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The Utopian Avant-Garde: Soviet Film Posters of the 1920s

Feb 25–Aug 21, 2022

The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, and the subsequent civil war in Russia that continued until 1920, created an environment that allowed for unprecedented experimentation. The Bolsheviks' overall objective of building a Communist "workers' paradise" resulted in the active rejection and eradication of all existing civil and social norms while various political factions fought to define and implement what their new country would become. In this chaos, a vibrant, idealistic group of young artists and intellectuals enjoyed a brief period during which they could use their talents to build a new Russian culture. The government quickly determined that film and graphic design were the best means of disseminating ideas among a predominantly illiterate population, and they were thus used to direct the attention of the public to the glory of the nascent Soviet state.

This exhibition comes to Poster House through a generous loan from The Ralph DeLuca Collection.



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The Utopian Avant-Garde

Jerome Harris, 2022

The Rise & Fall Of Utopia

As cinema became increasingly popular among the urban proletariat, the Party influenced the ways in which both film production and censorship regulations adapted to meet unforeseen challenges. The screening of “bourgeois” foreign movies had become more commonplace than the new regime had originally intended, and their comparably higher profits were put back into the growing domestic film industry. Meanwhile, groups of young artists tasked with indoctrinating the public with the Party’s values incorporated the visual language of the Revolution into poster advertising, turning the dark streets of Moscow into a kaleidoscope of color. Major Russian film directors also emerged during this period, and poster artists drew on their innovative approaches to filmmaking in their own promotional compositions. Creativity previously unmatched in any medium flourished in posters throughout the 1920s, establishing a golden age of Soviet graphic design.

This incredible period of unbridled optimism and experimentation, however, was short lived. In the aftermath of Lenin’s death in January 1924, it soon became clear that these ambitious posters better reflected the early idealism of the Revolution than the draconian dictatorship slowly strangling society under Stalin. By the 1930s, the government that had supported and funded the production of innovative,



Director Dziga Vertov and his poster for **Film-Eye**, 1924

revolutionary design turned on those same artists who had helped promote the early dream of Communism to the public. In less than a decade, the idea that progressive, avant-garde art could be used to change society for the better was roundly silenced, ushering in more than 50 years of rigid censorship that strictly controlled all forms of individual expression. The posters on display in this exhibition represent the best examples from this surprising period in design, one never allowed to reach its full potential and one virtually unknown outside of the Soviet Union until the final collapse of the Communist government in the early 1990s.

**Of all the arts, for us the
cinema is the most important.**
—Vladimir Lenin



Film-Eye, 1924

Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956)

- Directed by Dziga Vertov, *Film-Eye* was meant to be the first in an unrealized six-part series that showcased his novel approach to documentary filmmaking. Through the use of hidden cameras, Vertov and his team captured slices of everyday life in Soviet Russia. He then deployed a full range of modern film techniques to edit and reconstitute the footage, including animation, multiple exposures, high-speed shots, reverse motion, and montage.
- Vertov started his career as a journalist within the newsreel department of the Moscow Cinema Committee; this film is seen as the bridge between straight reporting and his theory that the editor creates a truth beyond the narrative perception of reality. This concept as well as the method itself are also referred to as “kino-glaz” (film-eye).
- While Alexander Rodchenko was known for his avant-garde photography, this poster does not include actual photomontage due to printing limitations in the Soviet Union at that time. Instead, both the central eye and the double portrait of the boy are drawn in a photorealistic style.



The Death Ray, 1925

Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956)

- Recently determined to be the work of Rodchenko, this poster stands in stark contrast to the more elaborate design on the right for the same film. Multiple advertisements were commonly created for a single movie, often with comparable print runs (printing information in the margins indicates that 6,000 copies of this poster were released, while 7,000 were printed of the version next to it).
- As Rodchenko was one of the founders of the Constructivist movement, it is no surprise that his poster deploys the strong, contrasting colors and simple, geometric shapes of that style to produce a visceral response rather than a narrative summary of the film.
- The sole figurative element in the composition is represented by the aviation goggles on a minimalist head behind the central glyphs, part of the villain's signature costume.
- The box at the lower left presents a unique marketing challenge to viewers: “solve before the first screening— whoever solves the mystery of the signs on this poster will get free entry to *The Ray of Death*.” While not yet the dominant political party in Germany, the Nazis had officially adopted the swastika as their symbol in 1920. As the bad guys in the movie are repeatedly referred to as “Fascists,” the intended connection between them and the National Socialists is fairly clear, as is the significance of the rotation of the four glyphs to form a swastika.



