

The Clockmaker

TITLE: The Clockmaker (Der Uhrmacher/ L'horloger)
ARTIST: Ivan Vasilievich Kliun
DATE: c. 1914
MEDIUM: Oil on canvas
DIMENSIONS: 30 3/4 x 23 in. (78.11 x 58.42 cm)
(canvas)
CREATION PLACE: Asia, Russia
CREDIT LINE: The John R. Van Derlip Fund
ACCESSION NUMBER: 2007.85
LOCATION: G367



Gallery Label

Kliun, like many of his modernist contemporaries, started out as a realist painter and then moved quickly through Impressionist, Fauvist, and early Cubist phases, ultimately arriving at Suprematism. *The Clockmaker*, in its study of color and form harnessed to a sense of movement, is a powerful manifestation of his brief experiments combining the influences of French Cubism and Italian Futurism. Born in Bolshiye Gorki, Kliun began drawing at an early age and sought formal training during relocations to the Ukraine, Kiev, Warsaw and finally, Moscow, where he began the study of painting. Not being from a family of means, Kliun worked as bookkeeper in order to support his growing family. Consequently, *The Clockmaker*, may actually be a self portrait wherein Kliun reflects on his dilemma: never having enough hours to spend with his true vocation but, instead, being relegated by economic necessity to tallying columns of figures during the precious daylight hours.

Biography

Ivan Vasilievich Kliun (Kliunkov) 1872-1943, was a painter, graphic artist and sculptor born near Kiev, Russia. Kliun was initially a book-keeper with a penchant for drawing, and became involved in art relatively later in life than his contemporaries. He received formal training in the 1890's in Warsaw, as well as the Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg before meeting Kasimir Malevich at Rerberg's studio in Moscow. Malevich introduced the provincial Kliun to the Russian avant-garde, which he embraced with enthusiasm. Exhibiting from 1910, Kliun demonstrated great competence in the new modes, often described as Cubo-Futurism. By 1915 he was producing works in the "Suprematist" style, which featured geometric shapes, and very simple forms, such as a single black circle on a blank canvas. These date mainly from the period 1915-24. After the Russian Revolution Kliun held an official position teaching art until 1921.

Art History Context. <http://www.artexpertswebsite.com/pages/artists/kliun.php>

Kliun is still thought of as a minor figure in Russian art and one could not regard him as innovative. His trajectory matched so many artists post-1905: from academic art to the eager pursuit of the various concurrent artistic revolutions/movements which burgeoned before and during WWI. Popova and Brancusi are but two examples. He had the misfortune however of being committed to the Russian revolution, a revolution which at first liberated and then enslaved Russian artists. He had little choice- with the rise of Stalin it was Socialist Realism, emigration, or death. [Alexandra Exter, for example, chose to leave the USSR and settle in France.] Socialist Realism was the usual choice made by leftist artists- the alternative was to abandon the revolution. Kliun died isolated and no doubt alienated in 1942. (Please see article below from *Socialism Today* on the role of the arts in revolution and dictatorship.)

With the renewed interest in avant-garde Russian art [Exter and others] and the Russian nouveau riche who have fueled the massive price rises, Kliun is receiving considerable attention from the market. Unfortunately, he is also attracting attention from forgers for the same reason [This also happened with Exter's works.] His simpler abstract works are easy to fake, though these fakes would in no way match the compositional clarity which marks Kliun's work.

However, Kliun also created other compositions distinctly different from that of his "Suprematist" style, including landscapes painted "en plein air" (outdoors) in the Impressionist style. These landscapes reflected the countryside where he lived, and were often a striking contrast to the majority of the body of his work. His landscapes painted during the years 1914-1915 have been compared to the style of Gauguin, and some were even copied directly from French landscapes. While some artists may have only painted in one style at a time, Kliun created Suprematist compositions and Impressionistic landscapes in tandem. [please see attached examples]

Suprematism and Kasimir Malevich

Please see Stokstad, Vol. 6, pages 1084-86.

<http://www.incorm.eu/journal2009/report.pdf>.

This link is a four page article titled: *Report-A Suprematist Painting by Ivan Kliun*. Although it gets a little technical, it is very helpful in understanding the artist's thinking about color theory and composition.

Historical/political Context

The following excerpt from *Socialism Today*, May 2009, puts into context the challenges artists faced as the Russian Revolution turned to Stalinism.

From revolutionary freedom...

A time of revolution is a great time for the development of art. The new workers' state set up in the Soviet Union after the Russian revolution in 1917 triggered an incredible wave of artistic energy. Many artists, writers and architects embraced the revolution as the workers' state opened up universities, schools, studios, museums and galleries. Resources were made available on the basis of the nationalized planned economy which enabled them to help design, promote and defend this new revolutionary world. To express it and to express themselves. And to begin to empower the working class to develop themselves.

