

BIOGRAPHY (MoMA)

When The Museum of Modern Art's first director, [Alfred H. Barr, Jr.](#), met Aleksandr Rodchenko on his trip to Moscow in 1927—one of the first times an Anglophone art historian had visited the Soviet Union in the years since the Russian Revolution—he wrote, “Rodchenko showed us an appalling variety of things—Suprematist paintings (preceded by the earliest geometrical things I’ve seen, 1915, done with compass)—woodcuts, linoleum cuts, posters, book designs, photographs, kino sets, etc.... [He] showed much satisfaction at having delivered the death blow to painting.” Rodchenko had declared the death of painting in 1921, with three monochrome paintings—Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, and Pure Blue Color—exhibited in the exhibition 5x5=25 alongside works by fellow Russian artists [Varvara Stepanova](#), [Alexandra Exter](#), [Lyubov Popova](#), and [Aleksandr Vesnin](#). In these works, Rodchenko emphasized the paintings’ material qualities, applying the three primary colors in a way that drew attention to their substance as matter. “I reduced painting to its logical conclusion and exhibited three canvases: red, blue, yellow,” he declared. “I affirmed: it’s all over. Basic colors. Every plane is a plane and there is to be no more representation.”

After he jettisoned painting, Rodchenko turned his attention to merging art with life. He became a founding member of the Constructivist Working Group in 1921, which defined art making as a form of professional expertise and labor like any other, and not as a spiritual calling. Using the materials and tools of an architect or engineer—a compass, ruler, and plywood—he produced a series of spatial constructions in 1921, which were hung suspended from the ceiling. With these circular structures, he abandoned the premises of traditional sculpture—mass, pedestal, and precious materials—in favor of open volumes made from everyday materials like wire and plywood. His spatial constructions were included alongside works by leading Constructivist artists Karel Ioganson, [Georgii](#) and [Vladimir Stenberg](#), and Konstantin Medunetskii in an exhibition organized by OBMOKhU (Obschestvo molodykh khudozhnikov [Society of Young Artists]) in Moscow in May 1921. Between 1920 and 1930, Rodchenko taught construction and metalwork at VKhUTEMAS (Higher state artistic and technical studios), the Russian equivalent of the German Bauhaus.

In the mid-1920s Rodchenko turned to other mediums, including graphic design, book illustrations, and, most notably, photography. On a trip to Paris in 1925 he bought a handheld camera, which allowed him to easily experiment with the composition of images. He framed the world from new points of view—from above, below, and at other unexpected, sharp angles—encouraging the viewer to see familiar things in new ways. His photographs and photomontages were published widely in such avant-garde periodicals as LEF and Novyi LEF, and in such state-run publications as Sovetskoe Foto and USSR in Construction. In the early 1930s he embraced photography as a tool for social commentary, critically depicting the disparity between the idealized and lived Soviet experience. The images he made contrasted with Socialist Realism, which was declared the official style of art in the Soviet Union in 1934. Preferring the saccharine depictions of positive, heroic, and idealized subjects

unencumbered by the trials and tribulations of everyday life, Soviet critics found Rodchenko's photography too formalist at times. Nevertheless, he continued to find support abroad, exhibiting in Film und Foto: Internationale Ausstellung des Deutschen Werkbunds at the Städtische Ausstellungshallen in Stuttgart, Fotomontage at the Staatliche Kunstbibliothek in Berlin, [Cubism and Abstract Art](#) (1936) and [Abstract Painting: Shapes of Things](#) (1941) at MoMA, and Mezinárodní Výstava Fotografie at the Manes Exhibition Hall in Prague. Rodchenko died on December 3, 1956, in Moscow.

Ksenia Nouril, C-MAP Fellow for Central and Eastern Europe, Department of Photography, 2016

Barr, Alfred H. "Russian Diary 1927–28," in October 7 (1978): 10–51.

Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in Painting as Model (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 238.

BIOGRAPHY (from Britannica)

Aleksandr Mikhailovich Rodchenko (born November 23 [December 5, New Style], 1891, [St. Petersburg](#), Russia—died December 3, 1956, Moscow, Russia) was a Russian painter, sculptor, designer, and photographer who was a dedicated leader of the [Constructivist](#) movement.

Rodchenko studied art at the Kazan School of Art in [Odessa](#) from 1910 to 1914 and then went to [Moscow](#) to continue on at the [Imperial](#) Central Stroganov School of Industrial Art (now the Stroganov [Moscow State University](#) of Arts and Industry). In 1916 he began living with the artist [Varvara Stepanova](#), whom he had met at the [Kazan](#) school and who was to become his companion both in art and in life. That same year Rodchenko met [Vladimir Tatlin](#), who invited him to participate in the [Futurist](#) art exhibition "The Store." Rodchenko entered the artistic circle of the radical Moscow avant-garde and began taking part in their intense creative life.

From 1918 to 1922 Rodchenko increasingly worked in the Constructivist style: a completely [abstract](#), highly geometric style that he painted by using a ruler and compass. In 1918 Rodchenko presented a solo show in Moscow. That year he also painted a series of black-on-black geometric paintings in response to the famous *White on White* [painting](#) of his [rival](#), [Kazimir Malevich](#). That spirit of rivalry with the older generation of avant-garde painters proved an important creative stimulus for Rodchenko. As head of the group of young Constructivists, he engaged in a heated battle for "industrial art" over [easel painting](#). The battle was won by the "industrial artists," in the field of theory (Rodchenko replaced [Wassily Kandinsky](#) as the director of the Institute of Artistic Culture) as well as in the teaching and practice of art. In 1919 Rodchenko began to make three-dimensional constructions out of wood, metal, and other materials, again by using geometric shapes in [dynamic](#) compositions; some of those hanging [sculptures](#) were, in effect, [mobiles](#).

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In the 1920s he took up other art forms, among them [photography](#); [furniture](#) design; [stage](#) and [motion-picture](#) set design; and [poster](#), [book](#), and [typographic design](#). He [collaborated](#) with poet [Vladimir Mayakovsky](#) on a number of projects, including Mayakovsky’s book *Pro eto* (1923; “About This”; Eng. trans. *That’s What*), for which Rodchenko did the book design and created accompanying [photomontages](#). During 1927 and 1928 Rodchenko designed all 24 covers for the avant-garde art and leftist political publication *Novy LEF* (“New LEF”).

[Marginalized](#) as far as the official Soviet art—[Socialist Realism](#)—was concerned, Rodchenko centred all his [innovation](#) and creativity on photography and shaping with his distinct style the photographic record of Soviet [industrialization](#) and photographic [propaganda](#). He created distinct images that featured unusual—often oblique—angles and showed the geometric influence of his Constructivist background. His art photographs were exhibited, and his photojournalist work was published widely during the late 1920s and early ’30s. He also taught art and design beginning in 1920. He returned to painting in the late 1930s and created Abstract Expressionist works in the 1940s. Beginning with his appointment in 1920 and throughout the next decades, he also served as the [Bolshevik](#) government’s director of the Museum [Bureau](#) and Purchasing Fund, through which he helped to establish public art museums throughout the Russian provinces with collections of modern and contemporary works.