The Death Ray, 1925

Anton Lavinsky (1893–1968)

- Like Rodchenko, Anton Lavinsky was a pioneer in the use of photomontage; this is one of the earliest cinematic posters to actually incorporate that printing technique. To do this, the designer would cut out imagery from printed photographs at the appropriate scale and paste them onto a larger graphic image. The composition would then be photographed and reprinted through photo-offset lithography.
- Directed in Russia by Lev Kuleshov, *The Death Ray* is considered one of the earliest feature-length science-fiction films. While two of the eight reels of the movie have been lost, the plot revolves around a labor uprising in a foreign country. Fascists steal a “death ray” from a Soviet inventor, only to have it turned on them by those they have attempted to oppress.
- Although the film clearly promotes a pro-Communist message, contemporary reviewers found it confusing and too artistic in style, resulting in poor sales at the box office. While montage and other avant-garde techniques would become iconic elements of Soviet cinema, domestic audiences typically found these devices frustrating and hard to understand.



Battleship Potemkin, 1925

Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956)

- Considered one of the most important films ever made, *Battleship Potemkin* chronicles the real-life mutiny in 1905 of Russian sailors aboard a ship off the coast of Odessa. Directed and cowritten by Sergei Eisenstein, many of the plot points are fictionalized to enhance a pro-Communist message about how this act of rebellion was the first step toward the Bolshevik Revolution.
- At least four other posters were created for the initial release of the film in the Soviet Union, including designs by the Stenberg brothers and Anton Lavinsky. Each presents a decidedly different take on the movie.
- Rodchenko's Constructivist composition is graphically the strongest in the series, with the diamond shape around the ship's gun turrets creating a three-dimensional trompe l'oeil effect, at once receding into and emerging from the page. The text surrounding the diamond announces "coming soon to the best cinema theaters of Moscow."
- This was the first Soviet film to be commercially successful abroad; however, it is important to note that popular Western-style cinema was still ten times more profitable with Russian audiences than that made by domestic avant-garde directors. Unlike ballet or theater that had historically reflected the tastes of cultural elites, cinema was the preferred cultural activity of the working classes, and, therefore, the most successful films were those that presented easily digestible entertainment.



The Second Exhibition of Film Posters, 1926 Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

- In 1925, the Stenberg brothers arranged the first exhibition of Soviet film posters at the Moscow State Chamber Theater, where they also worked as set and poster designers between 1922 and 1931. A year later, the graphic designer Nikolai Prusakov organized a similar show at the same location featuring new work.
- The lower text panel of this design indicates that posters by Bograd, Borisov, Voronov, Gerasimovich, Dlugach, Evstafyev, Lavinskyi, Naumov, Prusakov, Refrezhye, Rodchenko, Ruklevsky, Rychkov, the Stenberg brothers, and others would be on view between February 1 and 15 in an exhibition open from 12 to 5pm, except Sundays and public holidays.
- This poster stands in stark contrast to those highlighted in the exhibition, focusing on Prusakov's tetrahedron-shaped signature as the central motif. The designer viewed the glyph as a gesture toward Suprematism, an artistic movement that glorified geometry and strong use of color, rather than as a signifier for his own ego. He would bring Suprematist principles to many of his best poster designs.
- The government response to the show was positive, with Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Commissar of Education, noting that the designs were devoid of pre-Revolutionary bourgeois sentimentality, but served instead as functional and aesthetically pleasing vehicles of information.



The Three Million Trial, 1926
Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Based on the 1907 Italian novel *The Three Thieves* (*My Billionaire Uncle*) by Umberto Notari, and directed in Russia by Yakov Protazanov, *The Three Million Trial* follows a comedy of errors over the theft of three million lire.
- The Stenberg brothers' composition borrows directly from the visual language of film, creating repetition with slight variation among three separate panels on either side of the page. While the differences to the gentleman-thief's character on the left are rather slight, the petty robber on the right appears to be waving cheekily—the successive movements implying the progression of a film reel.
- None of these characters are printed through photolithography, but were produced by the projection of stills from the actual film onto a wall; the figures were then traced with a lithographic pencil. The use of the film itself as the template for the design establishes a level of consistency between the “moving” figures and creates the illusion of photomontage.



