The Museum Of Pictorial Culture

From *Less-Known Russian Avant-garde* series

Lev Manovich and Julian Sunley, 2021

Although we usually assume think that first museum of modern art was MoMA (New York, 1929), an earlier museum called *Museum of Pictorial Culture* was established in 1919 and run by most important Russian avant-garde artists until its closing in 1929. Our essays discuss innovative museum concepts developed by these artists, and point out their relevance to recent museum experiments in presenting their collections online using visualization methods.

You can find our sources (including for images) and further reading at the bottom of the essay. The main source for this essay is the the exhibition 'Museum of Pictorial Culture. To the 100th Anniversary of the First Museum of Contemporary Art' at

The Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2019-2020, curated by **Dr. Liubov Pchelkina**. From the exhibition description:

"2019 will mark 100 years since the implementation of the unique museum project of Soviet Russia – the creation of the Museum of Pictorial Culture, the first museum of contemporary art in our country… "The exhibition will present the history of the Museum of Pictorial Culture as an important stage in the history of Russian avant-garde and the history of the Tretyakov Gallery's acquisitions. The exposition will reflect the unique structure of the museum. The exhibition will include more than 300 paintings, drawings, sculptures from 18 Russian and 5 foreign collections. For the first time, the audience will be presented with experimental analytical work of the museum. Unique archival documents will be an important part of the exposition."

Room C at the original Museum of Pictorial Culture, containing works by Liubov Popova, Antoine Pevsner, and Nadezhda Udaltsova.
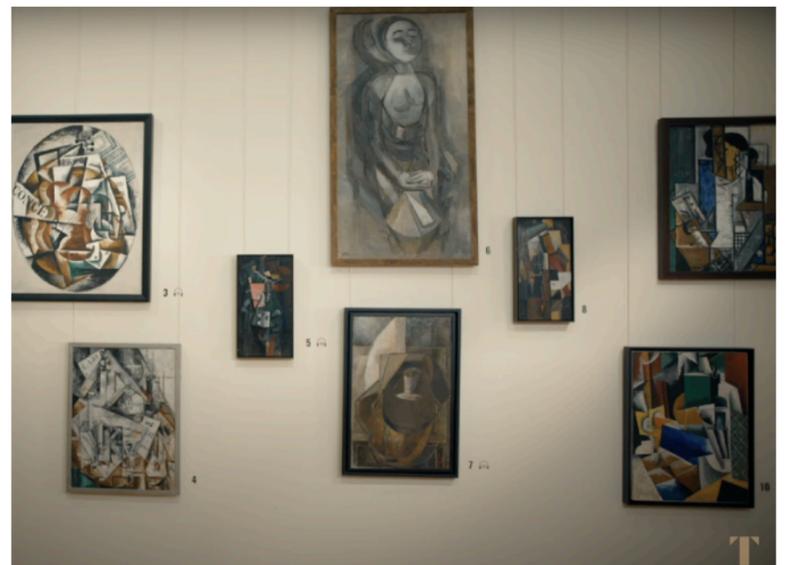
Room C reconstructed at The Tretyakov Gallery, 2019.

Museum as an Experiment

Lev Manovich

Interface for Interactive exploration of image collections created by Cultural Analytics Lab and California Institute for Telecommunication and Information, 2009. http://lab.softwarestudies.com/2008/12/cultural-analytics-hiperspace-and.html

The Museum of Pictorial Culture (1919-1929) was so innovative that 100 years later some of its foundational ideas have still not been realized in any art museum. To be more precise, we can think of these ideas as "research questions." (In science, many articles start by listing a number of research questions. They then proceed to describe the experiments carried out to explore these questions and discuss their results.) In the 20th century, many avant-garde art movements formed a particular doctrine and then promoted it via manifestos, exhibitions, journals, books, and lectures. But the MPC was different. Although its founders included Kandinsky, Malevich, Rodchenko, Tatlin and others, who were all leaders of different artistic movements, none of them appear to have dominated the museum's development.

The MPC's research questions and goals included the following:

1) How to best represent modern art? What artists should a new museum collect? Should it only include the avant-garde artists of our time, or also its important, but more traditional artists? (One answer to this was provided by Kandinsky, who wrote in 1920 that 'The Museum of Pictorial Culture does not seek to express a particular artist in their entirety, nor to present the development of the given tasks of any one era or country, but presents, regardless of their school, only those works that introduce new methods.' (Arzamas. Translated by JS)).

2) How to facilitate the research of artists in residence in the museum? (As Dobromila Blaczczyk notes, "according to Vladimir Tatlin and Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaya, the erected museum is designed as an entire complex consisting of lecture halls, workshop rooms, and…art studios.")

3) How to develop a scientific approach for studying both contemporary and historical art?

