

# The Icon and the Avant-Garde in Russia: Aesthetic Continuity in Tatlin's *Painterly Reliefs*

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As the commencement of a series, this work [*The Bottle*] (Figure 1) has been repeatedly quoted as the unquestionable proof of the entirely French Cubist origin of the *Painterly Reliefs*... This gave birth to a completely mechanistic vision of the succession of modern art movements which, considering the visit of Tatlin to Picasso as the providential cause and *The Bottle* as the connecting link, tried to artificially draw a linear evolution of Constructivism directly from French Cubism.<sup>1</sup>

## *The Western Dogma of the Primacy of European Modernists*

The indigenous influence of folk and religious art on the Russian avant-garde is acknowledged but downplayed by Western art historians, who favor theories of European influence. This tendency to conflate the achievements of Russian artists beneath the mighty penumbra of Western European influence may be due to the great percentage of Russian artists who emigrated to Europe in the 1920s, when after a period of artistic fervor and Soviet encouragement, the "elitist" radical formalism of the avant-garde fell out of official favor. Western art historians and curators seem to treat Russian modern artists as second cousins to such innovators as Picasso, Braque or Marinetti. Scholars scramble to document points of contact between European artists in their studios and their visiting Russian admirers.

Such a dependence on the traditional hierarchies of early 20th century art history reveals a lack of thorough investigation into the indigenous influences of icon-painting and folk art on the Russian avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Thoroughly modern in every sense of the word, these artists, however, differ distinctly from their Western counterparts due to the depth of certain structures in the Russian artistic tradition.

It may seem difficult at first glance to discern a similarity between medieval icon-painting and the avant-garde; but in Russia, historically isolated from the West, the tradition of icon-

painting developed without interruption in some regions, especially Novgorod, from the 12th to the 20th century. Numerous aesthetic elements and art-making techniques will be shown to exist in both icon-painting and the work of Vladimir Tatlin. These elements and techniques will not be investigated as simple influences upon Tatlin's modern art, but as continuous and deeply rooted cultural structures that Tatlin chose to acknowledge in his work.

I will demonstrate that the indigenous artistic elements of the icon: monumentality, the respect for materials, certain compositional canons and art-making techniques far outweigh the influence of European cubists and futurists on Tatlin's work. Tatlin's biographer, John Milner, and Russian art scholar, Christina Lodder, appear to have fallen prey to the theory of the supremacy of European artists as innovators in modern art. Thus, in discussing Tatlin's early development, we hear the following statement from Milner:

It is vital to an understanding of Tatlin's early introduction to art to place an adequate emphasis upon this aggressive development that *so strangely and like a curious hybrid emerged fully fledged from Parisian example.* (italics mine)<sup>3</sup>

Tatlin's rapid artistic development did not occur in a cultural vacuum. There were of course several French painting exhibitions that artists like Tatlin, Larionov and Burliuk viewed with interest. However, it is quite disconcerting that some Western scholars believe that Tatlin's first constructions, experiments with material properties or *faktura*, could have been made by an artist satisfied with copying French innovations.

Radu Stern discusses the problem of assuming as truth the theory of direct lineage from Picasso to Constructivism. In challenging the assumption, Stern sees Tatlin's *painterly reliefs* as vastly distinct from Picasso's collages. Stern compares Tatlin's selection of materials, industrial samples representing their own material properties, with Picasso's more eclectic use of materials; and he concludes that "Tatlin's revolutionary move from surface to space can not only be explained by Picasso's influ-

<sup>1</sup> Radu Stern, "Tatlin's Bottle (1913) and the Rise of Abstraction," *Arts Magazine* 62 (Dec. '87): 57.

<sup>2</sup> But See Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995), a ground-breaking book considering Kandinsky's ethnographic experience as a fundamental key to

his life's work and a means to view the continuity and coherence of his iconography from beginning to end.

<sup>3</sup> John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 9.

ence."<sup>4</sup> Stern does not discuss indigenous influences, but instead talks of Tatlin's personal approach to abstraction. His critique of Western assumptions of European predominance in early abstraction, however, supports my investigation.