One Sixth of the World, 1926
Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956)

- Commissioned by the Soviet government, *One Sixth of the World* is a pure propaganda film intended to showcase the diverse riches within Communist countries (indicated by the title as comprising one-sixth of the world's population).
- Rodchenko's ingenious composition shows a photomontage head of a woman staring out at the viewer while one sixth of the black upper layer of the image appears to have been pulled back, revealing a second layer in red—the color of the Communist flag. The design tempts the viewer to continue pulling down the black upper layer, thus figuratively turning the entire world red.
- Director Dziga Vertov enlisted a group of eight teams to travel throughout the Soviet Union and film the happy, productive lives of its citizens. The end result is less avant-garde than his other films, serving politically as a visual tapestry of the Soviet Union's prosperity and natural resources.



The character of film culture was determined by an unspoken compromise between popular tastes and governmental policies.

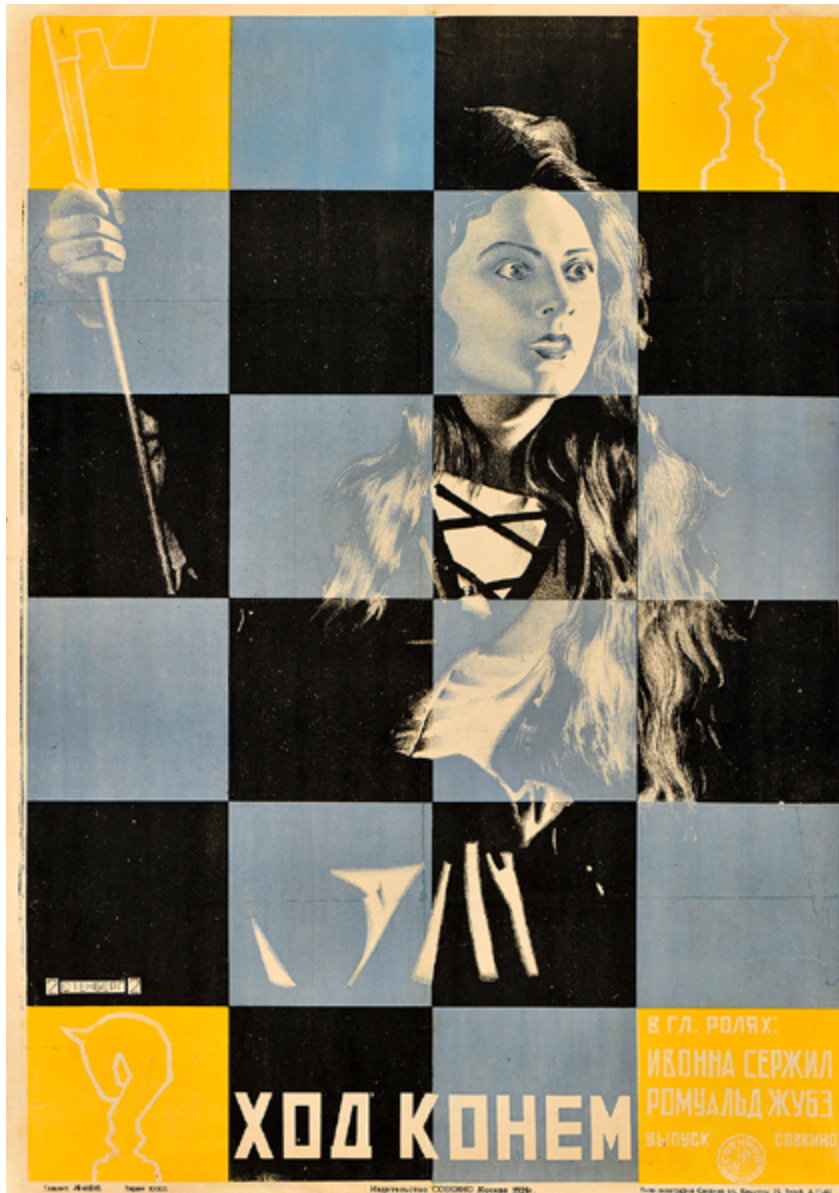
—Peter Kenez, Russian historian

Captain Duncan, 1926

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)

& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Imported from the United States, *Captain Duncan* was originally released as *Half-a-Dollar Bill* two years before its Soviet debut.
- While the reedited Soviet version of the film has not survived, the original plot follows Duncan McTeague, captain of the *Grampus*, who discovers an abandoned baby in his cabin with half a dollar pinned to his clothing. McTeague raises the boy on the ship, not knowing that his mean-spirited first mate is the child's father. Years later, McTeague accidentally kills the first mate, the mother returns to claim her son, and the captain marries her.
- The Communist government found this type of schmaltzy fodder distasteful and bourgeois; however, Soviet audiences preferred it to state-supported cinema. Although often heavily edited, movies like this provided lucrative ticket sales and distribution fees for the country, which were directly funneled back into the domestic movie industry to create new propaganda.