4) How should works be shown in a museum? (Accordingly, the artists were experimenting with different systems for organizing works spatially and temporally.)

The last question is of particular interest to me. In the 2000s, computer scientists, visualization designers and media artists began to experiment with organizing and displaying image collections in new ways. Some of these experiments expand the range of possible techniques of data visualization - instead of using points, lines, rectangles and circles as elements of a visualization, they use complete images (Crockett). Others focus on organizing many images by visual and/or semantic similarity, using techniques from computer vision and machine learning. As part of my own lab's work, we combined both approaches in order to analyze and visualize gradual changes across large numbers of images created over periods of time. The examples include visualizations of all of Vincent van Gogh's paintings, over 20,000 photos in the Museum of Modern Art's (New York) historical collection covering 150 years of photography, and every page of popular manga series, such as *Naruto* (see Lev Manovich, *Cultural Analytics,* The MIT Press 2020).
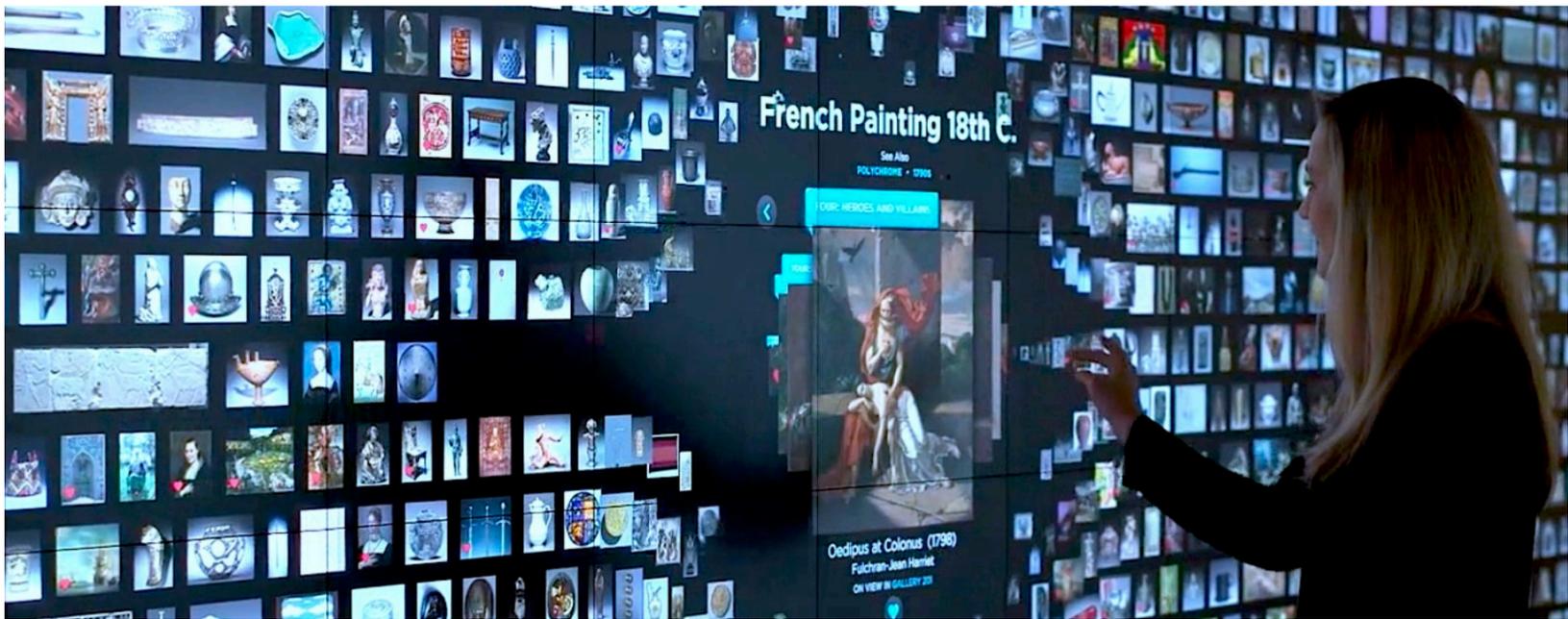
All of these experiments and research have been presented in many publications, conference papers, and art and design exhibitions - but they have not yet been adapted by the museums themselves for displaying collections physically. (One exception would be Gallery One in the Cleveland Museum of Art, 2012-) However, many museums have begun to experiment with showing their collections online in new ways, allowing for example searching for images by colors. As of early 2021, these include Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Tate, Barnes Foundation, US Library of Congress and a few others.

