

Roann Barris, Ph.D., Art Department
Faculty Summer Scholarship: Russian and Soviet Visual Materials, 2008
Outcome

I applied for and received a stipend to supplement an NEH summer institute fellowship. The institute, held at the NY Public Library for 3 weeks (June 22 - July 15) focused on the theme above: identification and use of archival Russian and Soviet visual materials in the collection of the library, universities in NYC, and museum libraries in the metropolitan area. My successful application to the institute was based on my continued research in the area of Russian constructivist theater of the 1920s and the possibilities of being able to use some of this material in a future course on Russian culture and an exhibition of Russian posters in one of the RU museum spaces.

Twenty-five scholars of Russian history and culture were selected for the institute. Most of the participants were not art historians (only 4 of us were) but all of us were scholars with ongoing research in the area of Russian studies. The institute format consisted of presentations by guest speakers, many of whose books I had already consulted in my own research and with whom I now had a chance to interact on a more personal level, visits to the special collections described above, and time to work in the Slavic and Baltic reading room of the NYPL. The culmination of the institute was two days of presentations by all participants.

I used my time in the institute for several things. Most important to me was the opportunity to share my larger research-fellowship proposal (related to Russian constructivist theater in the 1920s) with scholars who might be in a position to give me feedback on content, presentation and format. Because a large portion of the visual material I use in my research is available only in Russia, I had to give serious thought to the kind of visual research I could do while at the NYPL. What initially felt like an obstacle became very productive as it forced me to consider connections between my scholarship on theater and visual models which were used in posters, book design, newspapers, etc. – in short, if a Soviet iconography existed, it would have affected all forms of visual display, from theater to wall newspapers. This question and one or two others became the basis of my work and final presentation at the end of the institute. I will summarize these findings below.

I. In a somewhat random selection of images, I began to identify recurring patterns used in a range of visual media, from the *sten-gazety* (wall newspapers) to propaganda posters, certainly not intended as works of art, to political posters, photographs and cartoons. The content is different, as are the goals; what seems to be constant is the preference for a formal structure in which a key image, usually a person, is in the center, and other people or events radiate out from the center (much like a religious icon with a saint in the center). The other parallel we might note is the consistent tendency to try to animate the text, such that the propaganda posters which most resemble newspapers in their excessive textual orientation seem to be less common.

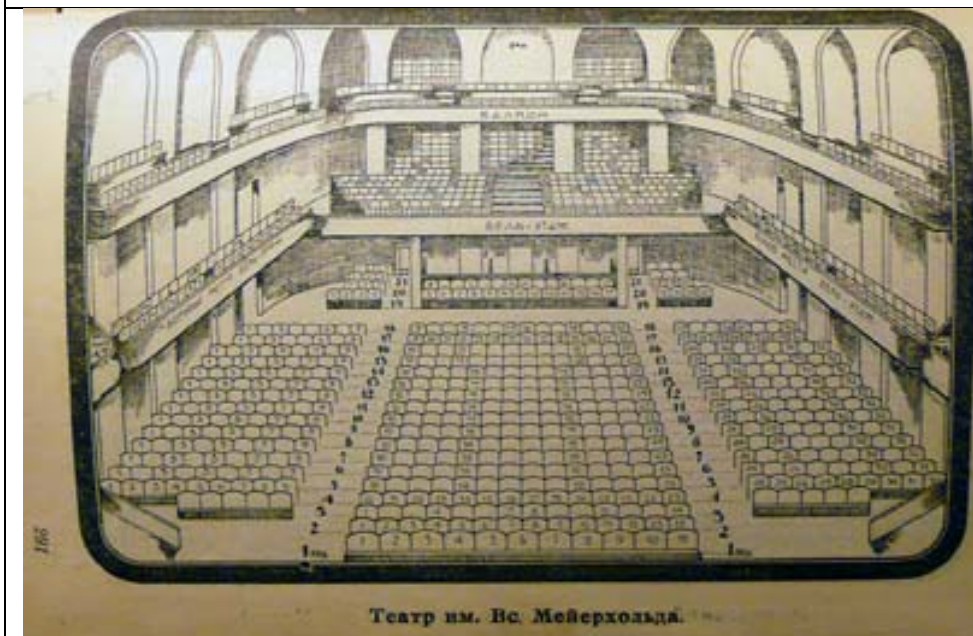
The uncatalogued collection of propaganda posters was particularly exciting as it represented a type of object/material which I had never seen before. All of them dated to the early 1920s and were from various regions in the Soviet Union and the Ukraine. My work examining these will be used in the NYPL's creation of a digital catalogue for the collection.



Above: Two examples (a poster for a lottery and a poster for the peasant/worker unity in the defense of the Soviet Union)



Propaganda poster (above); Meierkhold's theater (below)



II: An important question for me concerns the question of whether an observable relationship between agitation plays and constructivist plays exists. At this point, the only answer I can give is that the connecting link may be through the workers club theaters. Meierkhold did envision a theater which would be mobile or moving and which would involve productions that could be replicated by untrained groups of workers. But in the 1920s, as we can see in the plan of his theater (reproduced in a 1925 guide to Moscow theaters), his theater was very traditional and the only productions he staged which might have been amenable to restaging in

non-professional theaters were productions like *Smert' Tarelkina* (Death of Tarelkin). Certainly this bears further analysis to determine if there are any parallels to the agit-sudy although the staging itself does not suggest any. Having read the play, it does seem likely as a candidate for a relationship since it does concern justice (or its miscarriage), and having examined a book of diagrams for the construction of workers' club theaters, it is possible to suggest a relationship between the moving "furniture" of Tarelkin and workers' club theaters.

III: The third part of my investigation was an examination of research related to El Lissitzky, the designer for the intended (but unproduced) staging of *Khochu Rebenka* (I Want a Child) by Meierkhold in 1929. This examination was useful for two reasons: 1) this play has always been an important part of my research but my study of it so far has focused primarily on Meierkhold and Tretiakov (the author) but not on Lissitzky; 2) Lissitzky, more widely known for his graphic design and photography experiments, explored ideas related to the viewers' manipulation of books, images, and general viewing experiences. Lissitzky will be more important to my research than I had realized for this reason and for another: as an artist who changed his manner and mode of working, he might be said to have modeled a career of stylistic inconsistency. What sounds like an oxymoron may have been paradigmatic for the Russian avant-garde and its overall refusal to be pinned down to recognizable styles.

Two book designs by Lissitzky:

