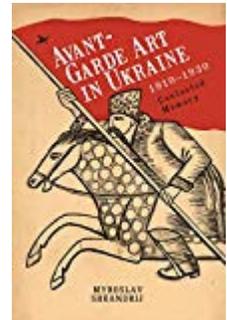


**Myroslav Shkandrij.** *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine, 1910-1930: Contested Memory.* Brookline: Academic Studies Press, 2019. Illustrations. 202 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61811-975-9.



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**Published on** H-Ukraine (July, 2021)

**Commissioned by** Nataliya Shpylova-Saeed (Indiana University)

## **Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine, 1910-1930: Contested Memory**

Visitors to Leah Dickerman and Masha Chlenova's sweeping exhibition "Inventing Abstraction: 1910-1925" (2012) at the Museum of Modern Art were greeted with a towering network analysis that charted the interpersonal relationships between the show's eighty-four artists, an image, in the words of the art critic Roberta Smith, that showed how abstraction was "a great collective endeavor that emerged simultaneously" across Europe and North America.[1] Myroslav Shkandrij's *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine, 1910-1930: Contested Memory* in many ways takes a similar approach to Ukrainian visual modernism of the same period: Shkandrij identifies the core figures who participated in Ukraine's avant-garde and maps out the networks that connect them with their more celebrated colleagues in the twentieth century's major artistic centers. From this bird's-eye point of view, the book leaves one with the impression that Ukraine's cities such as Kharkiv, Kherson, Kyiv, and Odesa in many ways

could be mentioned in the same breath as Moscow, Berlin, Paris, and New York. Yet Shkandrij's narrative has a second concern—to conceptualize the "Ukrainian dimension" (p. xii) of the avant-garde—an approach that can be seen in the biographical aspect of the chapters as he isolates the Ukrainian character of a diverse set of artists, such as David Burliuk, Alexandra Exter, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, or Dziga Vertov. The end result is a volume that shows Ukraine's avant-garde to be a movement with international urban aspirations and radically localized in the often rural places where its protagonists lived and worked.

*Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine* is a slim book whose eleven chapters, most of which were previously published in academic journals, museum catalogues, or online and showcase Shkandrij's wide-ranging work as advocate, curator, and scholar of Ukrainian art. Unlike his other, more traditional monographs on twentieth-century

Ukrainian culture, the chapters are what Shkandrij calls “exploratory essays” that seek to define how Ukraine’s national “sensibility, traditions, and worldview” (p. xii) became part of the international avant-garde.[2] Indeed, the provisional nature of these texts is felt in the loose connection between the chapters and the varied quality of their prose. The book’s central thesis—that the Ukrainian avant-garde “preceded” the October Revolution, “frequently challenged it,” and “was ultimately destroyed by it” (p. 3)—plays out over its four overarching sections.

The first section (“Forging the European Connection”) is a peripatetic overview of how members of the Ukrainian avant-garde were well integrated into Western Europe, with brief biographical capsules on Alexandra Exter, Alexander Arkhipenko, David Burliuk, Sophia Levytska, Mykhailo Boichuk, Oleksander Hryshchenko, Mykhailo Andriienko-Nechytailo, Wladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, and Klyment Redko. Also included are historical sketches on avant-garde film, Lviv, and, most importantly, Kyiv, which Shkandrij argues had a unique combination of individuals and institutions that transformed it into a “powerful generator of avant-garde activity” (p. 16). By the turn of the century, Kyiv witnessed growth, industrialization, and modernization; acquired the first electric streetcar in the Russian Empire; and was home to the Kyiv Art School, Ukrainian Academy of Arts, the Jewish Kultur-Lige, and Kyiv Art Institute as well as the Mezhyhiria Art and Ceramics Institute, which together aspired to be the “Bauhaus of the East” (p. 17).

The second section (“Politics and Painting”) isolates what Shkandrij views to be the distinct qualities of Ukraine’s avant-garde. Unlike its “Northern” counterpart in St. Petersburg and Moscow, this “Southern” avant-garde, he argues, was “pioneering,” “democratizing,” and “anti-establishment” due to its expression of a “marginalized identity” (p. 7). Like the French Cubists’ fascination with the “African and tribal,” it celebrated

“the primitive and exotic” cultures of the Scythians and Cossacks (p. 34); however, unlike Western manifestations of primitivism, the Ukrainian avant-garde was anticolonial and anti-imperial because it “saw itself as rediscovering its own tradition” (p. 35). For this reason, in Shkandrij’s view, it was committed to a “principled localism” (p. 36) that was in harmony with “living organisms” and “rural landscapes” and skeptical of “the city and technology” (pp. 20-21). Finally, it was inspired by the “national liberationist currents” (p. 37) in vogue with both ethnic Ukrainians and Ukraine’s Jews, who during the 1910s and 1920s became “cultural allies” (p. 59) as they developed parallel versions of “national modernism” (p. 77).