The limitation of these emerging new display practices is that so far they have not questioned the conventions of how sets of images are shown on the web in general - organized in rows or grids, with equal space between them. This, of course, is completely different from what many exhibition designers do today when designing physical exhibitions. In contrast to the picture galleries of the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries where the artworks were hung close together in similar grids, modern exhibition design has gradually adapted modernist principles: the generous use of empty "negative space," and the creation of strong contrasts between shapes, sizes, colors, textures, types of light, and so on. In contrast to earlier grid-like painting displays, modern exhibition spaces may feature only a few works or just one work; the rooms may use different lighting, or the walls can be painted different colors, and so on.

In other words, each exhibition room and the physical exhibition as a whole became a kind of modernist painting - but instead of having contrasting elements inside one painting, we have separate objects in an exhibition space. When was this idea first expressed and systematically developed? Most likely, the MPC was the very first museum that used this strategy for some of its rooms where artworks were arranged by Rodchenko or Malevich. Already in 1918 Malevich wrote:

«Развеска-распределение имеет чрезвычайно важное отношение и которое должно быть также обосновано, ибо от самой развески зависит и состояние самого произведения.
     Полагаю, что стены музея есть плоскости такие, как и плоскости холста, на котором должна возникнуть конструкция, нам известно, что чем больше на плоскости форм, напоминающих своей форму другую, тем [больше] ослабляется конструкция, чем же меньше и разнообразнее конструкции, тем сильнее напряженность и цельность конструкции. Поэтому развеска однородных произведений не усиливает их, а ослабевает, ибо характер повторяется и превращает в одну линейную массу совпадающие формы.
     Развеска должна быть разнообразна: икона, кубизм, супрематизм и т. д.» (Arzamas).

My English translation:

"The hanging of works has an extremely important relationship and must also be justified, because the state of the work itself depends on the hanging itself.
     I believe that the walls of a museum are planes such as the planes of the canvas on which a structure should appear, we know that the more forms on the plane that resemble another form, the [more] the structure is weakened, the lighter and more diverse the structure, the tension and integrity of the structure are stronger. Therefore, the hanging of homogeneous works does not make them stronger but weaker, for the character is repeated and turns the coinciding forms into one linear mass.
The hanging should be varied: icon, cubism, suprematism, etc."

The title of the 1918 text from which this quote is taken is very telling, summarizing Malevich's vision of modern art at this time, and its two key dimensions:

«Создание Музея живописной культуры (или Дворца культуры цвета и объема)»

"Creation of the Museum of Pictorial Culture (or the Palace of Culture of Color and Volume)"

Would you like to have Malevich install an exhibition in your museum today?