The Knight's Move, 1926
 Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
 & Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- This is one of two chessboard-themed designs created by the Stenbergs for the Soviet release of the French film *The Miracle of the Wolves* (1924), a historical drama that takes place during the 15th century.
- During the 1920s, chess emerged as a major part of Soviet culture. The term “chess fever” had even been coined in 1925, the year before this film was released.
- While chess does not appear in the actual movie, poster designers were often only given a title, a brief plot summary, or some film stills on which to base their compositions. It would be reasonable to assume that the Stenbergs inferred that a title like *The Knight's Move* might involve the popular game.



In the Gardens of Avarra, 1926
Designer Unknown

- Released in France in 1923 as *In the Gardens of Murcie*, this film follows a love triangle involving two men from different economic backgrounds and the beautiful woman torn between them. This intimate drama coincides with a water shortage in a small Spanish village.
- The text at the bottom indicates that the film was distributed by Sovkino—the most powerful national film organization in the Soviet Union that controlled the distribution of all foreign films and operated at least four movie studios with 22 production units. This organization would have made the decision to change the name of the garden in the title from Murcie to Avarra—a possible reference to the Awara fruit from a South American palm tree.
- This design, with its bright colors and geometric shapes, represents Suprematist principles. Unlike Constructivism, Suprematist art is not purely information-driven and functional, but elicits a response in the viewer through abstract imagery.



The Punishment, 1926
Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)
& Grigori Borisov (1899–1942)

- This poster advertises the fourth in a series of five Georgian adventure films about a small gang of unlikely heroes and their various exploits in the First Cavalry Army.
- Depicted in the image is Kador Ben-Salim, the only known Black actor in Soviet cinema of the 1920s. Of Senegalese descent, he came to Russia as part of a Moroccan circus troupe. He then joined the Red Army during the Revolution and subsequently appeared in at least eight movies, frequently using his skills as an acrobat.



The Unwilling Twin, 1926
 Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)
 & Grigori Borisov (1899–1942)

- Originally released in the United States under the title *Alarm Clock Andy* (1920), this movie is a romantic comedy in which a low-level employee accidentally impersonates a specialist in order to win the love of the boss's daughter. When the real specialist shows up, Andy has him arrested as a fraud, lands a deal for the company, and wins the girl.
- Because paper and other printing supplies were hard to come by in Soviet Russia, salvageable materials were often reused. Darker ink from a different poster can be seen bleeding through the background of this design, indicating that the verso contains a separate advertisement.
- Collaborative designs like this were not uncommon since the entire concept of the individual artist had been brought into question during the Revolution. Collective making was essential to the building of a new Communist future, and artists were at the forefront of that movement.



The Girl with the Hat Box, 1927

Semyon Semyonov (1911–86)

- Directed by Boris Barnet, *The Girl with the Hat Box* (sometimes translated as *Moscow That Laughs and Weeps*) is a lighthearted Russian romantic comedy in which the characters come up against post-Revolutionary urban regulations.
- Under Lenin’s New Economic Policy, housing was entirely owned by the government which would assign it to individuals based on their family situation. Single people were often stuck in dormitories, while married couples occasionally received slightly larger and more private accommodations in communal apartments.
- The female lead in this film has a private room above a milliner to whom she sells her hats. Taking pity on a homeless student, she suggests that they engage in a marriage of convenience so that he can have her apartment while she lives with her grandfather outside the city. Predictable romantic intrigue ensues.
- Semyon Semyonov’s poster does not depict a scene from the film, but rather shows the clothing of an apparently bodiless figure set against a giant question mark. The text above reads “Where is the person?”—the answer being that he’s gone to see *The Girl with the Hat Box*. This technique of promoting a film by referring to the public’s general excitement about seeing it was used by many designers, especially if they had been given little information about the plot before they made the poster (see the nearby composition for *Mounted On Kholt*).



