Zeitschrift: Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

Band: 77 (2023)

Heft: 2

Artikel: Transcending artistic boundaries : pre-war Japanese avant-gardes through the lens of two migrant artists. David Burliuk and Varvara Bubnova

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1061921

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Transcending artistic boundaries – pre-war Japanese avant-gardes through the lens of two migrant artists: David Burliuk and Varvara Bubnova

https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2022-0036
Received October 31, 2022; accepted April 18, 2023; published online May 15, 2023

Abstract: This paper problematizes the role two migrant artists David Davidovich Burliuk and Varvara Dmitrejenva Bubnova played in (re)defining the Japanese pre-war avant-gardes during the Taishō period (1912–1926). Careful consideration is given to the contextually based artistic practice in relation to the specific Japanese history of modernization, the establishment of art institutions, and state-controlled exhibition systems on one hand. On the other hand, however, an argument is made for complicating this context with multipolar and yet entangled avant-gardes composed of many histories that connect and diverge at the same time. The primary focus lies on closely describing and highlighting these profound connections, encounters, and exchanges, regardless their length or intensity. The article aims to trace and discuss the experiences of the two migrant artists who redefined themselves within the local context, based on the choices they made and the barriers they faced.

Keywords: Constructivism; David Burliuk; Japanese avant-gardes; Japanese Futurist Association; lithography; Taishō period (1912–1926); transculturality; Varvara Bubnova

1 Extra-European avant-gardes from a transculturally framed art history

When we speak of originality as an unimaginable work of art, born from a state of purity and innocence, autonomous, free from any prior model, truly authentic, this discourse is connected closely with the contradictions between center and periphery,

This essay's research is based on my doctoral dissertation, which I am currently writing at the University of Bonn, Germany.

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with the result that these artworks are not only associated with their authentic creator but similarly their birth is localized in the major centers. From there, they spread out to the artistic peripheries, where they are copied, modified, and misunderstood, according to the common narrative.

As the avant-gardes did not stop at European borders, as stories of these movements in Mexico, Chile, China, Japan, Canada, Ecuador and elsewhere are as diverse as their cultures and complex historical developments, this article contains consideration not of the singular avant-garde, but rather of plural avant-gardes. In addition, the paper defines them not by their characteristic as something they are "not", namely European, but rather as Sascha Bru has demonstrated, by something that goes beyond, something "extra".[1]

The European and extra-European avant-gardes were from the very start entangled in a web or matrix, which translated knowledge about art and the places where it was created. Therefore, when an avant-gardist revolution in art is spoken of it is interconnected by a variety of phenomena, such as the building of ethnological collections and the writing of art history of the world, just to name two. These collections were driven by assumptions that the remainders of the past were vanishing and required rapid and instant safeguarding and protection. Consequently, the concept of the "primitive" was born, a key term within the modernist culture and avant-gardes' movements in particular.[2] A myth without which no art history books is complete, is the foundational myth of the encounter between the European artists and the "primitive" through objects, masks, and statues, which led to an explosive release of never seen creative energy in the form of a radical breakthrough in the artistic language.[3]

But what if we try to follow the ways of how the knowledge about the objects, their producers, and collectors actually traveled? If we view this path, we will, for instance, unveil that much of the so-called "primitive" art, was in fact produced during the early twentieth century for the Western markets, and this means, that these producers were intertwined elements of modernity and the international economic market. They were not a disappearing past that needed to be saved, but rather active actors within a shared historical present. As Monica Juneja has stated, the challenge in approaching extra-European modern or avant-gardes' movements lies in finding a suitable methodological framework, that does not simply add unknown artists to the existing canon or isolates them to the field of individual

1 Bru 2018.

2 The term "primitive" referred to avant-gardes in different ways, such as in European folk culture, in prehistorical artifacts, in the work of children as well as in so-called 'outsider art' produced by autodidacts or psychiatric patients. Bru 2018: 145–153.

3 Juneja 2017: 93–96.

area-studies.[4] It is precisely the concept of transculturality that addresses this notion of culture being limited to the territory of the nation-state and looks instead at transformative processes that have constituted art practice: "Rather than postulate stable units of investigation which exist next to each other and are connected through flows or transfers, the problem of how these units themselves are constituted needs to be systematically addressed."[5] As "trans" in transcultural refers to how culture is in the constant state of being made and remade, time and space have to be also approached by using "the logic of circulatory practices".[6] Relying on this definition of a transculturally framed art history, the following paper addresses the example of the pre-war Japanese avant-gardes as a global process, which was formed from many histories that connect and dissolve at the same time. As Sascha Bru has noted, the extra-European avant-gardes relied on the potential of the European avant-gardes' project to "help change their own local cultural production"[7] and "precisely the European avant-gardes' mistrust of official European culture was also what made their project so suitable for appropriation in the continent's former colonies".[8] As this relationship is a complex dynamic, each case study has to be approached based on the balance between the local context-based art production and global impulses. Although we speak of simultaneous processes at this point, it must not be forgotten that this by no means implies equality, as power-political, economic, social, gender, and further inequalities were present in the respective context.

This paper starts with the complex relation of Japanese modern art and avant-gardes with world exhibitions, accompanied by the changing definitions of art, museum, exhibition, and art system, which is framed by the modernization of the country during the Meiji period (1868–1912). Often referred to as 'Westernization', this article instead uses the term modernization to describe this process, as new social and cultural products, often received from Western contexts, encountered historically grown constellations right from the beginning. When the Ukrainian artist David Burliuk and the Russian artist Varvara Bubnova arrived in 1920s Japan, they met the Japanese avant-gardes' movements, which were developed by traveling Japanese artists and intellectuals as well as through correspondence with Europeans, and most notably through translations of manifestos and theoretical texts in local magazines. The two migrant artists brought to Japan new perspectives, impulses, theoretical backgrounds, and transgressive artistic languages. They were not passive observers but actively immersed in the Japanese art scene. Both artists created a new

4 Juneja 2017: 82.
5 Juneja 2017: 87.
6 Juneja 2017: 88.
7 Bru 2018: 145.
8 Bru 2018: 157.

awareness of locality in the intersections of spaces, cultures, and practices. Part of becoming aware of locality means considering it both as an aesthetic practice and as a discursive space for self-reflection. In order to grasp this space, where the migrant artists met the Japanese art scene with its respective contexts, the following contains a sketch of the contact relations as precisely as possible relying of primary sources, writings, memoirs, and media coverage. It should be emphasized that the process of exchange where the respective differences are resolved is not the core of this study. Instead, the negotiation space can be understood here as a "third space" according to Homi Bhabha,[9] where no resolution of opposites takes place, but the dissonances, tensions, frictions, and misunderstandings remain. At the core of this negotiation, creative impulses are released, which could be found in works of art, writings, and statements, making this "hybrid" space accessible and understandable.

In the first case study the Ukrainian artist David Burliuk is introduced, along with his short but nevertheless productive stay in Japan. Although Japan could be seen as a crossroad for the artist on his way to New York, this two-year stay from 1920–22 did not limit his artistic explorations. After realizing his starting position in Japan held tremendous potential due to the modernization of the state, the high appreciation of Western art, and Western-style painting (*Yōga* 洋画), Burliuk found fruitful grounds for his artistic theories and methods, namely those of Futurism. As he was surrounded by like-minded Japanese colleagues, they would together work on a global definition of Futurism. However, this being said, the contrast between Burliuk's image of Japan and the reality of active artistic production could have not been more different.

The second case study is dedicated to the Russian artist Varvara Bubnova, who spent over 36 years in Japan and was at the very start of her stay in 1922 in the midst of the Japanese avant-gardes' movements. As she faced misunderstandings, rejection, cultural and language barriers, and late recognition, she kept a critical perspective toward the Japanese avant-gardes.

This paper aims to trace and discuss the two migrant artists who redefined themselves within the local context, based on their choices and the barriers (internal or external) they were faced with and tried to overcome.

2 Japanese art producers as active actors within a shared historical present

During the 19th century, historical developments led to the entanglement of Japanese with European art – on the one hand in Europe due to the spread of Japanese art

9 Bhabha / Bronfen 2000.

during the course of the World's Fairs, and on the other hand due to Japan's modernization strategy. At the beginning of the 1860s, the Japanese government sent out several missions abroad, during which the members of the delegation would experience the Great London Exposition. Since standardized expressions for the exhibited Western art concepts did not yet exist in the Japanese language at the time, many written characterizations of these events by travelers made use of a variety of vocabularies in order to provide a grasp of the meaning and function of a Western Museum.[10,11] Due to the simultaneous translation of both the terms "museum" and "exhibition" into Japanese, their practical application initially caused confusion. This meant that, for instance, the term "museum" was applied to permanent exhibitions during the Meiji era. For the case of the "art museum", this expression (*Bijutsukan* 美術館) was for a long time used explicitly for temporary halls, which were destroyed after the exhibition or reused for other purposes.[12] The above examples illustrate that these abstract western art-historical concepts corresponded to a specific local context and reveal the complex process of cultural translation within coexisting and simultaneous modernities.

Besides inventing a new vocabulary, the art administration system after the Meiji modernization established several policies. For instance, the export of Japanese products was mainly focused on catering to the Western "thirst" for *Japonisme* craft objects, and the world exhibitions and domestic industrial exhibitions were used by Japan to present itself as a nation with its own national art history.[13] To prevent the outflow of ancient Japanese art to the West and to protect art objects from destruction, the government passed several laws and policies even during the post-war years. On the one hand, the government was continuously fearful of losing Japan's own heritage, but on the other hand, approved the export of objects to the West in order to promote industrial production.[14] Using the slogan *Kōko Rikon* 考古利今 (learn from the past to benefit the present) the government encouraged contemporary artists to create high-quality craft products for export. In this sense, the national museums (so-called Imperial Museums) supported the promotion of

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10 Fukuzawa 1995: 355–382.