I would.
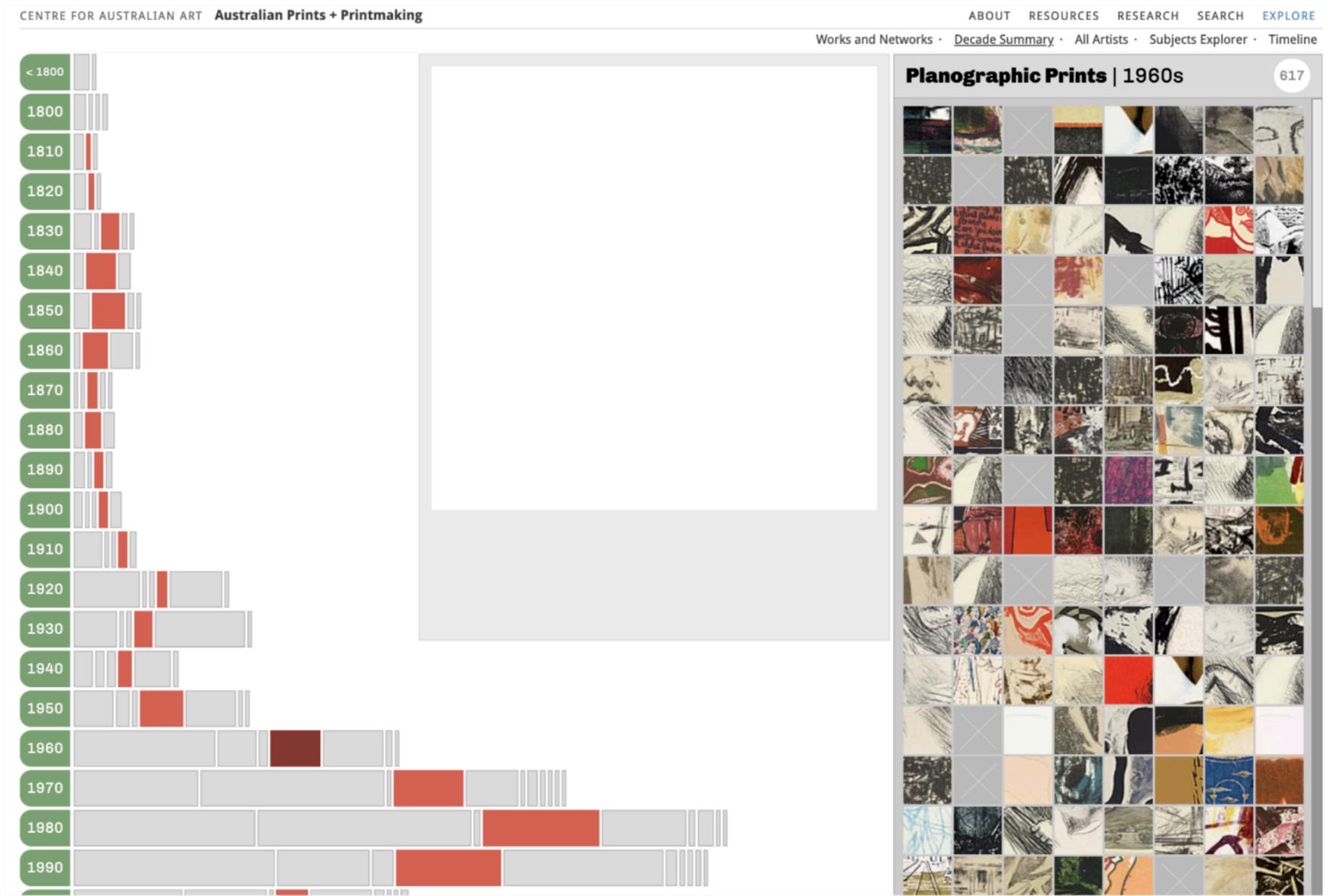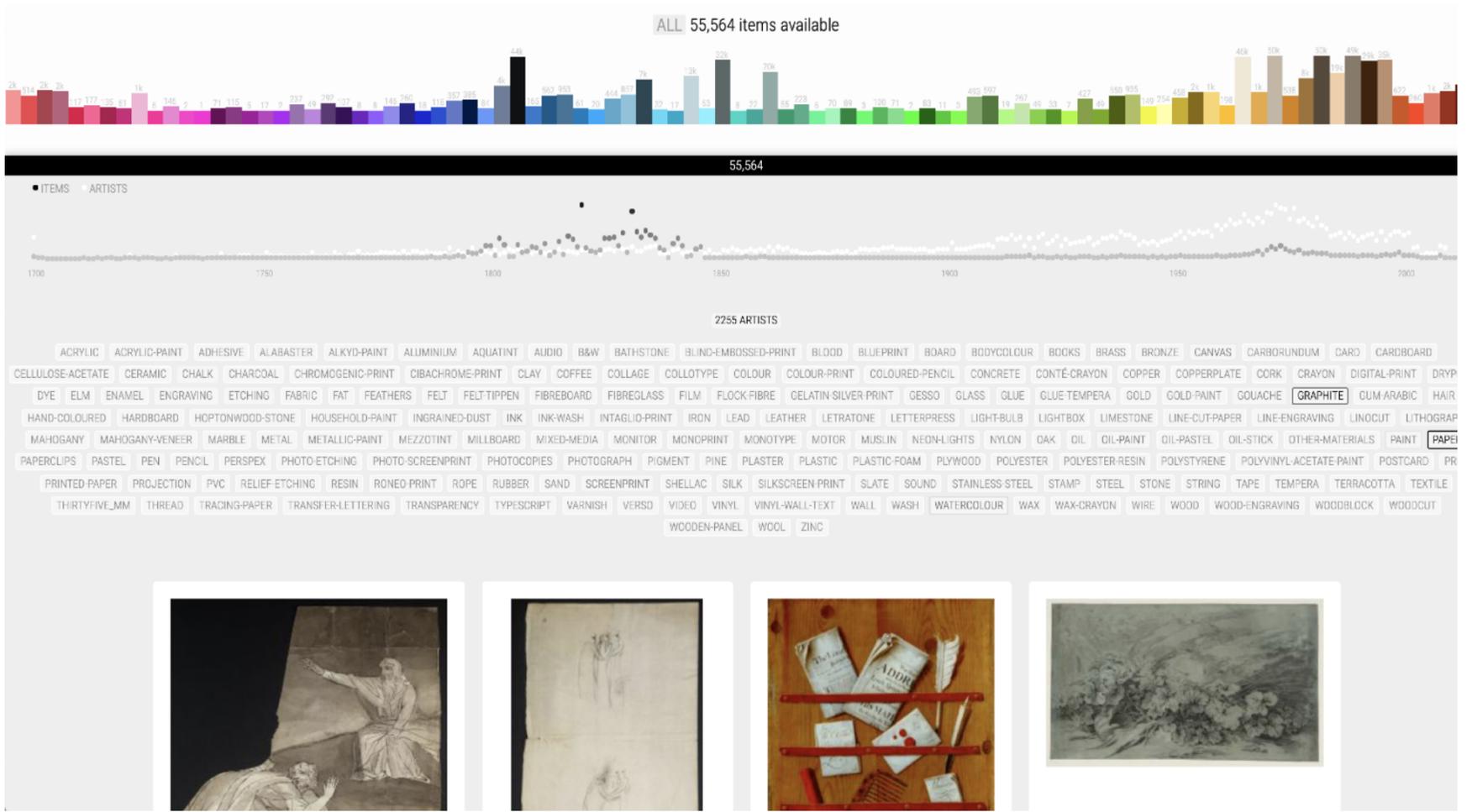
Screenshots of museum web interfaces that use interactive data visualization"