The third section (“Artists in the Maelstrom: Five Case Studies”) applies this framework to the biographies of five artists: David Burliuk, Kazimir Malevich, Vadym Meller, Ivan Kavalieridze, and Dziga Vertov. And in place of a conclusion, the fourth section (“The Avant-Garde in Today’s Cultural Memory”) surveys the important exhibitions that have established Ukraine’s contribution to modernism, which Shkandrij rightly celebrates as “a richly rewarding topic of study in its own right” (p. 168).

Shkandrij’s approach to his subjects is to give what we might call a “distant reading” of their Ukrainianness, which we first see in chapter 3 (“Political Posters 1919-1921 and the Boichuk School”), an introduction to the aesthetics and politics of Mykhailo Boichuk’s poster art. Boichuk cultivated what Shkandrij calls a “synthetic national art” (p. 47) that drew upon the Assyrian, Egyptian, and Byzantine traditions; Renaissance elements developed in the Italian quattrocento; Eastern-rite iconography; and Ukrainian indigenous folk motifs, especially the “life-affirming qualities” of village culture (p. 49). Thus, when Boichuk and his followers found themselves in Kyiv during the Civil War, they brought all of these practices to bear in support of the Revolution. However, Shkandrij’s discussions of the posters do not go

beyond one-paragraph descriptions of their content, thus leaving us without a way to sort through their rich visual language.

The gem of *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine* is chapter 6 (“David Burliuk and Steppe as Avant-Garde Identity”), which shows how what came to be known as Russian Futurism was thoroughly a phenomenon of Ukraine’s avant-garde. While it has long been known that the early Futurists frequently assembled around the Burliuk brothers near Kherson, where they formed the group Hylaea—the Greek term for the Scythian-inhabited territory on Ukraine’s Black Sea coast—Shkandrij reveals the interpersonal networks that linked David Burliuk to the artistic centers of Western Europe and the United States and uncovers the local sources that inspired his early visual practices, specifically the aesthetic and history of the Ukrainian steppe as “an unspoiled, fertile land overflowing with powerful energies” (p. 95). Furthermore, he demonstrates the extent to which the estate in Chornianka became the center of Futurism in the Russian Empire, which shows how the path of cultural influence traveled from the geographic periphery (Kherson) to the centers (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kyiv, Odesa). In this respect, he has given scholars of Futurism a roadmap to meaningfully engage with its Ukrainian origins.

Shkandrij’s analysis of Burliuk’s life and work is admirably comprehensive and one of the only chapters based upon archival research, which offers up a wealth of significant details. He proposes that the Chornianka estate’s maps depicting Hercules by the Dnipro inspired the Burliuk brothers, who had imposing physiques, to view themselves as the inheritors of this “simple and savage life” (p. 84). The Burliuks’ identification with “a robust Greek civilization” also compelled them to investigate the region’s past, and they excavated over fifty burial mounds and brought back valuable artifacts, such as the stone *babas*, which directly influenced David’s representations of nudes. Furthermore, Shkandrij shows how Burliuk’s know-

ledge of his family’s Cossack ancestry also inspired his interest in primitivism, which he associated with powerful “elemental forces” and “biological and psychological health” (pp. 88, 90). He also relates an anecdote about how the Burliuks were known to throw their canvases into the mud to ensure that the Scythian and Cossack soil would be part of “the flesh and blood” of their artworks (p. 92). These are the types of details that make Shkandrij’s theory of “steppe as avant-garde identity” a convincing one. However, not every chapter has the same biographical and interpretive rigor.

Chapter 7 (“Kazimir Malevich’s Autobiography and Art”) is an analysis of Malevich’s two autobiographies, both of which contain ample information about Malevich’s early years in Ukraine. These biographies contain positive references to Ukrainian villages, peasants, folk creativity, and icons, which shed light on the origins of Malevich’s aesthetic sensibilities and his commitment to be “on the side of peasant art” (p. 108). However, since Shkandrij avoids openly polemicalizing with other national-patriotic interpretations of Malevich, he does not propose a way to distinguish Malevich’s Ukrainianness from his other identities, whether as an ethnic Pole, a Russian imperial subject, a resident of the Belarusian city of Vitebsk, a citizen of the Soviet Union, or a member of the pan-European avant-garde. To this end, Shkandrij takes at face value the fact that Malevich “made a point of identifying as Ukrainian” in Kyiv but dismisses his self-identification as Polish as a functionalist attempt “to obtain a job” in Warsaw (p. 113).

Chapter 8 (“Vadym Meller and Sources of Inspiration in Theater Art”) focuses on the theater design of Vadym Meller and his wife and collaborator, the Suprematist painter Nina Henke. Shkandrij calls Henke the “key link between the avant-garde and cottage workers” in Ukraine (p. 116): she not only was an assistant in Alexandra Exter’s Kyiv studio but, more importantly, worked

for Yevheniia Prybylska, who supported women textile workers in the village of Skoptsi in the Poltava region and helped them exhibit their work in St. Petersburg, Kyiv, Berlin, and Paris. Thus, as the director of the work at Skoptsi and a member of Malevich's circle, Henke helped integrate the practices of Ukrainian folk creativity into Suprematism and Meller's Cubo-Futurist and Constructivist design.

