it on a grid, which they then straightened out and moved to a stretcher, painting onto it details from the blueprint. The process turned out to be quick and easy. When invited to the first viewing, the Vesnins were surprised by the speed of the construction of the perspective, which, to boot, had no construction lines aside from the grid. ■ In the 1920s and early 1930s, the Stenbergs had traversed in the sphere of object-based and visual art a path that was characteristic of many masters of the Soviet avant-garde. They experimented intensively at the stage «from representation — to construction» and then implemented in practice the discoveries they made into different spheres of object-based and visual art — theater, posters, book design, interior decoration, public event decoration, architecture, and architectural design graphics. ■ In the 1930s, when decorative and traditionalist tendencies predominated in the sphere of object-based and visual art, Vladimir Stenberg (alongside his interior design work — he designed the interiors of summer houses [*dachas*], for example) turned to one of the spheres of artistic construction where the «ornamentalist' tendencies had not

manifested themselves. Working as a consultant for the Central Railcar Design Bureau of the NKPS [Narodny komissariat putey soobshcheniya (the People's Commissariat of Transport Routes)], he introduced a series of design suggestions for projected plans of railway cars, subway and electric train cars, tramways, etc. Thus, for example, he suggested that the top shelves of sleeping cars should not be raised at an angle, as had been customary before, but should be turned down so that the space of the carriage would not be reduced visually. He also developed the interior outfitting, exterior appearance, and the ventilation system for the new type of metro cars in the second round of their construction. ■ In the years that followed, Vladimir Stenberg turned many a time to design — that sphere of artistic activity that he helped to establish in the 1920s, but which in the 1930s–1950s was not viewed in our country as an independent professional field. In the post-war years, for example, he radically redesigned the exteriors of the two motorcycles (one domestically produced, one foreign) that belonged to him and his son. The sidecar, gas tank, and fenders were reworked, the engine covered up, etc., and this stirred a lot of interest on Moscow streets from aficionados of motorized vehicles, who invariably wondered what unknown makes of motorcycles these were.

CONCLUSION (LEGENDS AND FACTS)

As makers of the avant-garde, the Stenbergs found themselves at the roots of two of the most important form-making and style-forming phenomena of the 1920s: 1) the formation of one of the main movements of artistic avant-garde — Constructivism; 2) the formation of design. The first phenomenon was connected primarily to the stage «from representation — to construction,» while the second was connected to the stage «from construction — to production.» ■ The first third of the 20th century holds a special place in the history of art in terms of the richness of its stratum of ideas for form-making. It would probably be difficult to find in the past another period when in such a short time, such a large number of fundamentally new form-making ideas had appeared. This enormous legacy, which was not realized in its own time, has turned into a firm foundation for the modern style, and in the course of more than half a century, its form-making potential has gradually been explored by artists as it came into broad use in scientific and creative endeavors (publications, exhibitions). ■ One has to put aside the artists' subjective contemporaneous perceptions of the processes of form-making in the 1920s, when it seemed to many that a new synthetic art (Kandinsky called it «monumental art») was being created. Instead, one has to evaluate that period based on its actual results, in which case one can note

a number of general laws and patterns in the establishment of the modern style. These are: 1 — an increased closeness and organic cooperation of the style-forming processes in the artistic and the engineering and technical spheres of creativity; 2 — the appearance of a new kind of creative activity — design; 3 — a new interrelationship between different types of object-based and artistic work and the formation of a new autonomous layer of decorative artistic techniques, which interact in complex, multifaceted ways with architecture and design that are otherwise nondecorative. ■ From the point of view of the general direction of INKhUK's work, all of its activities can be divided into three stages: the year 1920, when Kandinsky's conception was used as the foundation of the institute's work; the year 1921, when Rodchenko led INKhUK and when with active participation from the Stenbergs, the Moscow school of Constructivists was being formed at the Institute; and the end, the years 1921–1924, when INKhUK's work was determined by the theorists of production art (the heads of INKhUK's Administration were, successively, O. Brik, B. Arvatov, and O. Brik). ■ The theorists, however, divided INKhUK's activities into only two stages, considering the stage «from Representation — to Construction» to be transitional. As a result, first in the press of that period and then later in the works of modern-day researchers, everything essential in the formation of production art and Constructivism has come to be associated with the work of the theorists. The work of the artists (including the Stenbergs) in this approach became barely more than an illustration to the various slogans or propositions put forth by the theorists. ■ I think that the mate-

rial cited in this book has already persuaded the reader that this was not the case, that artists were not a passive but an active force in the process of formation of Constructivism and production art, and that they contributed not only in the questions of form-making, but in the development of theoretical concepts, as well. ■ And yet it has been necessary more than once to prove this obvious fact since a lot of legends and myths have accumulated in the history of the formation of Constructivism. ■ Let us consider just one fact, which is well known through publications and has become a myth. ■ In analyzing the process by which artists found a «way out» of painting into the object world, Nikolay Tarabukin wrote in March 1922: «Here, one has to mention the remarkable meeting of the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK), which took place on November 24, 1921, at which Osip Brik gave a talk about INKhUK's transition from [the jurisdiction of] the Commissariat of Enlightenment to the High Council for National Economy [Vysshyy sovet narodnogo khozyaistva]. Twenty five masters of «left» art, having rejected easelism as a goal in itself and having joined the productivist platform, acknowledged that such a transition was not only necessary, but also inevitable.»³² ■ And this is what was written on the same subject in the INKhUK report published in that same year of 1923 (B. Arvatov was the Chairman of INKhUK's Presidium at the time): «The day of November 24th was a remarkable moment...in INKhUK's work, a day, undoubtedly, of great historical significance. On this day, Osip Brik gave his talk, in which he proposed that the artists who have moved away from easelism

³² N. Tarabukin, *Ot mol'berta k mashine* [From the Easel to the Machine], Moscow, 1923, pp. 17–18.

should get started on real practical work in production ... Twenty five leading masters of «left» art under the pressure of the revolutionary conditions of modernity rejected the «pure forms of art» and acknowledged self-sufficient easelism to be a spent force and their own activities purely as painters pointless. The new master put forth his productivist banner.»³³ ■ Gradually, in the press, there came together a certain legend about this «historical» meeting of INKhUK. In contemporary scholarship, this «remarkable» fact passes from article to article and from book to book... L. Zhadova, in her 1968 article, after citing the aforementioned passage from the INKhUK report wrote, «thus, already at that time, the participants of the events themselves realized the significance of the overturn that had happened at INKhUK.»³⁴ And the art historian E. Rakitina began her 1975 article about L. Popova as follows: «On November 24, 1921, at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture, a remarkable event took place. Twenty five artists, both

famous ones and young ones, artists who not long before were taking part in exhibitions, acknowledged their easel art as purposeless and passed a resolution to go into production.»³⁵ ■ It all seemed to come out looking a little too simple: the theorist addressed the artists with an appeal and they, meeting this appeal with delight, immediately abandoned easel painting and, marching in formation (and numbering twenty five persons), moved into production. ■ In real

³³ «Otchet Instituta khudozhestvennoy kul'tury» [«The report of the Institute of Artistic Culture»], *Russkoye iskusstvo* [Russian Art], 1923, #2–3, p. 88.

³⁴ L. Zhadova, «O teorii sovetskogo dizaina 20-h godov» [«On the Theory of Soviet Design of the 1920s»] in the essay collection *Voprosy tekhnicheskoy estetiki* [Questions of Technical Aesthetics], Moscow, 1968, p. 88.

³⁵ E. Rakitina, «Lyubov Popova. Iskusstvo i manifest» [«Lyubov Popova. Art and Manifesto»], in the essay collection *Khudozhnik, stena, ekran* [The artist, the stage, the screen], Moscow, 1976, p. 152.

life, however, everything was much more complicated. ■ On November 24, 1921, there was, indeed, a meeting of INKhUK, and Osip Brik gave a talk at it about the transfer of INKhUK from under the authority of Narkompros to VSNKh. Yet it is important to stress something else here: the end of 1921 was the beginning of the third stage of INKhUK's activities, when the theorists of production art first took leadership in their hands. Osip Brik had only recently replaced Alexander Rodchenko in the position of the Chair of the Presidium of INKhUK. In his talk, Brik said that, «...given the fact that a huge number of INKhUK members (or, now that several members have split off, almost all of them) stand ideologically on production art's point of view, the question arises — is it not time to try and resolve the question of INKhUK's transfer to VSNKh.» ■ What Brik's talk was about, then, was not an **appeal** to artists to change their activities drastically, but an **acknowledgment** of the fact that they were already prepared to take the «way out» of painting into production; that they were in the concluding stage of the phase «from representation — to construction,» which coincided with the period of time when A. Rodchenko was the leader of INKhUK, and its most active members were the Constructivists from OBMOKhU — V. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, and G. Stenberg. ■ Who, we might ask, was present at this «remarkable» talk given by Brik? Who needed to be urged to reject easelism? They included the architects N. Ladovsky, V. Krinsky, A. Vesnin, A. Yefimov; the artists V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, L. Popova, K. Ioganson; the sculptors A. Lavinsky and A. Babichev; the theorists N. Tarabukin and M. Ilyin, and two other people. There was no one there who

