

Beyond Cubism

A dynamic, intensely colorful painting by a member of the Russian avant-garde comes to Cleveland



Aleksandra Exter (Russian, 1882–1949). *Landscape with Houses and Trees*, about 1914–15. Oil on canvas, 79.5 x 54.5 cm. John L. Severance Fund 2008.37

As a leading artist of the Russian avant-garde, Aleksandra Exter (1882–1949) played a crucial role in transmitting new developments in the visual arts to her native country through a collaborative relationship with Cubists, Futurists, Suprematists, Rayonists, and Constructivists. Exter's *Landscape with Houses and Trees* of 1914–15, recently acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art, is the first painting by Exter or any other artist of the Russian avant-garde to enter the collection. The acquisition is particularly significant since for several decades Exter served as a crucial link between modernist culture in Eastern and Western Europe.

Exter was born in Belostok near the current border between Poland and Belarus. After receiving her initial art training in Kiev, she began visiting Paris in 1907. Over the next few years she developed close relationships with Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Robert Delaunay, Fernand Léger, and Ardengo Soffici. Along with Léger and Marcel Duchamp, she contributed to the celebrated Section d'Or exhibition of dissident Cubists that opened in Paris in 1912. In 1914 she visited Italy and exhibited with the Italian Futurists in Rome, and in the spring of the same year joined with Kasimir Malevich, Marc Chagall, Wassily Kandinsky, and Alexander Archipenko in the landmark exhibition of Russian avant-garde art held at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris.

Exter was just as active in her native Russia. In 1908 she joined an avant-garde group in Kiev, then participated in the



This well-worn photograph shows Exter at the Tramway exhibition, Petrograd (St. Petersburg), 1915. © Palace Editions, The State Russian Museum, Moscow

Triangle exhibition in St. Petersburg in 1910, all of the Jack of Diamonds exhibitions in Moscow from 1910 to 1914, and the exhibition "No. 4" of Russian Futurists, Rayonists, and Primitives held in Moscow in 1914. These groups, especially the Jack of Diamonds led by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, dedicated themselves to transmitting Cubism and other avant-garde styles to Russia. As a prominent member of several such groups, Exter played a key role in bringing the Russia avant-garde to a prominent position in the international art world.



ABOVE: Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881–1973). *Bottle, Glass, and Fork*, 1911–12. Oil on canvas. Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 1972.8

RIGHT: Fernand Léger (French, 1881–1955). *The Aviator*, 1912. Oil on canvas. Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 1981.16

World War I brought an end to Exter's trips abroad. She spent nine years, from 1915 to 1924, working in Kiev, Odessa, St. Petersburg (Petrograd), and Moscow. It was during this period that she joined the Russian Suprematist movement and became a politically engaged artist. Her contributions to the political and cultural life of the emergent Soviet Union included organizing cooperative workshops, making posters and signs for street demonstrations, and producing costumes and stage sets for the avant-garde theater. In 1924, as the political and cultural climate turned more repressive after Lenin's death, Exter left Russia and spent the rest of her life working in France.

Landscape with Houses and Trees is an impressive painting that reveals how thoroughly Exter absorbed the principles of Cubist spatial structure. The composition features a complex interweaving of fragmented planes moving, colliding, and intersecting in a collapsed space. Exter painted it at a crucial time when she was moving beyond Cubism toward a more dynamic style of intense energy, color, and movement. Although Cubism, as first developed by Picasso and Braque, was widely admired by avant-garde artists, the style also came under severe criticism for being overly restrained and lacking the dynamic qualities necessary for expressing the spirit of the modern industrial age. Prior to 1912, Exter followed the model of classic Cubism by painting calm, restrained compositions in a nearly monochromatic palette. By contrast, the intensely colored forms and rhythmically expanding arcs in *Landscape with Houses and Trees* reveal that she had already begun transitioning toward a new style influenced by the Italian Futurists. Art historians refer to this style as Cubo-Futurism, a term especially appropriate for this painting, although it also provides evidence of her decidedly Russian-Ukrainian love of decorative patterning and bold, saturated color. *Landscape with Houses and Trees* complements the museum's existing collection of Cubist paintings by Picasso, Braque, and Juan Gris, while at the same time demonstrating how avant-garde artists developed Cubism in new directions—in this case, toward greater dynamism and abstraction. ■■■

SEE IT IN JUNE

Visitors can see Exter's *Landscape with Houses and Trees* when the permanent collection galleries of the new east wing open next summer. The galleries will feature an entirely new presentation of the museum's 19th-century, modern, contemporary, and photography collections.



