Introduction

In 1923, Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) organized and designed a posthumous production of Zangezi, a play by Velemir Khlebnikov (1885-1922). (See Figs. 1, 2) This “revolutionary event” (as characterized by Tatlin) was far more than an homage to his recently deceased friend. It was a reiteration of Russian avant-garde art and thought, dating from the early teens. The play is an example of Khlebnikov’s literary creation of a new, universal society based on principles of a mathematically calculated harmony expressed in Futurist linguistics. The designs summarize Tatlin’s development of geometric abstraction and the Constructivist theory of the “Culture of Materials.” Both men were pioneers in the efforts of develop a UNIVERSAL language—both of word and image—suitable to the radically new society wrought by the socio-political and cultural revolutions in Russia during the teens and twenties. The Russian Revolution served primarily as a catalyst for the frenetic activity that had begun in Russia early in this century.1

Despite differences in their styles (“Futurist,” “Suprematist,” “Constructivist”), most members of the Russian avant-garde shared the following goals: to destroy the Old Order based on the powers of tsar-aristocracy-bourgeoisie-church; to discredit outdated artistic and literary forms; to contribute to the building of new society in their writing and art. All media were considered in this new light, including: poetry, prose, and criticism; painting, sculpture, and architecture; graphics; domestic and industrial design; and theater. After experimenting with various styles, materials and techniques during the early and middle teens, the Russian avant-garde began to direct their efforts toward creating a socially useful art for the masses. Thus, they turned increasingly away from “narrative literature” and “fine art.” Writers began to develop new linguistic forms, frequently abetted in their efforts by enterprising typographers.2 Artists began to create wall murals, environmental sculptures, book and


periodical designs, posters, furniture, dishes, textiles, architectural projects, theatrical decor, etc. This change in intention among writers and artists more or less coincided in time with the Revolution.

Before presenting an analysis of Zangezi, this study will investigate the nature of Tatlin’s Constructivist art and aesthetics as well as Khlebnikov’s Futurist style and philosophy.

**Constructivism and Futurism**

Constructivism was the style of this new art, and new approaches to language and linguistics came under the rubric of Futurism. Constructivism emphasized geometric abstraction and social utility. Although the term “Constructivism” was not invented until 1921, Constructivism as a style was introduced in the spring of 1916, when Tatlin sponsored his exhibition *Magazin* (“The Shop”) in Moscow.³ Works included in this exhibition expressed Tatlin’s desire to experiment with uniting “purely artistic forms with utilitarian intentions... in our work of creating a new world... to exercise control over the forms encountered in our new everyday life.”⁴ In preparation for the application of these principles to utilitarian art, Tatlin experimented in non-objective forms, promoting an experimental combination of industrial materials, such as metals and glass, with a creative process. The so-called *Counter-reliefs* shown by Tatlin at “The Shop” and elsewhere were actually assemblages created as non-objective studies of material and form. (Figs. 3, 4) The absence of a strong sculptural tradition in Russia facilitated the rapid development of non-objective sculpture there.⁵ Tatlin and his contemporaries were not bound or even influenced by a figurative approach to form or, for example, by traditions of casting bronze or carving marble or wood. Thus, they were free to develop both a new context and a new form for sculpture, as demonstrated by the Counter-reliefs.

In painting, the concept of *sdvig*, developed by Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935) in paintings and prints represented a “dislocation” or “shift” of forms on the canvas. (Fig. 5) *Sdvig* refers to the Cubist and Futurist devices of representing portions of figures or objects completely independent from the whole. In constructional painting and sculpture, *sdvig* is transformed into wholly independent, non-objective forms interacting dynamically with each other as well as with penetrating and surrounding space.

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³ For works produced prior to 1921, when the term “Constructivism” officially entered critical jargon, the term “constructional” will be used in this essay. For a discussion of “Constructivism” before and after 1921, see my article, “Art after the Last Picture Show: Rodchenko,” *Art in America* (Summer 1980).
⁴ Tr. Bowlt, Russian Art, p. 205.
⁵ Strictures against “making graven images” had been imposed by the Eastern Orthodox Church in Russia, thereby affecting the production of sculpture.