11 For a detailed reference on the new terms such as *Hakurankai* 博覧会 (*haku* 博 = broad, far, wide, many; *ran* 覧 = look at; *kai* 会 = gathering, society) and *Bijutsu* 美術 (art), which was for the most part a neologism, compiled by the words *bi* 美 (beauty) and *jutsu* 術 (technique) see Satō 2011: 66–93. The application of the term *Bijutsu* 美術 was used for the first time in a translation of a German article in 1872 regarding the preparations for attendance at the world exhibition in Vienna, Kitazawa 1989: 144–150. This description included the following definition of art: "The ability to make/ create music, sculpture, poetry, and so on are called art in the West".

12 Isaeva 2018: 13–16.

13 Satō 2011: 106.

14 Satō 2011: 106–107.

Japanese art in the West.[15] Their main role lay in collecting, protecting, and exhibiting old Japanese art up to the end of the Edo period so that contemporary artists could learn from the past and create art objects useful for the present. In other words, the craft objects exhibited at the World Exhibitions were not pre-Meiji items, but contemporary items created with the explicit purpose of exportation.[16] From the very beginning, the modernization of the country since the Meiji era has been characterized by the dichotomy of a comprehensive reform of political and social structures with new ideas, concepts, and techniques (coming from the West) as well as affirmative return to an unchanging form of Japanese identity.

The above-mentioned studies by Satō Dōshin show that the Japanese Meiji government actively formed the Western view of Japanese art as they encouraged the export of contemporary art and craft objects, while at the same time trying to prevent the "outflow" of old Japanese art (pre-Meiji Japanese art). The promotion of exports was indeed a highly national policy. As a result, the Japanese art producers were in fact active actors within a shared historical present, intertwined with elements of modernity, and the international economic market.

A further dimension of connection between Europe and other continents at the time was the emergence of art production, not in terms of the so-called "primitive" but instead modern genres. In the case of Japan during the 19th century, Western concepts of art, art history, exhibition, museum, and art schools were introduced. Western concepts brought additions to the previous understanding of exhibiting and the reinforcement of a hierarchization within the existing art genres. However, at the same time, irreversible divisions arose: for example, between the traditional Japanese-style painting *Nihonga* 日本画 and Western-style oil painting *Yōga* 洋画.

Due to historical developments, Japanese modernity has been intertwined with the West and the introduction of Western culture. In the second half of the 19th century, this resulted in the Japanese state rejecting its feudal structures and its policy of isolation. At a rapid speed, Japan appropriated Western social structures in the areas of government, economy, education, military, and culture. Following this, the need to distance from the governmental notion of the modern nation-state rose in the late Meiji and early Taishō periods, with there being instead a focus on the concerns of the individual.[17] This seemed to be the right time for Japanese artists to draw on the European avant-gardes as they found them suited to giving artistic shape to their own voice and their own modernity.

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15 Satō 2011: 107.

16 Isaeva 2018: 13–16.

17 Schoneveld 2019: 11.

Mori Ōgai (1862–1922) finished his translation of the Futurist Manifesto by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944), the founder of Italian Futurism, with loud laughter: "はゝゝゝ。" (Ha, ha, ha, ha).[18] Less than three months after its initial publication in *Le Figaro*, Marinetti's eleven declarations were published in Japan in the monthly literary magazine *Subaru* スバル. It is likely that Mori felt a connection to the avant-gardists' dissatisfaction with the art of the past, which led to him making this translation. By looking at the historical context of this publication, Mori's laughter can be read as a critical commentary on contemporary events. With its victory over the Russian Empire in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, Japan showed its power on the world political stage. Within the Japanese population, however, noticeable disappointment spread over the provisions of the Treaty of Portsmouth, which ended the Russo-Japanese War. Public unrest caused protests against the treaty in Tōkyō in 1905 that spread to other cities. Due to an increase in the surveillance of the population, state authorities uncovered a plot to assassinate the emperor, which became known as the "Great Treason Incident" of 1910.[19]

The spirit of revolt and opposition to previously unquestioned values echoed through the art system and was reflected by the establishment of artists' groups in clear rejection of the government's official exhibition format. Since 1907, the juried autumn exhibition *Monbushō bijutsu tenrankai* 文部省美術展覧会 (abbreviated *Bunten* 文展), organized by the Ministry of Culture, has been considered the peak of prestige for Japanese artists. *Bunten* was the first official attempt to organize and control the notion of modern art through centralized selection, clear categorization, and the distinction between *Yōga*, *Nihonga*, and sculpture. The Japanese government was aware of the political, economic, and social potential of visual arts in creating a modern image as a national identity.

One of the most influential modern literary and art magazines of this period was *Shirakaba* 白樺 (White Birch), founded in 1910 by the art group *Shirakabaha* 白樺派 (White Birch Society). It is considered to be one of the first magazines where Western artworks by Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890), and Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), among others, were prominently featured. *Shirakabaha* spread their ideas by publishing the magazine, organizing

18 Mori Ōgai 1909: 104.

19 As a result, the executive power of the police force was expanded. The Tōkyō Police Headquarters set up a special division to investigate activities considered dangerous to the state. On September 29, 1908, the police were also empowered to punish minor crimes themselves without trial and this primarily meant crimes against order in the social sphere (including those that frequently occurred during collective protests or labor disputes). Zöllner 2023: 305–308.

exhibitions, and founding several satellite artists' groups.[20] Among those ideas was the attempt to redefine what it meant to be modern and independent of state ideology. For this, the focus was on the use of art and literature to articulate a sense of the self. *Shirakabaha* allowed Japanese artists to negotiate what it meant to be an individual on a personal level, as a member of an artistic and literary circle, as well as a citizen of society.[21] In 1910, Japanese sculptor, poet, and essayist Takamura Kōtarō 高村 光太郎 (1883–1956) summed up the spirit of this rebellion and the demand for liberation from the nation-state toward a free individual artistic expression in his manifesto-like essay *Midori iro no taiyō* 緑色の太陽 (The Green Sun).

> My inner state during the production of art is that of an individual person. There is no such thing as Japan or anything like that, I simply work the way I think, see, and feel, without paying attention to it. It may be that the finished work is considered "typically Japanese", but for me as an artist it makes no difference. Even the existence of local color will be zero in this case. [...]
>
> If someone paints a "green sun", I wouldn't say it's not true. I wouldn't say it's wrong, because I could see it that way too. I can't pass by without seeing the full value of the picture, even with a "green sun".[22]

Artists of modern and avant-gardes' groups were using modern art as a vehicle for self-expression, which was not previously promoted by the state, and thus formed art groups in explicit disregard of the *Bunten* such as the avant-gardes' groups *Miraiha Bijutsu Kyōkai* Futurist Art Association 未来派美術協会 or *MAVO* マヴォ. The modern art exhibition system was a complex symbiosis of state-sanctioned authorities of the *Bunten* and the artists' groups, some of them with only very short periods of existence, constantly in the process of reconfiguring or regrouping. However, on a closer look at these numerous artist groups, a number of characteristics stand out, starting with their homogeneous appearance. These associations consisted of young Japanese men with a specific artistic vision. Female members were extremely rare and none of them were in a leadership position, although there were female artists in close proximity (like Takamura Chieko 高村 智恵子 1886–1938, a trained oil painter married to the sculptor Takamura Kōtarō). These artist groups were keen on embracing a cosmopolitan point of view and building an international network. Usually among their members, one or two had studied abroad, and, upon their

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20 The most important of these was the *Fyūzan-kai* フュウザン会 Fyūzan Society (Charcoal Sketch Society), initiated in 1912 by Kishida Ryūsei 岸田 劉生 (1891–1929), Saitō Yori 斎藤 与里 (1885–1959), Yorozu Tetsugorō 萬 鉄五郎（1885–1927), and Kawakami Ryōka 川上涼花 (1887–1921), among others.

21 Schoneveld 2019: 11–13.

22 Takamura 1910: 37. (This and other translations from Japanese and Russian are provided by me unless otherwise noted).

return, functioned as important cross points in the global network. As a result, visitors from Europe and other countries found welcoming hosts in Japan.[23]

After Mori Ōgai's translation, media attention towards Futurism fell silent for several years until 1912, when the Italian Futurists presented their works outside Italy for the first time. This large-scale traveling exhibition began in February 1912 at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris, from where it traveled to several European capitals and was even visited on-site by a number of Japanese artists. The exhibitions attracted a great deal of international attention and were commented on by Japanese critics in exhibition reviews.[24] The peak of Japanese interest in this exhibition was a special issue of the magazine *Gendai no Yōga* 現代の洋画 (Contemporary Painting in the Western-style) in October 1912, devoted to Italian Futurism. This was made possible by direct communication between Marinetti and several Japanese artists, who asked Marinetti for relevant publications.[25]

In the 1910s, the Japanese public followed the development of Futurism not only in Italy and England but also in the Russian Empire, which was undoubtedly related to a broader Japanese interest in nineteenth-century Russian-language literature.[26] Yet, a lack of differentiation between the respective movements and their very context-specific developments can be observed. This, however, was due to the fact that other artistic movements, such as Dadaism, Fauvism, and Cubism, existed in Japan concurrently with Futurism. As a result, the lack of distinction in the discourse between Italian and "Russian"[27] Futurism led to the emergence of the image of Futurism in the Russian Empire as provocative, very vague, and dismissive.[28,29]

One of the artists who devoted himself intensively to this new movement in his early artistic practice was Tōgō Seiji 東郷青児 (1897–1978). His solo exhibition in 1915 was held at the important meeting place for artists and literati, the Hibiya Bijutsukan in Tōkyō's Yurakucho district. This gallery had previously hosted the landmark exhibition in March 1914 of some 70 color-woodblock prints by Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Max Pechstein (1881–1955), Franz Marc (1880–1916), and Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980), who were mostly Expressionist artists associated with the Berlin magazine "Der Sturm". With works such as *Kontorabasu o hiku* コントラバスを弾く (Playing the Contrabass, oil on canvas, 1915), Tōgō showed his involvement with

23 For instance, Bernard Leach (Shirakabaha group), David Burliuk (Futurist Art Association), as well as Varvara Bubnova (Futurist Art Association and Sanka-ten 三科展 group).