1) The Tate website allows search by color and material: https://gravitron.com.au/tate/tate.html.

2) The Centre for Australian Art's interface for its prints and printmaking collection allows search by type of print, and subject (such as 'nuclear issues' or 'student life'): http://www.printsandprintmaking.gov.au.
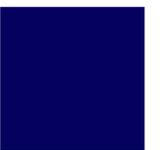
The Avant-Garde and Professionalism

Julian Sunley

In 1919, a conference on the future of museums was held in Petrograd. There was a lot to discuss on the topic — as a result of requisitioning property from the upper-classes, countless valuable objects would enter the national collection, and important sites would soon see themselves nationalised, including monasteries, palaces, and the houses of famous dead artists, including Tolstoy and Tchaikovsky (Polyakov: 1, 9). One of the conference's priorities, however, was to discuss the development of a new kind of museum. Although today it seems a given that at least some of our state museums should collect and display the art made by our contemporaries, The Museum of Pictorial Culture from the early Soviet period was the first to realise this model.

As argued above, the museum's development presaged modern exhibition design. Its educational orientation has remained just as forward-thinking. To illuminate trends in modern art for the public, lectures, guided tours, and descriptors written by the artists were all introduced — features of modern art museums that we now cannot do without (Pchelkina 2019). However, these now omnipresent policies emerged to alleviate a particular contemporary problem. They mitigated the distance between the masses and the avant-garde that was inherent to the latter's varied professionalisms.

In the pre-revolutionary period, the Russian avant-garde frequently took an antagonistic stance towards the professional painters and critics of the art world. For example, in 1919, Malevich described how *0,10* (the first Suprematist exhibition) 'provoked the indignation of "the venerable newspapers of those days" and of the critics, and also of professional people — the masters of painting' (Malevich 1976: 143). This antagonism can equally be seen beyond painting in these artists' self-description and behavior. One artistic group, *Oslinyi khvost* (Donkey's Tail), was named after a stunt, when Parisian artists duped the critics at the Salon des Indépendants into lauding a painting that had really been made by tying a brush to a donkey's tail. Members of this group were famous for pursuing their own stunts, such as Natalia Goncharova who paraded through Moscow with abstract designs painted on her face (Lodder).

Natalia Goncharova pictured in the manifesto 'Why We Paint Our Faces' (1913) by Mikhail Larionov and Ilya Zdanevich.

However, as David Cottington explains, the avant-garde's aesthetic and behavioral practices were 'still a kind of professionalism—that is, a collectivization of the identities and practices of art-making (in its widest sense) according to agreed criteria of competence and inheritance that protected the interests of its members' (Cottington: 69). In Cottington's account, what distinguished this avant-garde professionalism from normative professionalism was that it was 'less institutionally and bureaucratically legitimized' (Cottington: 39).

But if this absence of legitimisation is true in relation to the Russian avant-garde during the First World War, the same cannot be said of the Russian avant-garde after the revolution. The Museum of Pictorial Culture, which brought avant-garde art into a state-funded museum, was indicative of a wider phenomenon where Soviet avant-garde artists found themselves institutionally legitimized. In the case of the MPC, the artists even found themselves in a position where they were picking who to legitimize — one of the MPC's founding principles was that it be run by artists, and key figures including Tatlin and Kandinsky were heavily involved in the purchasing commissions that determined the museum's basic collection.