A Difficult Role, 1927

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)

& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Originally released in Italy under the title *Maciste in Hell* (1925), this film features a popular Italian cinematic character named Maciste who appeared in dozens of films from the 1910s through the '60s. He is defined by his Herculean strength, and is typically shown rescuing a damsel from an evil tyrant or a supernatural figure.
- In the original version of this movie, Maciste travels to hell to rescue a woman's baby from the god of the underworld, only to be stuck there until he receives a magical kiss from Pluto's daughter. None of these plot points are apparent in the poster, suggesting that, like so many other imported films, the reels were edited to fit a more appropriately Communist narrative.
- Cinema posters of the 1920s were essentially an extension of political graphic design, meant to embody Party ideology both in what they expressed and how they were made. As the concept of the individual artist was pushed aside after the Revolution, many designers collaborated on posters, none more intimately than the Stenberg brothers who usually worked on the same composition simultaneously. In all but their first two posters, the signature near the edge of their designs translates as "2 Stenberg 2," emphasizing their united, equal effort on a project.



Niniche, 1927

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Starring Ossi Oswalda (“the German Mary Pickford”), *Niniche* (1925) is a silent German romantic comedy about a hotel maid who pretends to be an infamous showgirl.
- The circular motifs within the composition imply the lens of a movie camera, while the rich-black background simulates the darkness of the theater. Designers like the Stenbergs believed that movie posters were an extension of the film, from production to premiere, and would often incorporate elements of those experiences into the image.
- The yellow text in the upper circle repeats the name of the film four times, while the red text lists Oswalda’s full name. As in many of the Stenbergs’ other posters, the typography becomes a design element rather than merely a listing of information about the film.



Sar-Pige, 1927

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982),
Georgii Stenberg (1900–33),
& Yakov Ruklevsky (1884–1965)

- Filmed on location in Uzbekistan with local Chuvash actors, *Sar-Pige* (released outside the U.S.S.R. as both *The Women* and *Zora*) follows the women of this Turkic ethnic group during a period before the Revolution.
- Movies like this were used to link the revolutionary cause with colonized or otherwise oppressed peoples, underscoring that Communism could only ameliorate their lives. At the same time, social and ethnic hierarchies are maintained in the narrative, forever “othering” those highlighted in the films.
- The poster represents a departure from most of the Stenbergs’ and Ruklevsky’s other graphic work. The lettering includes actual photomontage—a rare example of photolithography at this scale in the mid-1920s.



When we made posters for the movies, everything was in motion because in movies, everything moves.
—Vladimir Stenberg

The Pounded Cutlet, 1927
Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Released in the United States as *The Yokel* (1926), this 18-minute short is a slapstick comedy about a country man who inherits an oil well and heads to the big city. There, his middle-class aunt tries to set him up with her daughter, his pet goose runs amok at a formal party, and a young maid rescues him from guests who are only after his money.
- While the Stenbergs have included images of the lead actors, Snub Pollard (upper left) and Thelma Daniels (lower right), the central figures shown boxing do not appear in the film itself. This is presumably another example of the designers inferring a theme from the movie's title.
- The sequential repetition of partial images of the lead actors plays with the concept of film strips moving through a projector, connecting the static medium of a poster to the kinetic motion of cinema. This is further emphasized by the fact that the outlines of the boxers appear to be slightly separated from their bodies, as if the viewer is seeing two separate moments of the movie at once.



The Decembrists, 1927
 Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982),
 Georgii Stenberg (1900–33),
 & Yakov Ruklevsky (1884–1965)

- Directed by Alexander Ivanovsky, *The Decembrists* is a romantic Russian period drama revolving around the Decembrist Revolt of 1825, when the sudden death of Tsar Alexander I divided the loyalties of members of the court. Aristocrats who favored Alexander’s brother Constantine for the throne staged a coup against those who supported his younger brother, later Tsar Nicholas I. All those who opposed Nicholas were ultimately either executed or exiled to Siberia.
- The Soviet government viewed the revolt as a historical precursor to the Bolshevik Revolution, and therefore as an acceptable storyline for film. The purple figure on the left (the central image in the two-sheet format) is a bronze statue of Peter the Great on horseback located in Peter’s Square (subsequently Decembrists’ Square, and now Senate Square) in St. Petersburg where the revolt took place.
- The Stenbergs and Yakov Ruklevsky designed this poster so that it could be used in both a single and two-sheet format, depending on the available space. Other versions feature Turko-Arabic script (used by some of the peoples in the Caucasus), pointing to the wide circulation of films within the Soviet Union.