24 Omuka 2000: 248–250.

25 Kimura 1912: 26.

26 Rimer 1995.

27 The term "Russian" used here is a direct translation found in the articles by Nobori 1914 and Aika 1916.

28 Nobori 1914.

29 Aika 1916.

Futurist and Cubist elements, which, however, caused confusion about his artistic position. For example, a reviewer from the journal *Chūō Bijutsu* referred to Tōgō as a "follower of the school of Cubism and Futurism", while another critic in the same issue referred to his work simply as "Cubist".[30,31] In 1921–1922, Tōgō traveled to Europe to deepen his artistic tendencies and to meet the representatives of Futurism such as Marinetti. Along with Tōgō Seiji, Kambara Tai 神原 泰 (1898–1997) was seen as an influential figure within the Futurist movement, who also corresponded with Marinetti. He wrote repeatedly on Futurism, and his anthology *Miraiha Kenkyū* 未来派研究 Futurism Studies is one of the most reliable and comprehensive works on Italian Futurism in Japanese.[32] The first group of artists to identify themselves as Futurists was the *Miraiha Bijutsu Kyōkai* 未来派美術協会 (Futurist Art Association), founded in 1920. The loose structures of this group, caused them to be regarded as vague and ambiguous at first.[33] The artists could only agree on one thing in common, which was creating works in the style of Futurism and Post-Impressionism. In addition, an unusual fact of this association is found within its members. Among them were radical *Nihonga* artists, who wanted to introduce new elements into traditional genres.[34] Consequently, the futuristic language transcended genre boundaries at this early stage and reached artists who felt a longing for change and renewal.

When we talk about Japanese Futurism, it is crucial to reflect on the period when this movement emerged. Therefore, it is worth mentioning at this point the fact that modernization and "turning towards the West" meant to become a colonial power. By the 1910s, Japan had transformed itself into a modern constitutional monarchy after colonizing Taiwan, Korea, Okinawa, and Hokkaido. The emergence of the Japanese avant-gardes occurred at a moment when Japan, already a colonial power, had experienced the rise of militarism with two key victories in the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese War. Kambara Tai summarized this new form of national awareness as follows:

> In contrast, (to Futurism in Italy), Japan had won the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese War, and the triumphant nation continued to make astonishing progress in economy and industry, and made rapid development in the international strength of the country. The idea of

30 Naomasa 1915.

31 *Bijutsukai shōsoku* 美術界消息 *News from the Art World* 1915: 131.

32 Kambara 1925.

33 Burliuk's appearance and participation in the exhibition of the Futurist Association resulted in a generally increased awareness and attention for the Futurist Association. In comparison, the first exhibition, which was ignored or criticized by the press. Among the criticisms were voices that considered the works as mere imitation of the European Futurist avant-gardes without an expression of the true self. Omuka 1995: 153.

34 Omuka 2000: 265.

> worshiping imported goods transformed into the belief that the world was ours, and foreign books, ideas, art, culture and goods flowed to us as a matter of fact, and we already considered ourselves cosmopolitans. Therefore, we could sing along with the dynamics of cars that the futurists sang about without hesitation. Compared to Futurism in Italy, Japan's avant-garde art was nurtured by a much happier and more coercive environment and was born less as rebellions against the times than as the inevitable product of them.[35]

In this environment of simultaneous availability of various art movements, and young artistic positions turning to Futurism and other avant-gardes' theories, two migrant artists came to Japan.

3 David Davidovich Burliuk – a restless eclecticist: letting go of painting that is fixed to a single style

Accompanied by the Ukrainian artist Viktor Nikandrovitsch Palmov (1888–1929), David Burliuk traveled to Japan from Vladivostok in 1920, carrying around 400 paintings, and within two weeks upon his arrival organized the *Nihon ni okeru saisho no roshia gaten* 日本に於ける最初のロシア画展 (First Exhibition of Russian[36] Painting in Japan) at the Hoshi Pharmacy Center, in Kyōbashi Tōkyō (Oct. 14–30, 1920). In cooperation with the Tōkyō Nichinichi Shimbun newspaper, Burliuk opened this traveling exhibition, offering Japanese artists a comprehensive and diverse overview of so-called "Russian"[37] painting. This was received with large and enthusiastic responses from artists associated with the Japanese futuristic movement such as Fumon Gyō 普門暁 (1896–1972), Yanase Masamu 柳瀬正夢 (1900–1945), and Kambara Tai. The latter was drawn to the pharmacy almost daily in order to absorb the realistic, dadaist, futurist, and cubist works.[38] In an Miyako Shimbun newspaper article it was even stated that "This exhibition did more to wake up our artists than hundreds of artworks on display at the Imperial Exhibition."[39] Who was this Ukrainian artist, described by the Japanese media as provocative, with an extravagant appearance in a frock coat, top hat as well as a chrysanthemum in his buttonhole, who realized around 10 exhibitions, lectures, performances as well as a publication on Futurism in Japan?

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35 Kambara 1963: 7.

36 The term "Russian" used here is a direct translation of the exhibition title.

37 The term "Russian" used here is a direct translation of the exhibition title.

38 Kambara 1927: 39.

39 *Roshia no geijutsu wo bakuroshita miraiha no ga* ロシアの現実を暴露した未来派の画 *Futuristic painting that exposed the reality of Russia* October 18th, 1920: 1.

David Davidovich Burliuk (1882* in Semirotovshchina †1967 in New York) attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich (1902–3) and Fernand Cormon's private painting school in Paris (1904–5). He participated in the *Link* exhibition in Kyiv (one of the first avant-gardes' art exhibitions in the Russian Empire in 1908) and was a driving force behind many of the early avant-gardes' exhibitions as well as a crucial figure in the emergence of Futurism in the Russian Empire. The poet and painter Burliuk gave countless lectures on this new art movement, and exhibited, both in the Russian Empire and in Western Europe, for instance at the exhibition of the New Artists' Association in Munich (1910), the Paul Cassirer Gallery in Berlin (1911) and in the exhibition "Der Blaue Reiter" in Munich (1912). In 1912, he made a second trip to Western Europe, which took him through Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy. He moved smoothly from East to West, as well as from West to East, absorbing all artistic and theoretical directions that formed an exciting symbiosis in his artistic understanding and oeuvre. This was one of the reasons why the press in the Russian Empire criticized him as a "skillful eclecticist, who works with all the leftist tendencies of painting".[40] Consequently, works in impressionist, post-impressionist, cubist, and futurist styles can be found in the oeuvre of the Ukrainian Futurist.

David Burliuk belonged to the so-called Cubo-Futurism movement, which is characterized in particular by close cooperation between poets and visual artists. When it comes to painting, the members proclaimed a strict opposition against mere depiction and demanded a direction towards understanding painting through line, form, and color. In 1910, the Futurist group, including Velimir Chlebnikov (1885–1922), Vasilij Kamenskij (1884–1961), and the Burliuk brothers (David, Nikolaj, and Vladimir), appeared in public, and in 1912 they attracted a great deal of attention with their manifesto "A Slap in the Face to Public Taste", which was a sharp attack on academic tradition in art as well as literature. Consequently, the image of the enemy was clearly exposed, as the narrow, alienated and incomprehensible character of tradition, which was confronted with the new artistic spirit of progress, and was being literally thrown off the boat of new technology.[41] The Cubo-Futurists made publicity throughout the Russian Empire with lectures on Futurism and poetry readings, often with events taking on a performative character. Explicitly, Burliuk and Vladimir Majakovskij (1893–1930) provoked the audience with their striking outlook and extreme statements. For example, they appeared on several occasions with painted faces or walked around the performance venue with a ladle or a bunch of radishes in their buttonholes, calling themselves great geniuses of Russian-language literature. With the outbreak of the First World War and the Russian Revolution (1917–1922), a period of migration of Russian-speaking artists to the West emerged, although the

40 Burliuk 1994: 356.

41 Burliuk et al. 1912.

causes were highly individual – ranging from political circumstances, and material shortages to professional prospects.[42] Despite this Burliuk still continued his lectures on Futurism throughout the Russian Revolution, traveling towards Siberia then to Vladivostok and Japan, and in 1922 to his final destination, New York.