This new legitimisation coincided with a reevaluation of professionalism. Cottington highlights how there was a broad trend in the interwar period, as represented by Le Corbusier and Ozenfant in 'Aprés Cubisme', that encouraged the avant-garde artist to take on the 'the professionalism of the technician, the scientist, and the engineer', fronting 'technical mastery' and 'the meticulous application of scientifically based and mathematically derived rules of composition' (Cottington: 57). These statements have clear relevance for certain factions of the Russian avant-garde in the post-revolutionary period as well. The Constructivists, for example, alluded to this 'technical mastery' by describing themselves as engineers (*konstruktor* is engineer in Russian). Language that cast artists as scientists was also frequently employed, as for example in Rodchenko's essay 'Everything is Experiment', and Malevich's declaration that 'the modern artist is an artist-scientist' (Malevich 1923). From the 1930s, art critic Nikolai Punin would characterise the mood that preceded these developments as 'we were insanely tired of the imprecision of aestheticism' (Punin: 271).

Amongst this general turn towards the precision implied by professionalism, the Museum of Pictorial Culture became a base where artists could explore a scientific approach to both the creation and analysis of art. The MPC took on the drive to research in earnest under Rodchenko, who began his tenure as director of the museum in 1921 by hosting a series of sessions dedicated to exploring the difference between contemporary works that had been 'composed' and 'constructed' (Gough: 39). It was also under Rodchenko that the museum was first described as a scientific institution in official documents (Kachurin: 18).
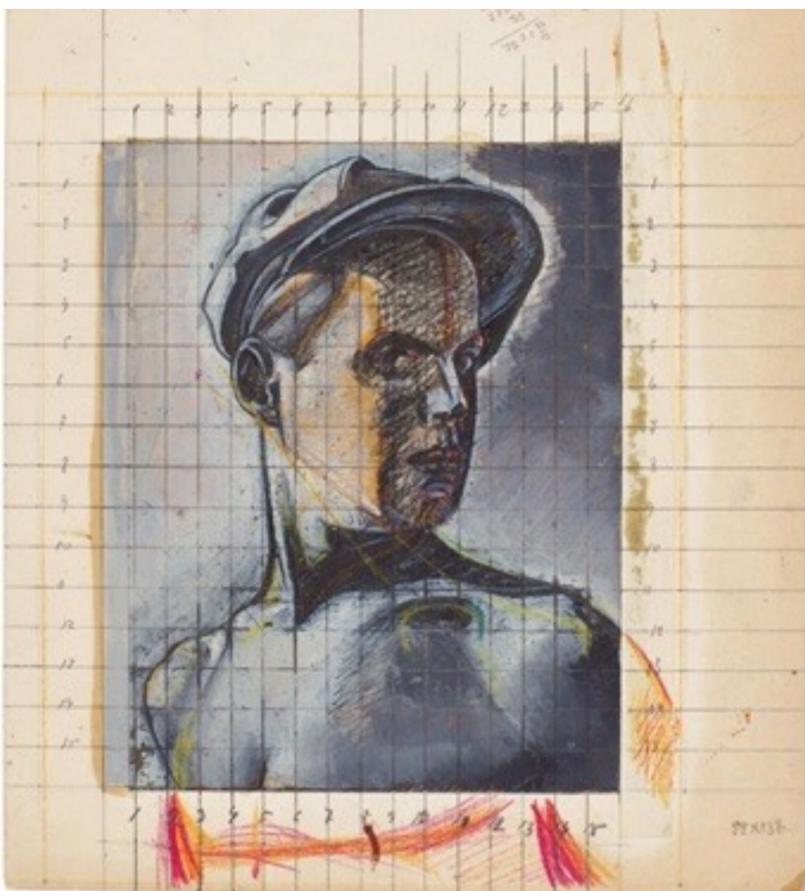
Self-portrait by Solomon Nikritin. His technique of dividing the work into sections is visible.

However, if it was Rodchenko that broadly oriented the museum towards scientifically researching the study and creation of art, then it was Solomon Nikritin and his lab that attempted to most fully systematise this research. Nikritin's lab not only undertook 'the classification of types of painting' and 'the creation of tables denoting elements of form and color' (Kachurin: 30-31), he practically abandoned painting for half a decade to develop his system of techtonics (Pchelkina 2015: 284). Equally applicable to art history and creating tomorrow's art, techtonics held that any painting was a closed system of interconnected parts — envisaged both as the individual sections of a canvas, and as such constitutive elements for painting as colour, shadow, texture, weight, density and the extent to which the contents appeared volumetric or flat (Pchelkina 2020). A scientific approach was even applied to the museums' exhibitions, which were designed using psychological principles (Today Culture: 2).

This identification with scientists, however, did not only position the artist as a professional, but also as a kind of labourer. From its inception the Museum of Pictorial Culture had argued that artists should run the museum. This helped to reconfigure artists as workers, since they were engaging beyond art with bureaucratic or managerial work. The museum's later fashioning of making and exhibiting art as lab work helped to further this reconfiguration of the artist as a laborer. It stripped art of its mysticism, de-exceptionalising it, and turned it into just one form of labour among others (Aristarkhova: 172). It was also important for the MPC that art and exhibition in a lab was 'understood as collective research, as opposed to a studio, where the creative onus rests on the individual' (Aristarkhova: 170). Its aim of cultivating a pictorial culture by and for the proletarian collective was more likely to succeed, if its methods of organization were grounded in collective labour.