To give a couple of examples. In 1919, the Museum of Artistic Culture was set up. It brought together modern art, European and Asian art, religious icons, historical artifacts and folk art to reflect the diverse nature, ethnicity and history of the Soviet Union. Its director in 1923 was Kazimir Malevich, a groundbreaking artist, who wanted it to be an experimental – today, we might say interactive – museum 'for the broad mass of the people'. The Lomonsov porcelain factory worked with a student art movement with the intention of 'bringing good design to the masses'. In the early years of the revolution there were thousands of such initiatives.

However, the museum was closed down in 1926, an ominous sign of future developments. In fact, by 1932 the state had closed many such institutions and artistic organizations. In 1934 Joseph Stalin launched 'socialist realism' in art, and 'proletarian literature'.

... to Stalinist straitjacket

The Stalinized Soviet Union was a totalitarian dictatorship resting on the economic basis of a nationalized planned economy. It was a political counter-revolution against the socialist Russian revolution led by Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky and the Bolshevik party. This new workers' state eventually became a brutal regime run by command from the top by a bureaucratic elite which strangled all elements of workers' control and democracy. This was because the revolution was isolated in an economically and culturally under-developed country. As Lenin and Trotsky constantly pointed out, it is impossible to build socialism in one country given the interconnectedness of the world's economies. A prerequisite for Russia to develop as a genuine, democratic workers' state was the help of other, more highly-developed workers' states. Unfortunately, the revolutionary wave immediately following the Russian revolution did not result in the consolidation of other workers' states, and Russia remained isolated.

With regard to cultural development, Trotsky writes in his classic analysis of the nature of the Soviet Union, *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937), of a "concentration camp of the arts". He detailed the process by which the bureaucracy was able to strengthen its grip on power. An essential part of that was the suppression of artistic expression.

Even under Stalinism, however, people cannot be totally suppressed. Trotsky writes of art being smuggled out under the noses of the censors like contraband, illegal goods. We can see that later in the satirical films, theatre and literature in Czechoslovakia and other eastern European regimes.

Stalin used art to help consolidate the position of the bureaucratic regime. And, as with all dictatorships, language was used to confuse, not to clarify. So 'socialist realism' was neither socialist nor a depiction of life as it was experienced by the mass of the population. It was art for the sole purpose of glorifying Stalin and the system he represented. This raises the complicated issue of the relationship between artists and dictatorial systems, which there is no time to go into in this introduction.

Suggested tour questions

When you look at this painting from a distance, what objects do you recognize?

How many different shapes do you see? How has the artist arranged these shapes?

How would you describe the colors the artist used in this painting?

Take a closer look, how would you describe the brushwork?

What emotions does this painting evoke?

What might the clockmaker be thinking about? What do you see that makes you say that?

Could the artist be commenting about work in general, certain types of work, or the worker himself? What do you see that makes you think this way?

Who else might identify with the worker in this painting?

Compare The Clockmaker with Alexandra Exter's Italian Village by the Sea and Naum Gabo's Constructed Head. All are in the same gallery. Note color, shapes, movement, emotion. Exter and Gabo were contemporaries of Kliun's. Both Exter and Gabo left Russia when Stalin came to power. (See OOMs on Exter and Gabo)

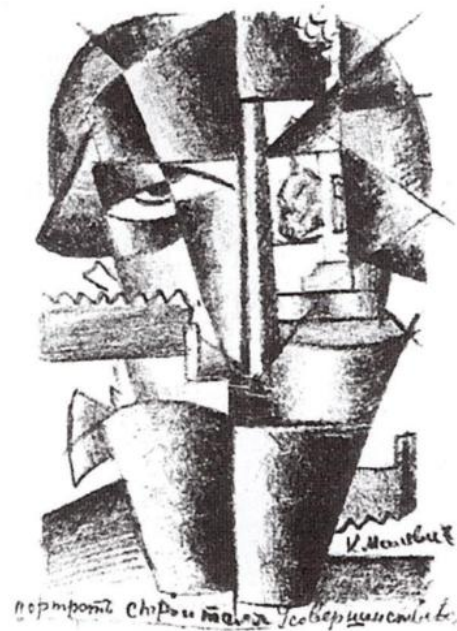
Tours/Themes

Artist's Choices, Shapes and Color, Machines and Art, Role of Art in Revolution

Self Portrait, 1909/10.



Portrait of Kliun by Malevich, 1913



The Townscape, 1917



Composition, 1917