David Burliuk, a well-established and recognized artist and poet, found himself in 1920s Japan in a marginalized position as an immigrant, and it is probably no coincidence that during this time, he emphasized his role as the "Father of (Russian[43]) Futurism" on several occasions. Burliuk's and Palmov's arrival in Japan was well-thought-out and accompanied by media coverage. Both artists were prominently dressed in frock coats and top hats (later they added a chrysanthemum to the chest and a long branch in the buttonhole). In addition, the artists brought along with them about 400 artworks and announced that they wanted to engage with the Japanese art scene while gaining knowledge of Japanese painting. Burliuk's other statements, such as he planned to walk "with a dog painted on his face through happy Japan" were considered a joke.[44] However, both the clothes and the statements may have seemed "nonsense" at first, belonged to the performative and provocative appearance of the Futurists in the Russian Empire. Two weeks into their stay in Japan, Burliuk and Palmov opened the mentioned exhibition displaying around 473 works by 27 artists, including further exhibition stops in Ōsaka and Tōkyō. The selection of the artworks was in fact very unusual as in addition to well-known Futurists and Constructivists, there were numerous completely unknown artists on display (about 261 works).[45] The Japanese art historian Omuka Toshiharu identified them as artists in exile, amateurs, Siberian farmers, and even 6 works created by Burliuk's five-year-old son.[46] These unknown artists went either completely unnoticed by the Japanese press, or were simply labeled as "weak, uneducated" and of "low quality".[47] This selection clearly reflected Burliuk's previous travel stops and especially his interest in the breaking down of boundaries in the understanding of

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42 Bowlt 1981: 215–221.

43 The term "Russian" used here is a direct translation of how Burliuk was introduced in published materials in Japan, for instance in the Burliuk, David / Palmov, Viktor (eds.) (1920), *Nihon ni okeru saisho no roshiagatenrankai* 日本に於ける最初のロシア畫展覽會 The First Exhibition of Russian Painting in Japan. Exhibition Catalog (List of Exhibits), 14–30 October, 1920: Hoshi Pharmaceutical Co.; Tōkyō: Hoshiseiyaku; or Burliuk, David / Kinoshita, Shuichirō 木下秀一郎 (eds.) (1923), *Miraiha towa? Kotaeru* 未来派とは？答える What is Futurism? An Answer; Tōkyō: Chūō Bijutsusha.

44 *Kao ni inu wo kaite koufuku na nihon wo arukitai miraiha no chichi to kisai to futari nyukyoushite tenrankai wo hiraku* 顔に犬を描いて幸福な日本を歩きたい『未来派の父』と『奇才』と二人入京して展覧会を開く *'Father of Futurism' and 'Genius' entered Tōkyō to hold an Exhibition, wants to walk through happy Japan with a dog painted in his face,* October 4th, 1920.

45 Burliuk / Palmov 1920.

46 Omuka 1995: 141–148.

47 Arishima 1920.

At the exhibition space of the "First Exhibition of Russian Paintings in Japan", Viktor Palmov, Tōgō Seiji, David Burliuk (from left to right), Image from Omuka, Toshiharu 五十殿利治; et al. (eds.) (2002): 極東ロシアのモダニズム 1918–1928: ロシア・アヴァンギャルドと出会った日本. Modernism in the Russian Far East and Japan 1918–1928: Tōkyō Shimbun: The Executive Committee for the Exhibition Modernism in the Russian Far East and Japan 1918–1928: 140, photograph by the author.

art in general. In their artistic as well as theoretical work, Palmov and Burliuk repeatedly promoted their intentional transgression of expression, of mixing the most diverse styles and genres as an artistic method, in other words, following a direction of letting go of painting that is fixed to a single style.

Keeping these diverse styles in mind, it is more than a simple coincidence that in Japan Burliuk, alongside paintings in futuristic and cubist style, also exhibited landscapes, and sceneries showing nature, working people, villages, and temples. A work that was often discussed in the Japanese media and could be considered representative for the futuristic and cubist style of Burliuk's oeuvre is the piece "Dostoevky's Art". This painting depicting the Russian writer, whose writings were already known in Japan, caused confusion and irritation among the public. Through the deconstructing of the human face and the provoked distortion, Burliuk conveyed his definition of an artistic movement. The overlapping eyes, dissonances, and disproportions established an image of Futurism that Burliuk strongly promoted through his public appearances. He proclaimed for instance at the performance *Hoo no ue no uma* (頬の上の馬 Horse on the Cheek) in Nagoya the origin of Futurism in the context of the emergence of traveling, which changed the human perception of speed: "If a painter intends to depict a very fast-moving scene on canvas, the eyes, nose, and mouth must lose their original forms and take on a new shape. […] Since a painter has to deal with everything he sees, it is in his nature to accept and paint what

David Burliuk, Dostoevsky's Art, 1920, oil on canvas, Location unknown, Image from the Magazine *Chūō bijutsu*, 1923, February, photograph by the author.

he sees as he sees it." Here, the artistic expression of movement should use a straightforward language of lines that can be broken, swirling, and energetic. Art, according to Burliuk, was a reflection of the times and should be welcomed without the constraints of tradition.[48,49,50]

48 Shibata 1921.
49 Shibata 1921.
50 Shibata 1921.

In addition to these works of deconstruction, speed, and dissonance, he also showed impressionistic paintings during his travels in Japan. These paintings reveal one of the primary sources of inspiration for Burliuk, to which he returned again and again during the course of his long creative life. In fact, the powerful hidden energies in nature fascinated him. He saw the world as a place of dynamic and constant movement, where all forms, as they interact, change all the time. He associated wildness with intensity, vitality, and joy of life, which he transformed into clear outlines, bright colors, and an extreme rawness in texture.[51] Burliuk's artistic understanding was thus an expression of the powerful, simple, and direct in folk art, something he associated with folklore, Scythian artifacts, peasant art, and the myth of the steppe,[52] where he drew heavily on his own Ukrainian family history.[53] In his search for the "wild beauty"[54] Burliuk traveled throughout Japan, even to isolated island groups such as to the island of Izu-Ōshima, about 100 km from Tōkyō, and to the Ogasawara group of islands, which lie about 1,000 km southeast of the main Japanese island of Honshū. These (and other) trips were recorded in three biographical prose narratives.[55] A more detailed look at these texts reveal that in fact Burliuk's quest in Japan, was a quest defining his relation, not with Japan, but with the West or as Oshukov put it: "In Japan, Burliuk realizes that he is a European."[56] An article in the Ōsaka Mainichi Shimbun highlighted Burliuk's strategies of constructing the Oriental other, i.e. his "Japan". He defined Japan in a purely aesthetic way by simply naming famous Ukiyo-e Japanese artists from the Edo period. The Ukrainian artist confessed that his interest in Japanese arts or his knowledge originated in the West, as Japanese culture came to the Russian Empire from France. In

51 Shkandrij 2019: 90.

52 Shkandrij 2019: 91.

53 Burliuk 1994: 98–104.

54 Burliuk 1994: 104.

55 *Cvetnaja gravjura. Japonskij dekameron* Ōshima, or Japanese Decameron (written in 1921, published in the US in 1927), *Po Tikhomu okeanu* In the Pacific Ocean (written in 1921, published in the US in 1927), and *Voskhozhdenie na Fudzi-san* The Ascent to Fuji-san (written in 1921, published in the US in 1926).

The narratives present three episodes from Burliuk's life in Japan: ten days spent on Ōshima (November 1920, together with Viktor Palmov and Sergei Scherbakov), four winter months spent on the archipelago of Ogasawara (December 1920—April 1921, with his wife and two sons, his sister Marjana, Václav Fiala (1896–1980), and Viktor Palmov with the latter's wife-to-be, Burliuk's sister-in-law), and the story of climbing Mount Fuji (July–August 1921, together with Václav Fiala and Herbert Peacock).

56 Oshukov 2017: 101.

addition, he presented himself as a successor of Goncourt, confirming the Westernness of his approach to Japan.[57]

Throughout the three narratives, Burliuk put himself in various exotic places while referring to Europe as a major point of his descriptions. In the introductory part of "In the Pacific Ocean", Burliuk reflected on the exotic and turned naturally to the Western tradition of representation of the other. He mentioned Robinson Crusoe, as well as novels by James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851) and Thomas Mayne Reid (1818–1883), whose stories he encountered in early childhood and now imagined himself to be one of their characters. He also remembered Western European artists, such as Paul Gauguin and felt an instant connection.[58] Oshukov has also pointed out that "Burliuk's literary allusions do not aim at either a comprehensive metaphorical representation of the Japanese culture, or an in-depth analysis of a certain literary tradition the author refers to."[59] Burliuk put the unfamiliar, odd, exotic, and alien, against the familiar background of Western (Ukrainian, "Russian") reality. In this way he does have similarities with Gauguin's "Tahiti paradise", where the exotic does not have a voice, is no different from the surroundings and remains in an imaginative framework for elaboration by the narrator. The other was merely a reflection of Burliuk, who was on the quest of finding the "primitive", "original" and "savage" Japan and preferred to see, talk, write and paint these aspects and not the modernized Japanese cities which he obviously encountered.[60]

The Ukrainian artist was an extremely controversial personality, moving between transcultural exchange and his own nationalism. He was not a passive traveler, merely observing and holding back from contemporary developments in Japan. On the contrary, he actively intervened in the Japanese modern art scene. The Japanese artists who were in close contact with Burliuk were representatives of the group that formed the Japanese Futurist Association, who were looking for new forms in clear distinction from the official exhibition system. In addition, Burliuk and Palmov got involved with the artists of *Nihonga*, which, considering the division between the genres of *Yōga* and *Nihonga*, shows their transboundary thinking.[61] The

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57 *Tōkyō de miraiha tenrankai. Jyōkyōshita Burikku, Parimofu ryōshi* 東京で未来派展覧会。上京したブリュック。パリモフ両氏 *Futurist exhibition in Tōkyō. Burliuk and Palmov came to Tōkyō.* October 4th, 1920: 2.