Chapter 9 ("Ivan Kavaleridze's Contested Identity") presents an overview of Ivan Kavaleridze's long, productive career as a sculptor, filmmaker, and writer, which began in the 1900s and stretched into the 1970s. The reason that Kavaleridze was able to navigate Ukraine's ever-changing political landscapes is that his work appealed to "nationalists and communists, traditionalists and innovators" (p. 135). Shkandrij demonstrates the ubiquity of Kavaleridze's sculptures throughout Ukraine, which have gone up, come down, and been reworked and reinterpreted according to the aesthetic and political needs of the day. Most interestingly, he discusses Kavaleridze's two monuments to Artem, the first head of the Soviet of People's Commissars in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, in Bakhmut (1924) and Sviatohirsk (1927). The Sviatohirsk *Artem* not only survived the turn to Socialist Realism in the 1930s and Nazi invasion in the 1940s but has gained new life during the ongoing war in Donbas. Since *Artem* stands in the Ukrainian-controlled part of the Donetsk region, locals have embraced the sculpture but reinterpreted it as a symbol of the "strength of the local worker," "young industrial Donbas," and "national" resilience in the face of the war, rather than as a celebration of the Communist Party or the international "working class" (p. 142).

Chapter 10 ("Dziga Vertov: *Enthusiasm*, Kharkiv, and Cultural Revolution") is the last chapter that analyzes the work of an avant-garde artist and does so by focusing on the cultural production of the First Five-Year Plan (1928-32).

Shkandrij opens by defining what he calls the three "enthusiasms" of the avant-garde in Soviet Kharkiv: the "national transformation" that sought a new language for Ukrainian cultural expression (p. 149), the "proletarian culture" movement that sought "new forms" to articulate the concerns of the working class (p. 150), and what he calls the "Stalinist" aesthetic, whose singular concern was "glorifying the state" and "admiring gigantism in state-sponsored projects" (p. 151). In doing so, he appropriates the title of Dziga Vertov's first sound film *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas* (1931), which he argues embodies all three manifestations of the avant-garde. But the connection between Kharkiv and Vertov is a tangential one: *Enthusiasm* was a production of Kyiv's VUFKU, and Vertov's crew only spent ten days filming in Kharkiv compared with the four months they spent in the Donbas.

Shkandrij's discussion of the Ukrainian elements in the film (signs, titles, events, geographies) focuses on one of its most understudied aspects. However, he does not speculate about the meanings of these elements within Vertov's cinematic universe. By not doing so, he misses a chance to not only reveal how Ukraine shaped Vertov's cinematic practices but also make the case to film scholars that a knowledge of Ukraine is necessary to fully grasp the complexity of Vertov's montage. Furthermore, he notes that "the film received a hostile reception, partly because the audience had difficulty understanding it" (p. 158), but as John MacKay has shown, there was one audience for whom the film was legible: Ukrainian workers themselves.[3] In other words, while the Soviet political elites found the film to be confused, Vertov managed to use his avant-garde cinematic practices to make a film that spoke to working-class Ukrainians.

The most valuable aspects of *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine* come from Shkandrij's ability to catalogue the Ukrainian aspects of his artists and their artworks, to situate them in a criss-crossing net-

work of Ukrainian and European institutions, and to synthesize how they have been discussed in Ukrainian-language scholarship. However, many of Shkandrij's observations are, as he indicated, "exploratory" and often not supported by close readings of the artworks themselves or engagement with much of the relevant scholarship in Russian and Soviet cultural studies. While other scholars will hopefully undertake the interpretive and historiographic legwork to disentangle these works' Russian, Soviet, and Ukrainian texts, one wishes that there were more analysis that showed how these "contested" identities came together and diverged.

In the final analysis, *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine* is a thought-provoking volume that brings together many of the highlights of Myroslav Shkandrij's long, distinguished career as a fearless advocate and thoughtful scholar of Ukrainian art. It establishes the Ukrainian origins of many branches of the international avant-garde and contributes to the ongoing debates about the regional and national character of modernism.

#### Notes

[1]. Roberta Smith, "When the Future Became Now," *New York Times*, December 20, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/21/arts/design/inventing-abstraction-1910-1925-at-moma.html>.

[2]. See Myroslav Shkandrij, *Modernists, Marxists and the Nation: The Ukrainian Literary Discussion in the 1920s* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1992); and Myroslav Shkandrij, *Ukrainian Nationalism: Politics, Ideology and Literature, 1929-1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

[3]. John MacKay, "Disorganized Noise: *Enthusiasm* and the Ear of the Collective," *KinoKultura* 7 (January 2005): [www.kinokultura.com/articles/jan05-mackay.html](http://www.kinokultura.com/articles/jan05-mackay.html).

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**Citation:** Nicholas Kupensky. Review of Shkandrij, Myroslav. *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine, 1910-1930: Contested Memory*. H-Ukraine, H-Net Reviews. July, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56727>



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