#### *Tatlin was an Icon Painter*

Vladimir Tatlin, born in Moscow in 1885, began his artistic training in 1902 as an icon-painter, studying with Levenets and Kharchenko.<sup>5</sup> As a teenager, he worked on ships as a sailor. During the period 1904-1910, Tatlin occasionally took work copying ancient Russian church frescoes.<sup>6</sup> The lessons Tatlin learned in the studios of master icon-painters are expressed throughout his later work; though, on the surface, his shift toward abstraction and dimensional painting may camouflage icon-painterly elements.

#### *Controversy over the Inspiration for Tatlin's Painterly Reliefs*

Tatlin may be best known for his tower, the model for *Monument to the Third International* of 1920. Before Tatlin began creating materialist utopian sculptures and pseudo-architecture, however, his reverence for materials and investigations into texture or *faktura* developed over time through a series of Cezannesque paintings, his collage-like *painterly reliefs*, and finally, the wall-bound but fully sculptural and abstract *counter-reliefs* and *corner counter-reliefs*. Russian art scholars acknowledge the influence of icon-painting on Tatlin's early paintings and also on the fully dimensional *corner counter-reliefs* that were often hung high in the beautiful corner, a place traditionally reserved for household icons. However, the present investigation is the first indepth discussion of the connections between icon-painting and icon cover (*oklad*) construction, and the transitional *painterly reliefs*.

In 1913, Tatlin made an assemblage entitled *Bottle* (Figure 1). This is considered his first *painterly relief*, and it is the only one that contains figurative elements. Tatlin was fascinated with the nature of widely varying materials and the possibility for compositional interaction. I propose that Tatlin's respect for materials, his belief that an art material should not be used in a manner that does not correspond with its inherent properties, evolved from his work as an icon-painter. Seeing a Picasso collage was certainly a catalyst, but evidence points to strong indigenous influence from Tatlin's intimate understanding of the construction of icons. When studying the *painterly reliefs*, one should note the materials, methods and formal choices employed and their similarities to the respect for wood, paint and plaster, and the elaborate building up and revealing process of icon-painting and *oklad* construction.

The series in question, the *painterly reliefs*, includes *Bottle* and a number of purely abstract wall assemblages. According

to Stern, *Bottle* was not a paper and paint collage, but an assemblage of tin foil, glass, wire, sheet metal and wallpaper attached to a board. Though a bottle is clearly represented, Stern sees this work as a greater step toward abstraction than Picasso's collages, even though Picasso's works depict less recognizable objects. More revolutionary than collage is Tatlin's approach to the nature of materials as the artist's primary interest. Tatlin, in effect, investigates the nature of transparency by comparing the qualities of more or less transparent materials to each other. Stern sees these materials arranged according to a scale of transparency with the opposite of the transparent, a curved piece of sheet metal at the bottom, the semi-transparent wire grill making up part of the contour of the bottle, and the fully transparent shard of glass inside.<sup>7</sup> Stern proposes *Bottle* as a very early, possibly first, manipulation of the void as an element in sculpture, where "space is considered a real material."<sup>8</sup>

The subsequent *painterly reliefs* were non-objective assemblages of iron, plaster, glass and asphalt. Milner discusses the retention of the format of painting, and even suggests that "when it is recalled that Tatlin had worked with icons, whose mounts might be metal or wood in high relief, the transition from a flat painted surface to relief is less surprising than it would be for a Western European painter."<sup>9</sup> However, Milner misses the opportunity to make more specific comparisons with the process of icon-painting. Tatlin's use of plaster foundations for the *painterly reliefs* not only references painting in general but parallels the plaster-covered boards used to make icons as "portable frescoes." What Milner means by metal or wood "mounts" is not clear. The jewel-encrusted metal icon cover or *oklad* is constructed, often in high relief, separately from the underlying painting (Figure 2). Often, only a holy figure's painted hands and face would peek through fitted openings in the *oklad*. The rest of the painting was considered too sacred to be seen, except during special times in the church calendar.

