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# Mapping Ukrainian contribution to modernism

July 27, 2006

BY [KEVIN NANCE](#) Art Critic

Mention Ukrainian art and your mind leaps first to Easter eggs. You know the ones I mean: those fragile folk-art treasures called *psanky*, with their delicate intertwining lines and geometric figures that smack of classical decoration and Byzantine iconography. What might not occur to many Americans -- for reasons having to do with the country's reluctant mingling with Russia and, later, the Soviet Union -- is Ukraine's contribution to the modern art movements that percolated throughout Europe and the United States in the early 20th century.

"Crossroads: Modernism in Ukraine, 1910-1930," a touring exhibit making a welcome stop at the Chicago Cultural Center through Oct. 15, is out to change that. Culled from private collections as well as those of the National Art Museum of Ukraine and other institutions there, this handsome, mostly unfamiliar grouping of about 70 works by 21 artists firmly establishes Kiev (which Ukrainians now spell Kyiv) as one of the most fertile hotbeds of European modernism, along with St. Petersburg and Paris.



"A Kiss" (1913) by Vsevolod Maksymovych, an homage

A casual walkthrough of the exhibit -- the first of its kind in the United States -- can tend to leave you with the impression of a polyglot, aggressively cosmopolitan art that lacked easily discernible national characteristics. Those trendy Ukrainians! They dipped their brushes into virtually every paint can of the avant garde, from Cubism and Futurism to (belatedly) Art Nouveau and (early on) Constructivism. (That last movement, widely considered a Russian phenomenon, was actually pioneered in part by a



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to Gustav Klimt's icon, is part of "Crossroads: Modernism in Ukraine, 1910-1930."

## ART REVIEW

### 'CROSSROADS: MODERNISM IN UKRAINE, 1910-1930'

RECOMMENDED

**When:** Through Oct. 15

**Where:** Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington

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their subtle use of Christian symbols -- and deepens into outright decadence in the overheated canvases of Vsevolod Maksymovych.



A Constructivist journal cover from 1929 by Vasyl Yermilov is part of "Modernism in Ukraine" at the Chicago Cultural Center.

jaw-dropping stunners.

The show's other standout is Viktor Palmov, who both employed and subverted the social realism of the early Soviet era by tamping down its heroic political agenda in favor of stylized treatments of the figure, endowing them with some of the folk mysticism and high color saturation that we now associate with Chagall.

The Soviets initially tolerated the Ukrainian avant-garde but eventually reversed course, sending a generation of free-thinking modernists into exile or the gulag. Here's the trail they left behind.

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cadre of native or adopted Ukrainians.)

A closer look, though, takes you back to those Easter eggs, or rather to their connections with classical, Byzantine and ecclesiastical sources. There's a distinctly Ukrainian lushness that adheres to even the most severe compositions here -- such as Kazimir Malevich's "suprematist" images, with

For good or ill, Maksymovych, a nudist, body builder and dapper provocateur-about-town who committed suicide at age 21 after a drug overdose, unexpectedly dominates this exhibit. His smorgasbord of large-scale decorative panels, heavily indebted to Symbolism and Art Nouveau (especially as embodied by Aubrey Beardsley and Gustav Klimt), may be too rich a diet for some; "The Nude" (1914), a trio of lithe bodies fronted by a fey young man whose privates are covered by what appears to be a heart-shaped valentine, borders on camp. But two of his images from 1913, "Kiss" (a worthy homage to Klimt's icon of the previous decade) and "Masquerade" (his most macabre and Beardsleyesque panel), are

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