58 Burliuk 1925: 4.

59 Oshukov 2017: 113.

60 Burliuk 1925: 5.

61 The *Nihonga* artist Otake Chikuha 尾竹竹坡 (1878–1936) has formed the group *Hakkasha* 八火社 with a focus on futuristic expression in art. The founder specifically sought contact with Burliuk and Palmov by inviting them for an event to protest against the exhibition of the Imperial Academy. During this meeting all three artists talked about artistic techniques, such as the collage technique and Palmov even spontaneously picked up a brush to paint. Omuka, Toshiharu 1995: 156.

poet and painter Takehisa Yumeji 竹久夢二 (1884–1934) recalled his exchange with Burliuk and Palmov as profound, both within and apart from their exhibition preparations. He mentioned that they had been going out many times together, enjoying a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere.[62] Some Japanese artists cited David Burliuk directly, such as Shibuya Osamu, and referred to Burliuk's emphasis on a strong and subjective expression of the material.[63] The same was true of Kinoshita Shuichirō 木下秀一郎 (1896–1991), who, because of his close exchanges with Burliuk, carried forward his artistic understanding prominently in the joint publication *Miraiha towa? Kotaeru* (未来派とは？答える What is Futurism? An Answer, published 1923).

With the aim of familiarizing the Japanese public with the concept of Futurism, the book by Kinoshita and Burliuk provided a foundation for understanding this new movement. In addition to tables, graphs and sample drawings, the basic elements of Futurism are explained in such properties as color, line, shape, and composition. All this is placed against the context of numerous Western art historical periods that the Japanese reader certainly encountered for the first time. A cosmopolitan moment of Futurism is immediately visible within the book by the use of different languages to articulate the avant-gardes' vocabulary. In fact, on the second page of the book, translated into German, it is indicated in the title and the authors: "'Was ist der Futurismus? Antwort' verfasst von russischer Futurist David. Burliuk und japanischer Futurist Shiu. Kinoshita" Compared to the first page in Japanese containing simply the names of the authors, in the German translation their respective position has been emphasized as "Russian"[64] and Japanese Futurists, thereby proclaiming to be the representatives of both countries. Burliuk and Kinoshita stated besides the unity among all Futurists the contemporary art as spirit and speed using terms in Japanese, German, and Russian: 精神 (*Seishin*, spirit in Japanese), ガイスト (*Geist*, spirit in German,), ヴィストロー (*Bistro*, speed in Russian), 神速 (*Shinsoku*, speed in Japanese).[65] Futurist artworks reflect the constantly changing circumstances of contemporary society, which are related to the processes of modernization and industrialization. The authors have connected this aspect with the origin of Futurism, which they particularly locate in Japan with Ukiyo-e artists such as Hiroshige and Utamaro. They argued that these print artists reflected the ever-changing times of their era by creating artworks that dealt with concepts such as time, space, and ephemerality. If Hiroshige or Utamaro were born in contemporary times of airplanes, they would have been considered futurists.[66]

62 Fumon 1962.

63 Shibuya 1922: 22.

64 The term "Russian" used here is a direct translation.

65 Burliuk / Kinoshita 1923: 124–126.

66 Burliuk / Kinoshita 1923: 126.

Kinoshita picked up and translated the ideas provided by Burliuk into the Japanese specific context through his manifesto-like text, which addressed the young generation of artists starting with the urgent call "Come, new, young artists! Come to the creation of a new era! Wake up, friends!".[67] This appeal sought to foster the creation of new art that embodied the constantly moving, spinning, and vibrating life. Kinoshita encouraged that despite being restrained by the conventions and limits of Impressionism, Realism and Post-Impressionism, artists should free themselves from these restrictions.[68] Moreover, he suggested a direction that should be one of liberation from conventions, institutions, and from constant imitation.[69] This last point is of great significance, as it was precisely here where the avant-gardes' groups that came after the Futurist Association picked up, namely self-reflection. It also contained a crucial challenge to academic art institutions, where the monopolizing power of European art, which was held up above everything and promoted by the government, prevented free artistic expression. By criticizing art societies as well as art institutions, Kinoshita made an attempt to unify young artists around a common goal, which was Futurism and its ideas of a speedy, energetic, passionate life. Both Burliuk and Kinoshita were agents who, in dialogue, sought a synthesis of the global with the local within a concept of Futurism based on different temporalities and contexts of a plurality of avant-gardes.[70]

4 Constructivism with Varvara Dmitrejenva Bubnova: creating affordable art for the public, mass-produced but authentic in its artistic value

A few months before Burliuk's journey to the US, the Russian artist Varvara Dmitrejenva Bubnova (*4.(16.)5.1886 St. Petersburg, †28.3.1983 (Leningrad)) arrived in Japan. Accompanied by her mother, she visited her sister Anna, who had married the Japanese scientist Ono Shunichi. At first, she intended to stay only a few years, but in the end, she stayed for more than 36 years. The following pages examine Bubnova's activities in the 1920s and 30s, as well as a brief outline of her artistic works during her final years in Japan. While including few biographical stops her artistic

67 Kinoshita 1923: 253.
68 Kinoshita 1923: 255.
69 Kinoshita 1923: 254.
70 Melnikova 2021.

transformation in Japan is put in relation to the active artistic production around her as well as the political discourses of the time.[71]

In 1907 Bubnova passed the entrance exam to the Imperial Academy of Arts of the Russian Empire in St. Petersburg, where she, being one of 10 female artists,[72] received a strictly classical education as a painter. Right from the start, Bubnova expressed disapproval towards the education system at the academy, which was embracing depictions of human anatomy, focusing on perspective, nude painting, copies from nature, and studies of the Renaissance.[73] Not until she met the Latvian art student, the later theoretic and critic, Voldemārs Matvejs (also known under his pseudonym of Vladimir Markov, 1877–1914) in 1908 did she find a like-minded person with whom she could share her frustration.[74] Together with Matvejs, she argued that there was more to art than a single style or period, but a plurality of global artistic developments. Over time she gained awareness of the fact that her academic education did not provide any idea about art of other countries and times. Yet this wider view was a necessity in her mind, in order to achieve new perspectives within art. According to Bubnova, it is necessary to abandon a single narrow view: "The sensibility of the eye is developed by strictly challenging our visual perceptions, by freeing of ourselves from one particular interpretation of the world view that we, through habit, may assume to be the only correct one."[75] After Matvejs very early and

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71 Due to the limited length of this article, Bubnova's role as a teacher of Russian language and literature at Waseda University and Tōkyō University is not covered. However, it is important to note that her teaching activities were a key aspect of her overall biography. The very combination of artistic and teaching pursuits led her to interact with diverse and significant figures in the Japanese avant-gardes and proletariat scene, such as Murayama Tomoyoshi, Yanase Masamu, and Yabe Tomoe. She also collaborated with graphic artists like Hiratsuka Unichi, Munakata Shikō, and Onchi Kōshirō, as well as supporters of the feminist movement, and prominent writers and translators such as Yuasa Yoshiko 湯浅芳子 (1896–1990) and Miyamoto Yuriko 宮本百合子 (1899–1951). Additionally, during Bruno Taut's (1880–1938) stay in Japan in the 1930s, Bubnova had the opportunity to engage with the German architect.

72 Kozevnikova 1984: 22–23.

73 Kozevnikova 1984: 23–25.

74 The close relationship with Matvejs was significant not only for her personal artistic development in shaping of her critical spirit, but also for the avant-gardes in the Russian Empire in general. Matvejs is considered one of the most important pioneers of modernism in Latvian and "Russian" art. In 1909, he became a co-founder and important theoretician of the group Sojuz molodeji (Union of Youth), which realized seven exhibitions. As Bubnova was fluent in several European languages, she was involved in translation (Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto in the 2. Nr. of the "Sojuz Molodeji"), publications ("Persidskoe iskusstvo" (Persische Kunst), in: Sojuz molodeji 1912 (1) under psydonym D. Varvarova) as well as exhibitions (for instance in 1910 in Riga) of the art group Sojuz Molodeji. Within this group's activities, she even witnessed the joint 1912 event of the Moscow Cubo-Futurists including David Burliuk and the poet Vladimir Majakovskij. Kozevnikova 1984: 39–40.

75 Bubnova 1994a: 132.

sudden death in 1914, Bubnova was the one who managed his literary remains and helped to complete the important book "Iskusstvo Negrov" (1919),[76] based on his manuscripts, notes, joint travels and conversations. The book was published during the Russian Revolution and had an impact on many avant-gardists, including Vladimir Tatlin (1885–1953), Kasimir Malevich (1879–1935) and Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956). Without Bubnova's dedication and expertise, the book would not have been published.

From then on Bubnova lived in Moscow and worked as a research assistant in the Historical Museum. In Moscow, she became a member of the Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut Khudozhestvennoy Kultury), founded in 1920, where she immersed herself in the creative and theoretical environment of, among others, Kazimir Malevich or Vladimir Tatlin and maintained exchanges, in particular, with Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova (1894–1958), and Liubov Popova (1889–1924). In comparison to these artists, who embraced abstraction, Bubnova remained faithful to her realistic portraits and landscapes, for which she had to face a lot of criticism. In discussions about the new direction of painting, she frequently defended the reproductive power of art, which she derived from her knowledge of illustrated manuscripts, arguing that art began with pictorial representation.[77] Her role within the Institute of Artistic Culture was, on the one hand, that of a secretary at meetings and, on the other hand, she gave her own lectures on so-called "African" sculptures (based on materials by Metvejs) as well as on the woodcut technique "Lubok". Regarding her initial motivation for becoming a member of the institute, she wrote in 1964 that it was the proclaimed goal of establishing objective rules, using for instance Constructivism, for painting that convinced her, although she did not reject tradition as her fellow artists did.[78] Constructivism denied the mere imitation of form and painting with slogans: "Make paintings! Make things and do not depict them! Go to the factory! Make things, build houses, develop them!"[79] It was at this juncture that Bubnova, who had actually received a classical art education, gained a deep insight into the concepts of Constructivism. Among them were strict rejection of depicting nature, and emphasis on the leading role of color, form and their composition in space. It was about conscious construction of abstract forms, color and its materiality with the creation of a three-dimensional space on a canvas. However, such a construction does not happen in an empty space, but rather must leave the artist's studios to be absorbed by the wider industry and, thereby, achieve a rationalization

76 Markov 1919.
77 Kozevnikova 1984: 68.
78 Bubnova 1994b: 90.
79 Kozevnikova 1984: 70.

of art making.[80] The results of these sessions formed her understanding of the role of art in society throughout her stay in Japan.