Both the process of building up the plaster and paint of the icon itself and the construction of the metal icon cover can be connected to the process and end result of the *painterly reliefs*. A close look at *Painterly Relief: Collation of Materials* of 1914 (Figure 3) reveals even more specific parallels. The assemblage of metal and wood is mounted to a plaster-covered board. Given the role of the traditional icon cover in concealing and revealing the holy painted image, the notch cut away in the central triangle of *Collation of Materials* takes on new significance. Milner believes Tatlin cut away this area to reveal the zero point on a grid of sorts, a point from which the different materials expand. However, the cut-away niche more closely resembles the opening in an *oklad* that reveals some small part of the image underneath. Here, let us remember that the bottle form in the first *painterly relief* was also a cutaway designed to re-

<sup>4</sup> Stern 57.

<sup>5</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 8.

<sup>6</sup> Milner 9.

<sup>7</sup> Stern 57.

<sup>8</sup> Stern 57.

<sup>9</sup> Milner 93.

veal the shard of glass inside, much like an ancient church reliquary would house and only partially reveal the shard or fragment associated with a saint.

The interpretation of the *painterly reliefs* as extensions of the icon aesthetic is supported by a comparison with a 1913 sketch entitled *Composition-Analysis* (Figure 4). Larissa Zhadova has made a visual comparison between this sketch and a well-known Russian icon of the *Virgin and the Don*, late 14th century by Theophanes the Greek (Figure 5). Additionally, she notes a direct connection between the sketch and a *painterly relief* of 1917.<sup>10</sup> In this pivotal sketch, Tatlin has reduced the virgin and child to simple triangles and ovals. This sketch appears to be a study for an assemblage: wedges overlap, gray-shaded planes intersect the oval face of the child, heads and limbs are revealed from beneath the layers, and the use of gray, brown and black for background planes resembles the sheet metal used in the above-discussed *painterly relief*. This sketch shares an alignment along a vertical axis with both the *Painterly Relief: Collation of Materials* and with the 14th century icon. Thus, if one accepts the connection between this sketch and the *painterly relief*, the association of icon-painting with the *painterly reliefs* is strengthened. At the very least, such a reading is not incompatible with the other evidence from icon-painting methodology: the parallel uses of plaster, layers of metalwork, and cut-away areas that reveal small sections of the surface underneath.

Thus, Christina Lodder misplaces her emphasis on Cubist influence against indigenous influence in her discussion of the *painterly reliefs*. According to Lodder, the *painterly reliefs*

exploit and extend the principle of collage as developed by Cubism, [they] could be seen to be a logical continuation of the Cubist interests. Without this artistic interest in Cubism, Tatlin's 'painterly reliefs' remain an apparently inexplicable change of direction, seemingly lacking any solid basis in his previous work. (italics mine)<sup>11</sup>

To strengthen the tie between Cubist collage and Tatlin's reliefs, Lodder attempts to find a Cubist painting in Tatlin's *oeuvre* that predates the reliefs. However, the earliest paintings that correspond most closely to a Cubist formula are panel paintings completed in 1917. Lodder cites the infamous visit by Tatlin to Picasso's studio in 1913,<sup>12</sup> which surely would have made an impression but does not supersede indigenous aesthetic concerns.

Turning to the paintings completed immediately before the *painterly reliefs*, Lodder is more comfortable attributing influence to icon-painting. That she cannot extend this recognition to Tatlin's transitional experiments in assemblage could be explained by the Western predilection, discussed by Stern, that

turns art historians' primary attention to established chronologies of modern art, where they expect to find a trickle-down effect of artistic ideas from the so-called greater to the so-called lesser artists.

#### *Icon Elements in Tatlin's Early Paintings*

The series of paintings and drawings that precede the *painterly reliefs* clearly show the influence of icon-painting. Tatlin mixed his own paints, using formulas he had learned as a student of master icon-painters. In *Sailor* of 1911 and *Nude* of 1913 (Figures 6-7), the choice of colors (ochre, red and blue), the use of white highlighting and black shading on top of the base colors, the minimal use of contour shading, the choice of gestures and body canons, and the monumentality of figures all point to direct connections with Tatlin's knowledge of icon-painting.