But the identification with a laboratory could also prevent a rationalized conception of art from becoming too predictable. Nikritin's conception of the museum captures this neatly: 'a museum of methods, and not a collection of many, though remarkable works. A laboratory of the principles of future mastery' (Arzamas). Here painting is broken down into a body of methods that can be mastered like an artisan's craft, but the lab workers are arguably more concerned with creating new methods, than they are with mastering old ones.

As the exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery reminds us, the Museum of Pictorial Culture closed shortly before the Museum of Modern Art in New York opened. When MoMA's future directors, Jere Abbott and Alfred Barr, visited Moscow in 1927-1928, the museum's identification with a laboratory seemed to make a particular impression. Abbott enthusiastically described Nikritin's methods of analysis on display as 'super-graphical-theoretical stuff!' (Abott: 188), and Barr would even later adopt the museum's specific combination of scientific and democratic discourse, declaring: 'the Museum of Modern Art is a laboratory. In its experiments the public is invited to participate' (Barr: 15).

The Museum of Pictorial Culture's Many Homes

The Shchukin Mansion.

Shortly after the Museum Conference in 1919, a commission, whose members included Vladimir Tatlin and Osip Brik, met to discuss the specifics of the future museum, including its location, then to be in the former mansion of Sergei Shchukin (Kachurin: 9), whose famous collection had been nationalised the previous year. For those keen to include non-Russian art in the collection, Shchukin's mansion, which had formerly housed works by Picasso, Matisse and Cezanne, would have been a natural fit.
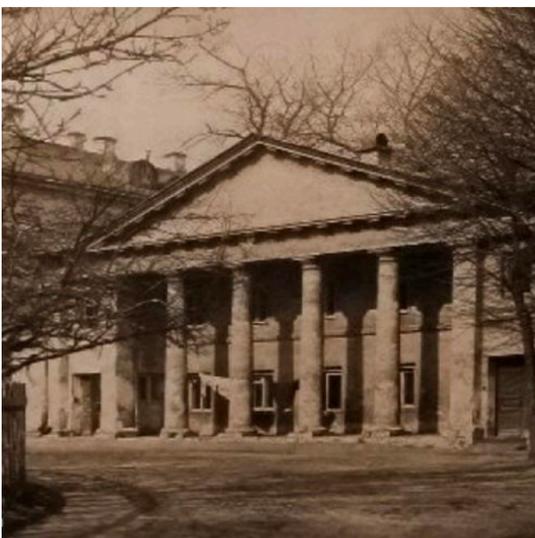
14 Volkhonka Street - 1919-1921
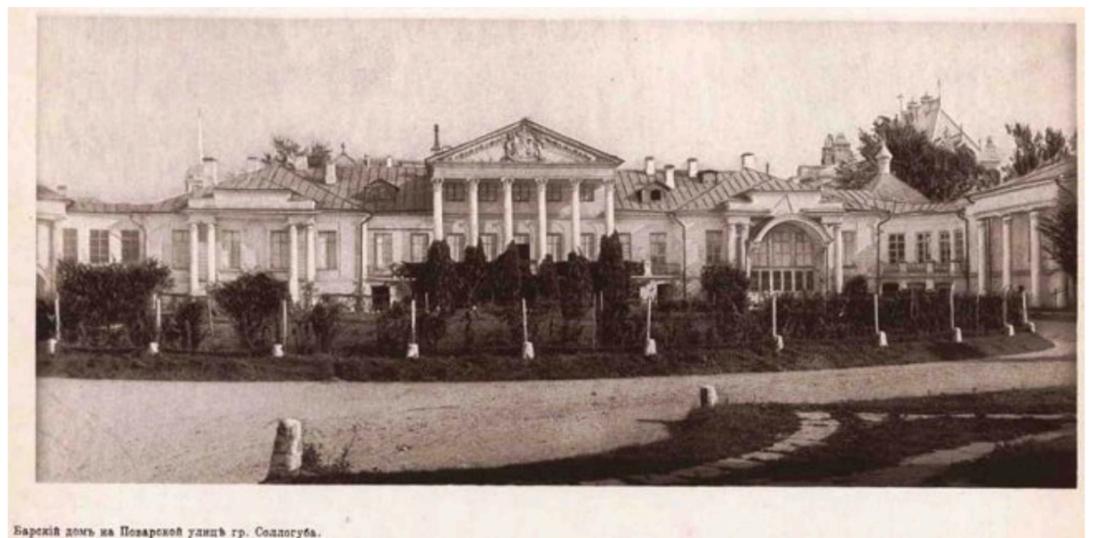
52 Povarskaya Street - 1922-1923