During this time her sister was already living in Japan and with the news of the birth of her nephew, Bubnova decided to travel to Japan together with her mother. A few months after her arrival, in August 1922, Bubnova contributed paintings to the *Nika-kai* 二科会 exhibition and attracted the interest of the Japanese Futurist Art Association with her woodblock print "Grafika", which led to her immediate invitation to become a member of the group. The black and white reproduction of this work in the Tōkyō Asahi Shimbun newspaper shows a figural representation of a face, formed of dynamic and powerful lines. The heavy, partly curved and criss-crossing strokes indicate a Bubnova who is experimenting with abstracting forms. In the same year, she exhibited at the annual exhibition of the Futurists and later also became a member of the follow-up formation group, *Sanka Indenpendento Bijutsu Tenrankai* 三科インディペンデント美術展覧会 (Third Division Independent Exhibition Association, also called *Sanka-ten* 三科展). The artist Shibuya Osamu, who was a member of the Japanese Futurist Association and Sanka-ten, described her abstract and dynamic oil painting "Sun-Urb" (Sun City) with an artistic language that was new to Japanese artists. Unfortunately, the work is only now known from a black- and white reproduction and a short description, indicating that there were cobalt blue and sepia rectangles against a vermilion background. The yellow on the upper part of the work is a reminder of the sun next to a line familiar of an airplane crossing the sun, noted a reviewer in the *Junsei Bijutsu* 純正美術 magazine.[81] Instead of trying to identify anything figurative in this painting, Shibuya highlighted the concept of non-objectivity as the subject of the work.[82] Bubnova took up this principle in advance in more detail in her articles published in Japan: *Gendai ni okeru Roshia kaiga no kisū ni tsuite* 現代に於けるロシア絵画の帰趨に就いて On Contemporary Trends in Russian[83] Painting and *Bijutsu no Matsuro ni tsuite* 美術の末路に就いて On the Death of Art. Both texts reflected the main ideas of the Institute of Artistic Culture on form, color, composition and its construction. Radical for this context was, however, her demand for the fusion of industry and art within the process of artistic production. According to Bubnova, painting should leave the dead path of museum exhibitions in order to enter people's lives.[84] Furthermore, she sketched a constructivist utopia, where work would form the basis of human life and mass production would be the material expression of a new human psychology.[85]

80 Bubnova 1994b: 93.

81 Taki 1922: 21.

82 Shibuya 1922: 25.

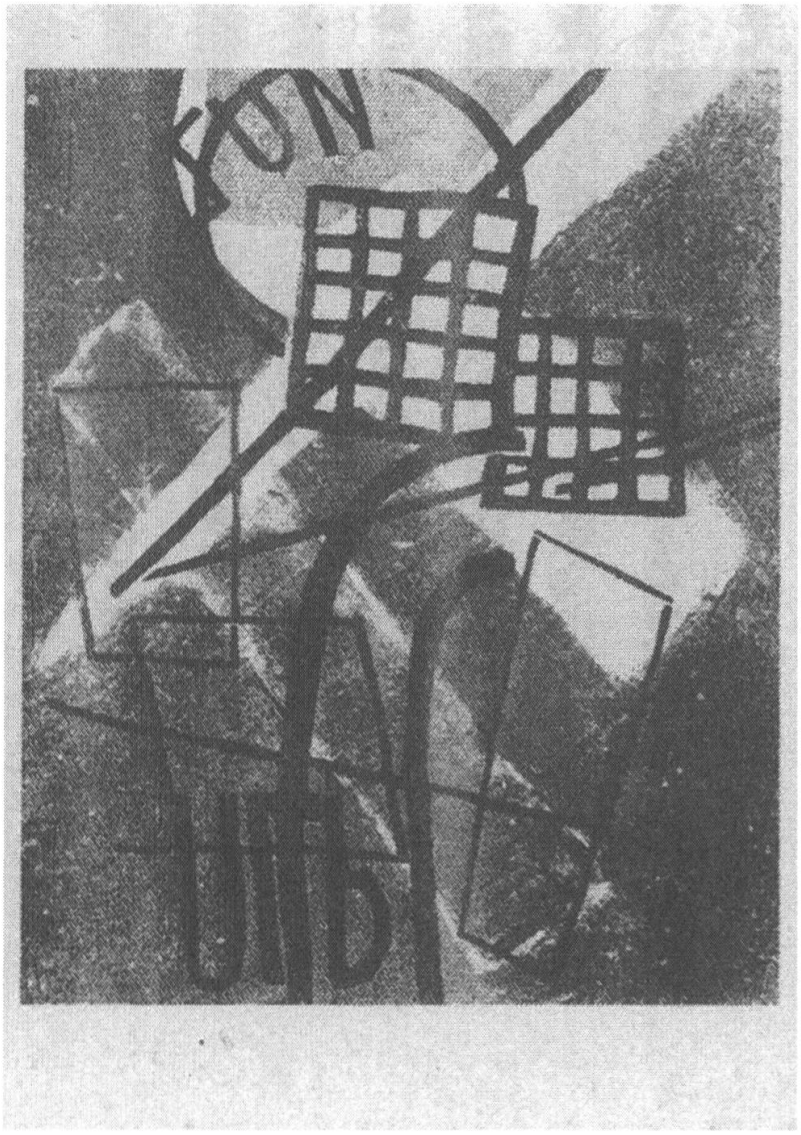
83 The term "Russian" used here is a direct translation of the title.

84 Bubnova 1922b.

85 Bubnova 1922a.


ワリヤ・ブ、ノヴ女史の版畫

Varvara Bubnova, Grafika, linoleum cut, location unknown. Image from newspaper article "Varija Bubunoba joshi no hanga ワリヤ・ブブノブ女史の版画" (Print by Varvara Bubnova), Tōkyō Asahi Shimbun, September 6th 1922: 5, photograph by the author.



Varvara Bubnova, SUN-URB, oil on canvas, presumed lost. Image from the Magazine *Junsei Bijutsu* November, Vol 2, No. 1, photograph by the author.

At first glance it seems that Bubnova was instantly on equal grounds with her Japanese colleagues but her letters to the artist Stepanova show a different side. For instance, she mentioned major communication problems and cultural difficulties with fellow Japanese artists, some of which included stereotypical remarks on her part.[86] She did become a member of the Sanka-ten group, publishing theoretical writings, but within the group she experienced rejection at first. Bubnova recounted her heavy dependence on a translator, who demanded that she adopt a more "populist" style for her texts, and who intervened in the content, thus decisively changing the progressive character of her theories.[87] She retold in one incident how she had proposed an ideological direction for the Sanka-ten group based on Constructivism and was rejected. "It seems that I frightened them," she commented.[88] What is interesting to note is her perception of the Japanese art scene, which she experienced as a struggle between the right-wing (conservative), and left-wing (progressive), camps. The left-wing artists, according to Bubnova, were not yet ready to move away from figurative painting, but they dreamed of constructivism. Moreover, she noted their struggle was too weak and not radical enough.[89]

When partaking in heated discussions among young Japanese artists reflecting on their time, Bubnova could not miss the arrival of a certain individual Japanese artist from his one-year abroad in Germany, namely Murayama Tomoyoshi 村山知義 (1901–1977). German Expressionism in Berlin attracted international artists, among them Murayama, who returned home with firsthand knowledge of the latest artistic developments in Europe and therefore could connect instantly to Bubnova and her radical direction. Between 1922 and 1923, Murayama encountered various artists especially at the Gallery "Sturm", who left a deep impression on him.[90] Additionally, he participated in international exhibitions and congresses, experienced theater pieces (by Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, and Max Reinhardt), and revolutionary free dance work by Niddy Impekoven. Just a few months after his return to Japan, Murayama presented the results of his travels in the form of a solo exhibition, and announced his newly born art theory *Ishikiteki Kōsei Shugi* 意識的構成主義 (Conscious Constructionism), which laid the foundations for the new avant-gardes' group MAVO.[91] Being aware of the international facet of the avant-gardes' movements, Murayama promoted the MAVO magazine in several important European

86 Bubnova 1994d.

87 Bubnova 1994c: 243.

88 Bubnova 1994c: 243.

89 Bubnova 1994c: 244.

90 Such as Franz Marc, Lyonel Feininger, Wassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka, August Macke, Kurt Schwitters and Alexander Archipenko.