It is interesting to compare the style of these two paintings with an example of an icon painted by Tatlin himself. With *The Apostle on the Cupola of the Church of St. George* of 1905-10 (Figure 8), one sees an icon that Tatlin completed as a student. The method of white contourless highlighting is used throughout the figure. Especially important for this study is the use of white highlighting in the face, used to flatten and reduce the features to geometric planes. Looking at the *Sailor*, one can clearly discern similarities to icon-painting. There is a dramatic separation of colors, and flat white highlights delineate the simplified planes of the face. The *Nude* and traditional icons share the use of white highlighting, the exaggerated curvilinear form of the figure's neck and head and its monumentality as devices.

Further supporting the connection between traditional icons, Tatlin's paintings, and the pivotal sketch of 1913, one must notice the semi-detached hand in the *Nude*, created by overlapping contour lines in black and gray, and the wedge- or triangle-shaped breast and head areas. These elements can be compared stylistically to portions of *Composition-Analysis*. The gradations of yellow ochre into white on the legs, arms and head of the abstracted mother and child mimic the body contours of the *Nude*, although in *Composition-Analysis*, the figures are even more interrupted by actual planar triangular wedges. Thus, I see a direct development from Tatlin's actual icons, to *Sailor* and *Nude*, to *Composition-Analysis* and on to the *painterly reliefs*.

The similarities between Tatlin's paintings and icons led his colleague, art critic Nikolai Punin, to state that "the influence of the Russian icon on Tatlin is undoubtedly greater than the influence upon him of Cezanne or Picasso."<sup>13</sup> Descriptions of icons from the Novgorod School could be used to describe the compositional and technical elements of Tatlin's *Sailor* or *Nude* equally well (Figure 9). Talbot Rice says of the Novgorod School:

studio; it was found inside a sketch pad including Cubist drawings.

<sup>10</sup> Larissa Zhadova, *Tatlin* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988) 63-66.

<sup>11</sup> Lodder 11.

<sup>12</sup> Lodder 11. A 1914 letter exists mentioning Tatlin's visit to Picasso's

<sup>13</sup> Nikolai Punin, "St. Petersburg Art," *Russkoe Iskusstvo* 1 (1923): 18.

As time went on the various features. . .such as the elongated figures, the slender forms, the absence of modelling, and the bright coloring, all became more accentuated, so that by the 16th century an essentially linear style had evolved.<sup>14</sup>

According to Lazarev, late 13th century icon-painting in Novgorod experienced

a rebellion of sorts against the Byzantine tradition...Composition is flat, with hint of a third dimension. The artist applied paint over large surfaces without any effort at chiaroscuro modelling...On the top of the flesh tints the artist put deep shadows and bright highlights rendered by separate thin lines... the beginnings of an iconographic technique which later was to become almost canonical."<sup>15</sup>

It is well-documented that the paintings completed before Tatlin turned to the *painterly reliefs* were influenced more by icons than by Western art. It is also well-known that Tatlin's fully dimensional series of *corner counter-reliefs* (Figure 10) that were produced after the *painterly reliefs*, were actually displayed as icons, high in the "beautiful corner." Thus, I experience considerable frustration when faced with assumptions of primary European influence for the transitional *painterly reliefs* in spite of available comparisons with traditional methods of icon-painting and *oklad* constructing.

#### *The Oklad as Relief and the Process of Icon-Painting*

A highly supportable structure for the development of Tatlin's three dimensional, mixed-media reliefs can be found in the *oklad* that appeared from the 13th to the 19th century (Figure 2). As a student of icon-painting, Tatlin must have been impressed by the ornate, gilded covers encrusted with precious and semi-precious stones, as an extension of the painterly medium. Icons with covers could themselves be described as extended paintings or as *painterly reliefs*. Thus, in addition to parallels between the *oklad's* openings for hands and faces and similar cutaways in the *painterly reliefs*, including the cut-out of the bottle form in *Bottle*, other general parallels can be made between the construction of icon covers and the concepts behind the construction of the first assemblages.

Descriptions of the process of icon-painting reveal other threads of continuity between traditional and modern Russian art. Keeping in mind Tatlin's emphasis on the essence of ma-

terials, the following description provides a glimpse of the potential depth and variety of influences and structures found by the modern Russian artist in the icon-making process.