needed to be agitated — the architects had no intention of going into production, while the artists (the Stenbergs first and foremost) were at that point already actively experimenting with volumetric spatial constructions. In late 1921, by the way, INKhUK's membership did not include twenty five artists; there were no more than ten, if one is speaking of painters who conducted experiments with abstracted form before taking the «way out» into the object world. ■ It goes without saying that the nature of the interaction between the arts and the new style being born at that time (an international superstyle) was determined not by the appeals of the theorists of production art (although the appeals did play a certain role for propaganda and agitation), but by deeper form-making and style-forming processes. ■ And yet, thanks to the actions of the theorists of production art themselves, there appeared a simplified version of a complex process of certain «left» painters' search for the «way out» into architecture and production art, a version that does not take into account the complex processes of form-making that took place in the course of the emergence of the aesthetic ideal of the new style. ■ While in no way diminishing the role of the theorists of production art, one also has to acknowledge that on its deep style-forming level, the process of «left» painting's finding a «way out» into the object world through experiments with abstracted form began earlier than the appearance of the theory of production art and took place in the framework of the artistic logic and pattern of form-making, to which not all the theorists of production art attributed proper significance. ■ It was, in particular, the group of young Moscow artists working

at the stage «from representation — to construction» that gave a powerful style-forming «salvo» in the shape of several series of spatial constructions. Continuing the line of Tatlin's *Tower*, these young artists (A. Rodchenko, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg, K. Medunetsky, and K. Ioganson) put down with their spatial constructions important foundations not just for Constructivism, but the avant-garde in general, as well. ■ When I spoke with the makers of the avant-garde, it was not the custom to ask them whether they had ever been subject to political repressions. A lot of what I learned on this topic I learned later and not always from the artists themselves. ■ Recently, I learned that V. Stenberg was under the surveillance from Lubyanka [Translator's Note: «Lubyanka» is a metonym for the various iterations of the Soviet secret police (ChK, OGPU, NKVD, KGB), which had its headquarters at the Lubyanskaya square in Moscow]. The story was related by the journalist Lev Kolodny in an article about the general Nikolay Vlasik, an all-powerful commissar of State Security and Stalin's main bodyguard. ■ «Despite constantly being busy, Vlasik found time for a very active personal life ... He hosted «cultural figures,» whom he met backstage at theatres during Stalin's visits to formerly imperial boxes. At Gogolevsky boulevard 7 [Vlasik's townhouse — S. Kh.-M.], one could hear the singing of the basso of the Bolshoi Theater, Maksim Mikhailov. The life-loving Alexander Gerasimov, who painted portraits of Stalin and other leaders with the help of the master of the house, stopped by for visits. The walls were decorated with paintings by Soviet artists. One of them, a man who helped decorate the Red Square during parades and demonstrations,

Vlasik had met through his work, being responsible for the organization of public holidays. The artist was a russified Swede by the name of Stenberg. His father had left the USSR to live in his native country, which meant he was living abroad. Despite the fact of such dangerous relations, the commissar of State Security was friends with Stenberg. He showed him the case that had been started against him by the Lubyanka. [He also] hosted him together with his wife. ...Not long before Stalin's death, Vlasik was arrested. He was tried and sentenced for showing Stenberg the case that had been started against him and for talking to Stalin on the phone in Stenberg's presence.»³⁶

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³⁶ L. Kolodny, «Vlasik i Vasily» [«Vlasik and Vasily»], *Moskovskiy komsomolets* [*Moscow Komsomolets*], December 11, 2007.

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~~years~~

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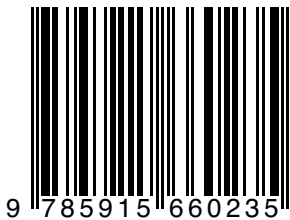
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