91 Murayama 1991: 5.

publications and maintained contacts with El Lissitzky (1890–1941) and Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931) upon his return.[92]

The theoretical writings by Bubnova "On Contemporary Developments in Russian Painting" and "On the Death of Art" found acceptance, especially by Murayama. Moreover, Bubnova and the Japanese artist exchanged ideas about German Expressionist and Constructivist art. Murayama quoted her in his theoretical writings and reviewed her works. In addition, Murayama underlined Bubnova's exploration of printmaking from a Constructivist perspective. At this point, she was studying lithography and undergoing a transformation towards the printing technique, which Murayama perceived as a necessary consequence based on her understanding of Constructivism.[93,94]

Despite being largely part of the avant-gardes' circle of *Yōga*, Bubnova gradually moved away from painting towards the printing technique of lithography during her time as a guest student at the Tōkyō Kogei Gakkō (Tōkyō Higher School of Arts and Crafts). Bubnova's technique choice seemed odd to most of her Japanese colleagues due to the fact that lithography was considered a rather low-quality printing technique in comparison to the respected and recognized oil painting. Bubnova explained her choice to others by saying that all printing techniques were fundamentally more democratic compared to oil painting. As a medium of mass production, she also noted that lithography did not produce a singularly unique piece that can only be seen exclusively in a museum or in a private collection, but consisted of numerous copies. In addition to this, the artworks were more affordable and thus more accessible to people. "My idea was to introduce affordable, mass-produced, but authentic works of fine art back home."[95] However, this decision was accompanied, in addition to the criticisms of her colleagues, by a practical dilemma, as Bubnova could not find a proper exhibition setting for her works within the Japanese art system, with its strict division between *Yōga* and *Nihonga*.

While gradually turning away from oil painting, she began studying Japanese art on her own, focusing on pre-modern art. She was during this study surprised with regard to contemporary developments within the Japanese art scene, where she saw parallels to her time in Moscow. She found herself discussing the same desires by young artists, especially after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, for all that was

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92 The back-cover page of MAVO magazine no. 1 shows a list of worldwide art magazines: Der Sturm (Berlin); Ma (Budapest/Vienna); Noi (Rome); Blok (Warsaw); Broom (Rome); Het Overzicht (Antwerp).

The list was continued in MAVO no. 2, no. 5, no. 7 and no. 9. Lissitzky sent Murayama the magazine Merz vol. 8, no. 9 and Van Doesburg sent Der Stijl no. 2. Van Doesburg apparently owned six issues of MAVO. Kawahata 1995: 8.

93 Murayama 1924a: 13–14.

94 Murayama 1924b: 12–13.

95 Bubnova 1994b: 30.

new, and found them to be turning away from tradition. On September 1, 1923, 100,000 people died, 50,000 were injured, and 70 % of Tōkyō's two million population was left homeless after the Great Kantō Earthquake. As a result, communication paths temporarily broke down, and the government fell into a chaotic situation.[96] In the context of these near apocalyptic circumstances, rumors began to circulate that people of Korean origin and Communist Party supporters conspired to weaken the country. This led to uncontrolled acts of violence, including on the part of the general population, against anyone even remotely suspected of communism.[97] Among the accused were often intellectuals and artists who were in contact with the socialist environment. Bubnova experienced these cruelties, particularly as her close friend Yanase Masamu was arrested and deprived of his property, including his works of art.[98,99] At this time, Bubnova positioned herself on the side of proletarian Japanese artists, such as Yanase Masamu and Yabe Tomoe 矢部友衛 (1892–1981), with whom she maintained a long friendship. Many avant-gardes' groups, among which she was active, were following a proletarian direction in art in order to reflect the life of the working class.

Painting first in oil, Yanase engaged intensively with Futurism, especially during David Burliuk's stay in Japan. He considered Futurism as carrying great potential for the proletarian class, the task of which, based on science, was to express a vision directed towards the future. For Yanase, the close connection between Futurism and the proletariat shaped a new direction for the Japanese avant-gardes.[100] Therefore, he argued for the abandonment of the conventional notion of painting, which he considered to be a process of the discarding of unnecessary "clothes" to reveal the "nakedness", in other words, the clarity of colors and strong lines. In this way the proletariat could use this art, referring here to the art of Futurism, for their own purposes.[101] With the arrival of Bubnova, Yanase's interest was awakened in Constructivism which later resulted in a turn to mainly political caricatures within the proletarian movement. Bubnova and Yanase both shared a common interest in German artists such as Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) and George Grosz (1893–1959) and her friendship with Yabe Tomoe was based on a mutual fascination for contemporary Soviet art. Yabe later became a leading figure and initiator of the 1927 Exhibition of Contemporary Soviet Art in Tōkyō (*Shin Roshiaten* 新ロシア展 The New

96 Mainichi Shimbun 1992: 154–157.
97 Shea 1964: 123–124.
98 Kozevnikova 1984: 134.
99 Yanase 1990.
100 Yanase 1922: 209.
101 Yanase 1921: 181–183.

Russian[102] Exhibition), where Bubnova was responsible for curating around 400 works.[103]

While refocusing her artistic work and interacting with groups open to printmaking (for instance, *Nihon Hanga Kyōkai* 日本版画協会 Japan Graphic Arts Society or *Kokugai-kai* 国画会 National Painting Society), Bubnova met the graphic artist Hiratsuka Unichi 平塚運一 (1895–1997).[104] This encounter led to another crucial relationship with Hiratsuka's student, Munakata Shikō 棟方志功 (1903–1975). Bubnova was immediately fascinated by Munakata's work, which impressed her due to the powerful balance between black and white, a variety within the line work combined with his precision und usage of the void as an outstanding element.[105] By drawing inspiration from Munakata and others in this circle of printing artists (including Hiratsuka and Onchi Kōshirō 恩地孝四郎 1891–1955), Bubnova developed an appreciation for ink painting and the materiality of the medium, which is equally as important as the actual brushwork, and she learned about the specific brush technique associated with it. Through her self-studies, Bubnova trained her way to "see" the different periods of Japanese painting and what eventually came most powerfully into her awareness, something she could not forget from that point on, was the *Suiboku-ga* 水墨画 (Ink wash painting) of the Muromachi (or Ashikaga) period (1338–1573).[106] Thus, she started to see interconnections between *Suiboku-ga* and the following periods ultimately acuminating in the works of Munakata. In doing so, she was able to draw a line into her present time, where traditional art continued to echo and exist as an ongoing and still vivid element. She called it the "secret" of Japanese art.[107] From this moment on, *Suiboku-ga* became the turning and pivotal point of her considerations, as well as the starting point for her engagement with pre-modern Japanese art. In addition, the artworks of *Suiboku-ga* appealed to her through their exceptionally graphic character. As she saw this represented in the uninterrupted line work with its most precise execution. Above all, Bubnova pictured these art works to be exclusive and mystical pieces, as they were not freely accessible due to their religious context of Zen Buddhism. The parallels to icon painting, which she studied in St. Petersburg and Moscow, are certainly a decisive element for the deep appreciation that she expressed towards *Suiboku-ga*. In an undoubtedly idealized way, she portrayed the priests and monks as artists in complete seclusion, who produced their work in an intimate process of dialogue with the sacred. Moreover, it is precisely in the emptiness and silence of the place, be it the

102 The term "Russian" used here is a direct translation of the exhibition title.
103 Kozevnikova 1984: 123–127.
104 Kozevnikova 1984: 137.
105 Kozevnikova 1984: 142.
106 Kozevnikova 1984: 149.
107 Kozevnikova 1984: 152–153.

temple or the church, surrounded by knowledge in the form of books and poetry, in solitude and renunciation of the worldly, that the creation of such works of art was possible, according to Bubnova.[108]

When looking at the remaining oeuvre of the artist, it is possible to identify certain stages of her development in terms of the context of time and interaction with the particular art scene. After her classical education at the academy, she experimented with abstraction and was drawn to Constructivism in Moscow. In the process of finding her own voice, she started to pursue printmaking. Initially, she created colorful prints with large-scale compositions, which garnered attention from the Japanese artistic print scene. Later, she began producing more black-and-white prints, which can be seen in the light of her intensive involvement with Japanese painting, as mentioned above. Thematically, despite the transformation in the medium, her everyday life formed the main and a recurring motif. She drew inspiration from the people in her immediate environment, the landscapes of the places she traveled to, and situations that deeply moved her, such as the unforgettable events of the Second World War. The (available) works from the 1940s and 1950s merge her initial training, her faithfulness to realistic portraits and landscapes with an intensive study of Japanese painting, as can be seen for instance in these two brief examples.

The work "A Tree and a Sacred Arch" consists of nothing but outlines that seem at risk of dissolving, while simultaneously conveying a sense of lightness and weightlessness. The entire height of the picture is occupied by a monumental tree trunk, and at its feet is a portal that serves as both an entrance and an exit, possibly a crossing point to a temple or shrine. As if to illustrate the true majesty of nature, a human figure stands next to the gate, depicted only as a silhouette. Despite its at points sketchy and dim stroke work, reminiscent of calligraphy, it is in fact a lithographic print. It is as if Bubnova was exploring the possibilities of the printing technique using the methods found in painting and drawing.

Bubnova framed the essential search of *Suiboku-ga* as the search for the inner through the outer expression by means of a reduction in synthesis with symbolic or spiritual expression. It is not only the brushwork that stands out in the *Suiboku-ga*, but also the repeated role of the void on the surface of the paper as an independent element. This allows for the effective and expressive portrayal of the contrast between the infinite nature, the tree, leaning over the edge of the work, and the insignificance of human existence right next to it in direct comparison.[109] Bubnova concluded that the same principles that she and Matvejs developed, primarily the

108 Kozevnikova 1984: 161.

109 Kozevnikova 1984: 161–162.

Varvara Bubnova, A Tree and a Sacred Arch, 1950s, Lithograph on paper, 45.6 × 30.6 cm, Copyright by Waseda University Library, photograph by the author.

rules of "heaviness and lightness", can be found in *Suiboku-ga*,[110] which represents a duality within expression. This and other aspects can be observed as well in her work "At an Old Graveyard in Japan". It features two main protagonists: a monumental statue and a human figure leaning in front of it, with nothing else but a tree in the background. Despite the title suggesting that the figure is standing on a graveyard, it may actually be some other place entirely. However, what attracts more attention than the two protagonists is the interplay of light on the statue, which illuminates the head in particular. In contrast, the upper part of the human body is completely white and appears to dissolve, leaving only a vague outline behind. In this work Bubnova aimed to transfer the finely nuanced shades of black and white, called *Nōtan* 濃淡 as an almost vanishing gradation onto a printing plate.