According to Boris Uspensky, inner symbolism has a fundamental significance for the icon, a symbolism not really relevant to the finished work, but to the process of icon-painting. "A fixed symbolic meaning already characterizes the very material of the painting: the colors of the icon represent the animal, vegetable and mineral world."<sup>16</sup>

The icon painters of the Old Believers or priestless sect used a technique of building up the representation to symbolically express the process of the re-creation of the figure depicted in the icon. First the skeleton was painted, then musculature, skin, hands and clothing. Finally, the identifying qualities of the person were added. This process is seen as a gradual revealing of the image and the paint itself acts as the revealer. The actual selection and preparation of the board used for the icon shows an equal amount of attention to process and materials. Many layers of glue, plaster and chalk are applied until a smoothly sanded surface is prepared to receive the paint. The surface in essence becomes a portable wall. Just as icon-painters freed frescoes from incidental architecture, so Tatlin freed paintings from the two-dimensional canvas with the *painterly reliefs*.

#### *Conclusion*

When Tatlin breaks free from the retained painterly elements of plaster backboard or wood mounts to create the fully sculptural constructions called *counter-reliefs*, it should not be surprising that Tatlin acknowledges his works' connection to icons by hanging a *corner counter-relief* in the traditional "beautiful corner." When Tatlin abandoned the figure in his reliefs, he remained committed to investigating the relationship of various materials to one another. This emphasis on distinct properties of particular materials extends the thread of aesthetic unity from the icon to the relief and on toward construction. On many fronts, from the choice of color and painting technique, to the building up and revealing process in the *painterly reliefs*, and the respect for and the selection of materials in the *counter-reliefs*, Tatlin extended the traditions of icon-painting into the era of the Russian avant-garde. Thus, ample evidence supports the primacy of indigenous Russian icon traditions as the impetus for a rigorous form of early modern materialist principles in Tatlin's *painterly reliefs*.

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<sup>14</sup> David Talbot Rice, *Russian Icons* (London: The King Penguin Books, 1947) 25.

<sup>15</sup> V. N. Lazarev, *Novgorod Icon-Painting* (Moscow: Iskusstvo Publishers, 1969) 14.

<sup>16</sup> Boris Uspensky, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon* (Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1976) 16.