VKhUTEMAS

Located within the same complex of buildings at 11 Rozhdestvenka, art students from the educational institute VKhUTEMAS would have been able to visit the Museum from 1924, receiving inspiration from its collection, library and the laboratory's on-show 'experiments'. The Museum was intimately connected with VKhUTEMAS. Rodchenko, its second director, had left the museum to teach there, while its third director, Pyotr Vilyams, took up the position shortly after graduating. The Museum would leave in 1928, eventually moving into and merging with the Tretyakov Gallery.

As the Tretyakov Gallery points out, the Museum of Pictorial Culture was one of the first museums to pursue a network model (long before the Guggenheim or Tate). Though unsuccessful in these aims, Rodchenko wrote in 1920 that the closely-affiliated Museum Bureau had already organised thirty museums in 27 towns and cities, which had collectively received 1,211 works. Paintings awaiting shipment to Penza from the Museum of Pictorial Culture are pictured above.

Olga Rozanova's portrait of her sister (1911-12) on the left, and Kandinsky's
'Painting with White Lines' (1913) on the right can be identified in the image above.

Malevich and Rodchenko both wanted the museum's collection to not be limited to contemporary art. Rodchenko wanted to include shop signs and popular prints (lubki), and both figures wanted icons (Dzhafarova 478-9).

For Malevich, the inclusion of icons would have institutionalised the connection between this art form and his own paintings. He had already used exhibiting techniques to connect his Suprematist paintings with this religious art form at the *0,10* exhibition, when he hung the 'Black Square' in the upper-corner of the room typically reserved for icons.

One can only imagine how the incorporation of icons would have brought out their influence on works in the MPC's collection, including Natalia Goncharova's 'Hay Cutting' (the framing of a large central figure by smaller ones along the edge is typical of icons (Kochergina)) and David Shterenberg's 'Anis'ka' (which uses icon-inspired reverse perspective for the table in the background).
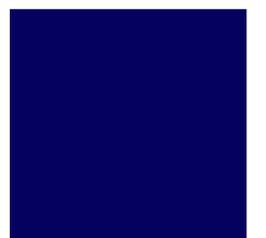
МОСКОВСКИМ МУЗЕЙНЫМ СОБРАНИЕМ
* где можно получить близкое знакомство *
с произведениями относительно немногих совре-
менных русских художников—представителей так
называемого „крайнего левого лагеря"—является
музей художественной культуры. Согласно опре-
делению на плакате при входе: музей „демонстри-
рует методы современной живописи и показа-
тельное собрание художественных произведений
различных современных течений в плане худо-
жественной культуры". Таким образом музей за-
дается целью не только обычной для собраний
живописных произведений, но отчасти и педаго-
гически-культурной, желая ввести зрителя в круг
современных художественно-технических исканий
и осветить ему те сложные и подчас еще мало
выяснившиеся пути, которым они следуют. В этом
смысле музей представляет большой и совер-
шенно своеобразный интерес, хотя посещение его
требует некоторой соответственной подготовки

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The Museum in Contemporary Documents

1. A guidebook to Moscow's museums (pictured on the left), written by the Symbolist poet Pyotr Pertsov, highlights the museum's mission to initiate viewers in the artists' aims. Nonetheless, he warns that a trip to this highly interesting, though unusual museum, still necessitates additional knowledge and preparation by the viewer in advance.

2. Two issues of *Iskusstvo kommuny* (Art of the Commune), were dedicated to the Museum Conference. In the second of the two (pictured below), Nikolai Punin (one of its editors) sceptically reviews the results, evaluating the speeches and papers as 'child's prattle' and 'what nonsense'. He takes issue with their insistence that workers need to be reeducated before they can engage with art.

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(О воспитательной роли музеев)

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Image Sources
(where not indicated in the captions).

Title Page:
Left Image - Tretyakov Gallery. Ekskursiia po vystavke "Avangard. Spisok No. 1".
Right Image -Tretyakov Gallery. Ekskursiia po vystavke "Avangard. Spisok No. 1".

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Goncharova in 'Why We Paint Our Faces' - Art of the Russias

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Solomon Nikritin's Self-portrait - Art Net

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The Shchukin Mansion - Wikipedia Commons
VKhUTEMAS - Stroganovka na karte Moskvy
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Paintings awaiting shipment to Penza - Dzhafarova 1992, p. 474
Painting with White Lines by Wassily Kandinsky - wassilykandinsky.net
Portrait of Anna Vladimirovna Rozanova - Wikipedia Commons

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