Although Bubnova worked in the midst of the Japanese avant-gardes and innovators in graphic art, thereby maintaining contacts with influential and important artists, participating in exhibitions, joint meetings and activities, her first solo exhibition did not take place until ten years after her arrival in Japan in 1933. The reasons for this late acknowledgement are numerous and may lie in her undergoing a stylistic transformation which the Japanese strict art system did not provide any space for. Likewise, a further significant fact is that, as a female artist, she was a pioneer on a path that had previously been difficult for women to access. For instance, the 1887 founded Tōkyō Bijutsu Gakkō (東京美術学校 Tōkyō Fine Arts School) did not accept female students until 1946. However, in 1900 the first private art institute for women, Joshibi University of Art and Design (女子美術大学, Joshi-bijutsu Daigaku) (abbreviated "女子美 (Joshibi)") was established as a reaction to the lack of access to art education for women.[111]

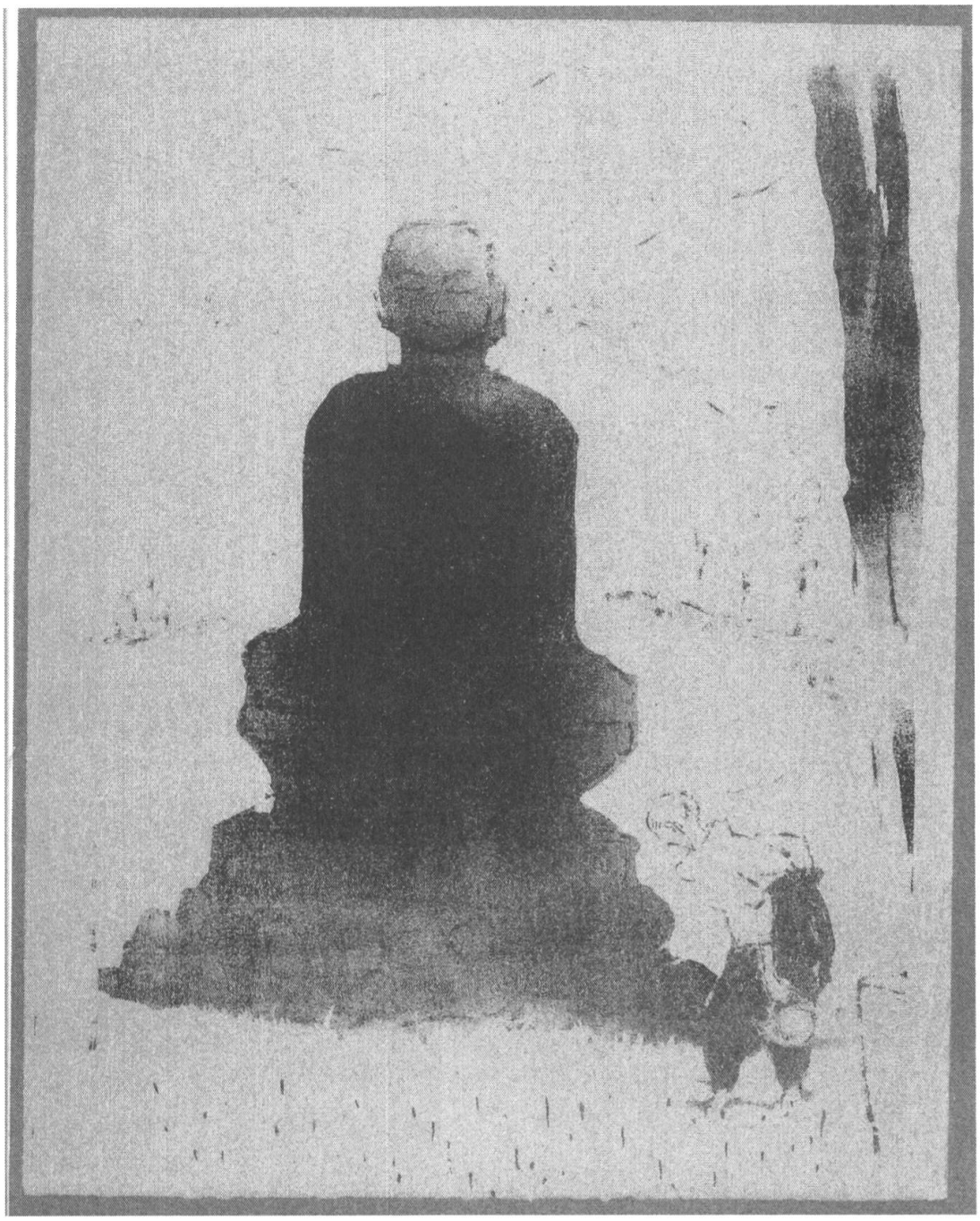
In 1932 Bubnova participated in the exhibition of the Society of Graphic Arts *Kokuga-Kai* 国画会 and received positive reviews, in which her extraordinary skills with the lithographic technique were mentioned.[112,113] Following this, in 1933 her first solo exhibition occurred in Ginza (Tōkyō) at the store for printing. Despite not addressing the gender issue widely in Kozevnikova's writings on Bubnovas biography, a few lines remain crucial. In one episode, when fellow Japanese artists visited her studio, they expressed their surprise at the fact of how talented Bubnova was as a female artist and did not expect her to be able to physically work on the

110 Kozevnikova 1984: 162.

111 In one episode, Kozevnikova reports how the first graduate of the first university for women in Tōkyō visited Bubnova to organize a regular meeting for students in order to broaden their perspective on other languages and cultures. Kozevnikova 1984: 81–82.

112 Kozevnikova 1984: 136.

113 Onchi 1953: 27–28.
Ono 1961: 228–230.



Varvara Bubnova, At an Old Graveyard in Japan, 1953, Lithograph on paper, 36 × 26.5 cm, Copyright by Waseda University Library, photograph by the author.

printing machine.[114] After the artists tried out the printing press themselves and realized how difficult it was to operate, even though they were men, they started laughing at each other. Despite being disguised as a humorous episode intended to

114 Suzuki 1934: 19.

highlight the artist's skills, it reveals instead the fundamental structural conditions that crucially determined Bubnova's stay in Japan.

5 Between the global and the local – a space for self-reflection

If we were to describe the Japanese avant-gardes during the 1920s using an image, a wave could be a suitable symbol or analogy. A wave that rises slowly, starting at engagements with stylistic issues of Cubism, Futurism, Fauvism, and merging the "Isms" while looking first to the technique and theory to draw from. Later, the boundaries of the material were explored and a political dimension added. The peak of this wave could be characterized as being radical, transgressive and politically motivated. Afterward, groups such as MAVO and Sanka-ten emerged, staging anti-establishment exhibitions, submitting expressionistic designs for the reconstruction of the earthquake-ravaged city of Tōkyō, and publishing magazines that included an issue with a firecracker on the cover, along with exhibitions that incorporated performative aspects, in addition to montage and collage works. In the midst of this turbulent wave were two migrant artists: David Burliuk and Varvara Bubnova.

In the first case of Burliuk, Japan represented a transit space without which the journey to the US would have not been possible. If we look with a critical lens at the stay of the Ukrainian artist, his propagandistic appearance as a "Western" painter and poet who called himself the "Father of Futurism" and had a clear agenda of spreading the futurist understanding of art in an extra-European country, is obviously following the model of diffusionism. However, this national agenda goes hand in hand with exchange and contact relations, that is, an active engagement with the Other. The coexistence of multiple narratives does not provide any contradictions, as the artist manages to combine the transnational and the national narrative without dissolving them. The dissonances, tensions, frictions and misunderstandings, however, remain. Burliuk was an extremely controversial personality, moving between transcultural exchange and his own nationalism. He was not a passive traveler, merely observing and holding back from contemporary developments in Japan. On the contrary, he actively intervened in the Japanese art scene and promoted his artwork in a striking, provocative manner, while at the same time contributing to the exotic visual confirmation of an imaginary Japan through his Western gaze.

Second, Varvara Bubnova, who had followed an unusual path and since her art training had been in the midst of the latest artistic developments, but still critical of them, played an important role as an artist, mediator, teacher, and translator in Japan and in the Soviet Union. Her example reveals the strict structures of the art

system in Japan, which she constantly questioned with her work as a female artist. While she acknowledged the longing of her fellow Japanese artists for a new art, for transformation and reconstruction in the world, she could not agree with it. In particular, she could not agree with young artists rejecting their traditional art.

For Bubnova, Japan became the center of her artistic activities. Therefore, as a trained painter, she turned down oil painting and became a pioneer in lithography, a hardly known printing technique in Japan. Her artistic transformation went hand in hand with the initial rejection of her artistic ideas, which she freshly brought with her from Moscow. The application of her concepts and theories were not possible within the boundaries of the Japanese oil painting, *Yōga*, but were instead possible in printmaking. Bubnova found a technique that corresponded to her constructivist claim of an art for all, in accordance with the slogan of the Institute for Artistic Culture "to go into production". Although surrounded by a new artistic environment, Bubnova found herself attending similar discussions on definitions of painting, which she had previously experienced in Moscow. Her story reveals the global and the local, the European and extra-European avant-gardes processes of transfer, selection, translation and hybridization.

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