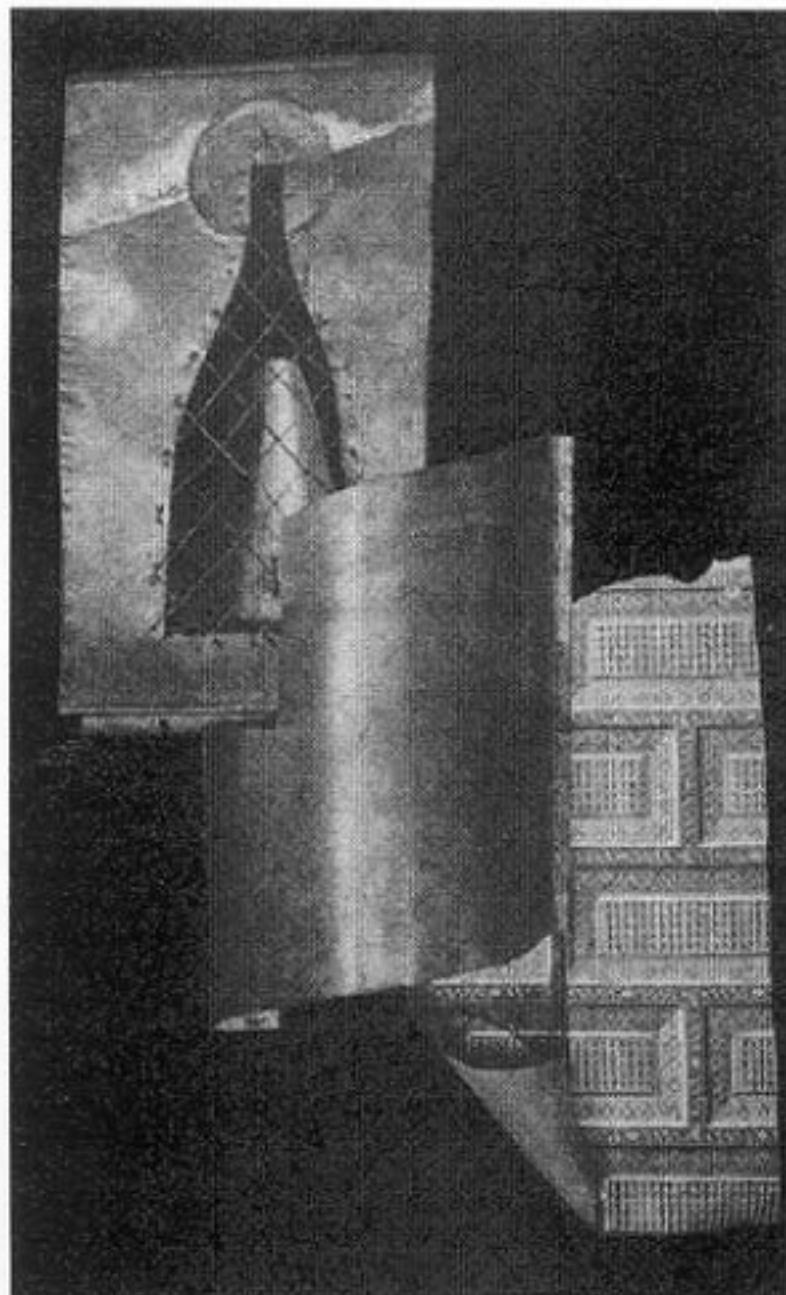


Figure 1. Vladimir Tatlin, *Bottle*, 1913, tin, cardboard, netting, wallpaper, whereabouts unknown. Photo: Collection of D.V. Sarab'ianov, Moscow.



Figure 2. Artist Unknown, *Orlud* or Icon Cover for a Russian Icon (*Fedorovskaya ikona Bogomateri*), undated, Russia. Photo: *Chudotvorniya Ukony Bozhiei Materi Kz Russkoi Historii*, Russian-language publication, New York: Russian Youth Committee, 1976.

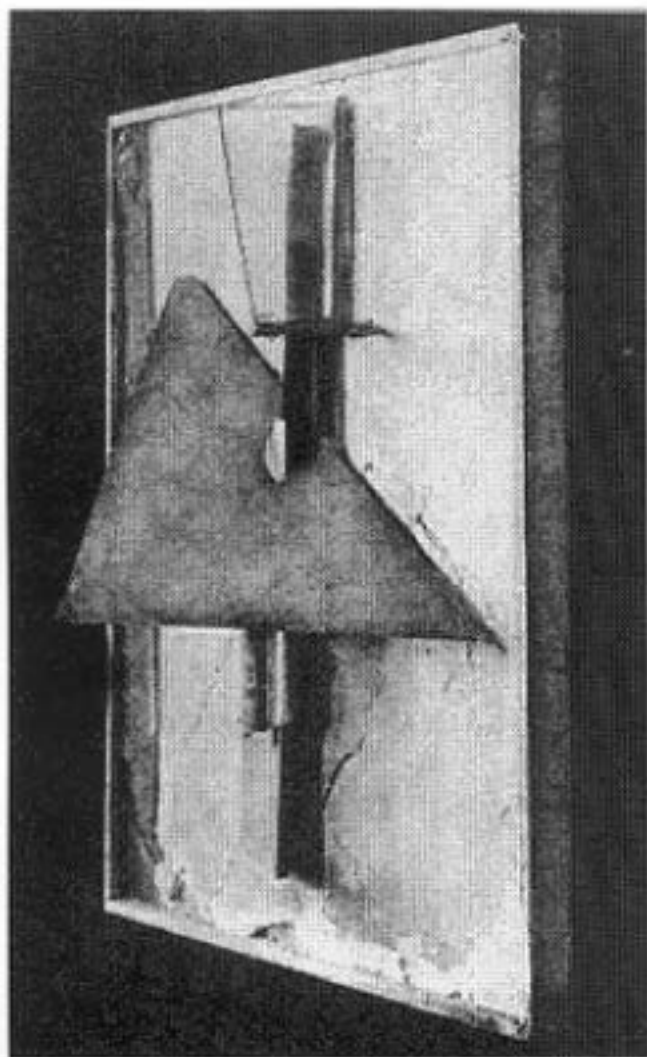


Figure 3. Vladimir Tatlin, *Collation of Materials (Painterly Relief)*, 1914, iron, plaster, glass, tar, whereabouts unknown. Reproduction: Nikolai Punin, *Tatlin (Protiv Kubizma)*, Petrograd, 1921.

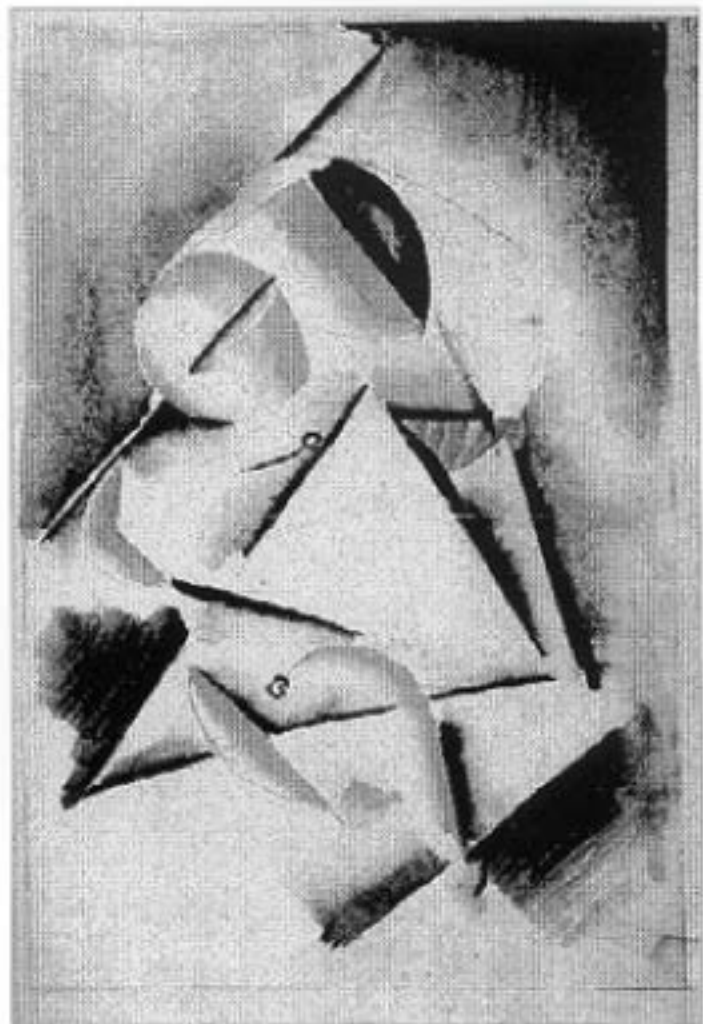


Figure 4. Vladimir Tatlin, *Composition-Analysis*, 1913, pencil, gouache and watercolor on paper, 49 x 33 cm Collection A.A. Kapitsa, Moscow.



Figure 5. Theophanes the Greek, *Our Lady of the Don*, late 14th century, 86 x 67.5 cm Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



Figure 6. Vladimir Tatlin, *Sailor*, 1911, tempera on canvas, 71.5 x 71.5 cm State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

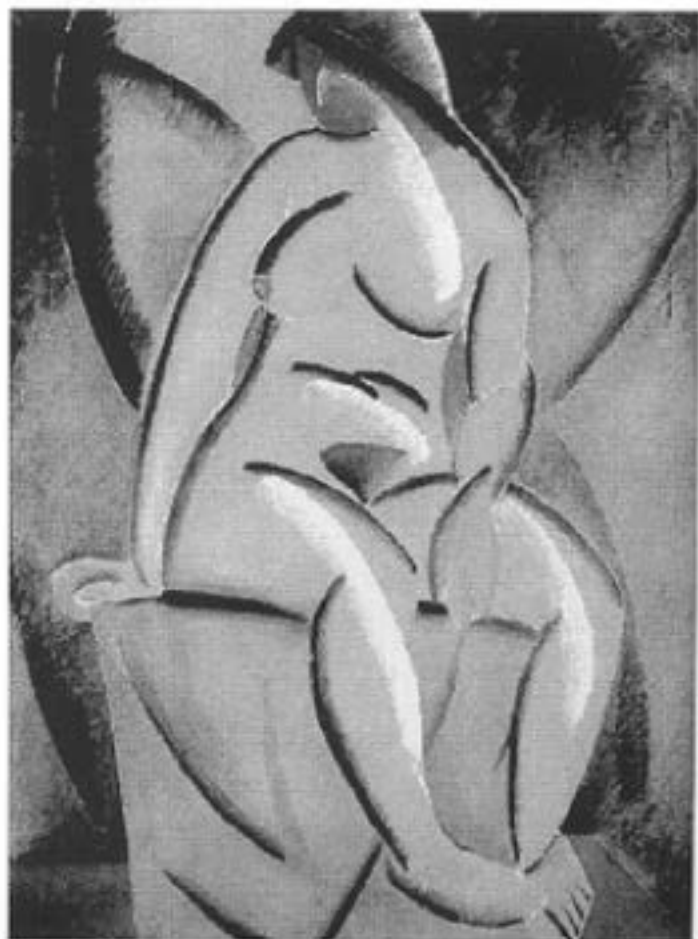


Figure 7. Vladimir Tatlin, *Nude*, 1913, oil on canvas, 143 x 108 cm Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.



Figure 8. Vladimir Tatlin, *Apostle on the Cupola of the Church of St. George, Sivriia*, 1905-10, copy of 12th-century fresco, watercolor and white paint on tracing paper glued to paper, 24 x 15.5 cm TsGALI, Moscow.



Figure 9. School of Novgorod, *The Transfiguration of Christ*, 15th century, 89.4 x 57.5 cm Museum of Art History, Novgorod.

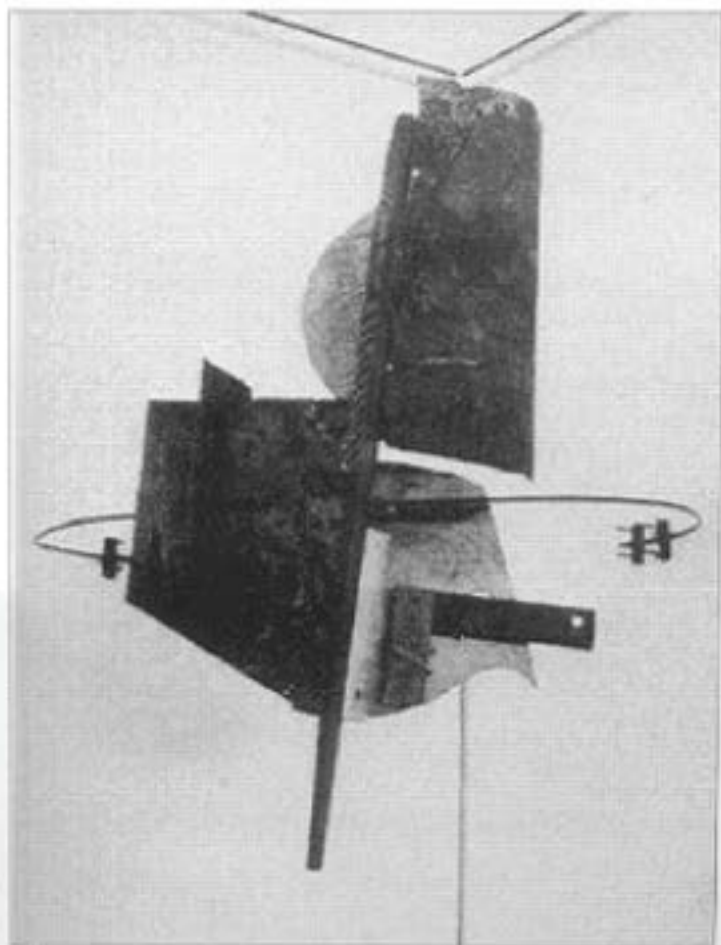


Figure 10. Vladimir Tatlin, *Corner Counter-Relief*, 1915, iron, aluminum, primer; destroyed. Photo: State Film, Photographic and Sound Archive, St. Petersburg.