The Decembrists (1927)

Early Film In Russia

Russia embraced the potential of film earlier than other countries. Five months after the Lumière brothers screened their first cinematograph show in Paris on December 28, 1895, they sent cameraman Camille Cerf to St. Petersburg and Moscow to demonstrate this new marvel as part of the celebrations surrounding the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II. Cerf filmed the royal family and its entourage throughout the day, creating a 93-minute feature—one of the first documentaries recording a historic event. The Tsar was so impressed with the result that he encouraged the importation of technical supplies from France (where most of the basic components for filmmaking were produced); he soon initiated the “Tsarist Chronicle,” a short newsreel series that ran until 1917 and was intended to publicly present and promote the activities of the Imperial Court. Soon, major production studios from France like Pathé and Gaumont set up offices in Moscow to make and distribute films.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 set the stage for the future of the Russian movie industry. Essential materials like celluloid film and equipment became nearly impossible to obtain, and imported movies, while not banned, were hard to find as supply chains were cut off by the Eastern Front. Without competition from foreign films, domestic production became the only means of satisfying the growing demand

for cinema. The style of movies produced also changed drastically during this time, evolving from a series of four or five shorts that mixed newsreels with brief dramas to more formulaic, feature-length films. The posters promoting them followed wider European trends, typically showing representational illustrations of a dramatic scene—but were generally of a much lower artistic quality than their foreign counterparts. The spaces used to screen these films also expanded, moving beyond gutted-out, cramped apartment buildings filled with rows of chairs to more lavish “movie palaces” that touted buffets, plush seating, reading rooms, and improved ventilation.

The urban public’s relationship with cinema shifted dramatically after the Revolution. By late 1918, the Bolshevik government under Lenin nationalized the film industry. Theaters were now entirely state owned, all screened content had to be deemed “educational,” and it was illegal to sell raw celluloid to private companies. Within a matter of months, the film industry imploded along with the country’s financial system. In 1921, facing mass famine, a power and heating shortage, and extreme inflation, Lenin determined that the only way forward was to rebuild the Russian economy by allowing some domestic private enterprise. In March of that year, he established the New Economic Policy (NEP) that allowed a modicum of free trade, including the reopening of movie theaters in Moscow and other cities. While some theaters continued to be state owned, the majority were either privately run or leased from the government, allowing for savvy entrepreneurs to capitalize on the public’s hunger for entertainment. Posters, more than any other medium, were now the most effective way to entice people to go to the movies.



High Society Wager, 1927
Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- First released in Germany in 1923 under the title *The Weather Station*, this film was often also known in other countries as *Worldly Couples*, and was directed by Carl Froelich, who went on to make films under the Nazi regime.
- The movie chronicles the gradual downfall of a married couple as they attempt to elevate their social status and make a fortune by gambling.
- This is one of the Stenbergs' most sophisticated compositions, showing the couple becoming detached from each other as they ascend a spiral staircase. The continuation of the steps at the top and bottom of the page creates a sense of movement and narrative beyond the world of the poster.
- The Stenberg brothers were two of the most prolific and important designers to emerge from this period; their posters are among the most innovative and progressive of the genre, with this being a prime example.



A Commonplace Story, 1927

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)

& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- While American films began to dominate the Russian import market by the mid-1920s, Germany remained one of the country's strongest trading partners, and some of the most famous actors in the Soviet Union were known because of their roles in imported German movies.
- Directed by Fyodor Otsep, *A Commonplace Story* was originally released in Germany as *The Yellow Pass* (1927). It follows a poor couple under the control of a wealthy landlord who forces the wife to work as a wetnurse for his daughter to reimburse him for overdue rent. When the daughter's husband makes unwelcome advances, the wetnurse attempts to flee, but the police confront her and give her a yellow card—the document of a prostitute.
- As in many Soviet posters from this time, the designers emphasize tension and fear in the faces of the figures and in the overall composition. Women often look scared or otherwise agitated, in contrast to those in Western European or American posters where they frequently embody the ingenue or damsel in distress.
- This image also appeared in Vladimir Stenberg's 1928 set design for *Sirocco* at the Moscow State Chamber Theater where he and his brother worked. He often incorporated their posters into his stage sets.



Sirocco Set Design (1928),
Vladimir Stenberg



Russian film poster artists experimented with the same innovative cinematic techniques used in the films.

—Susan Pack, poster historian

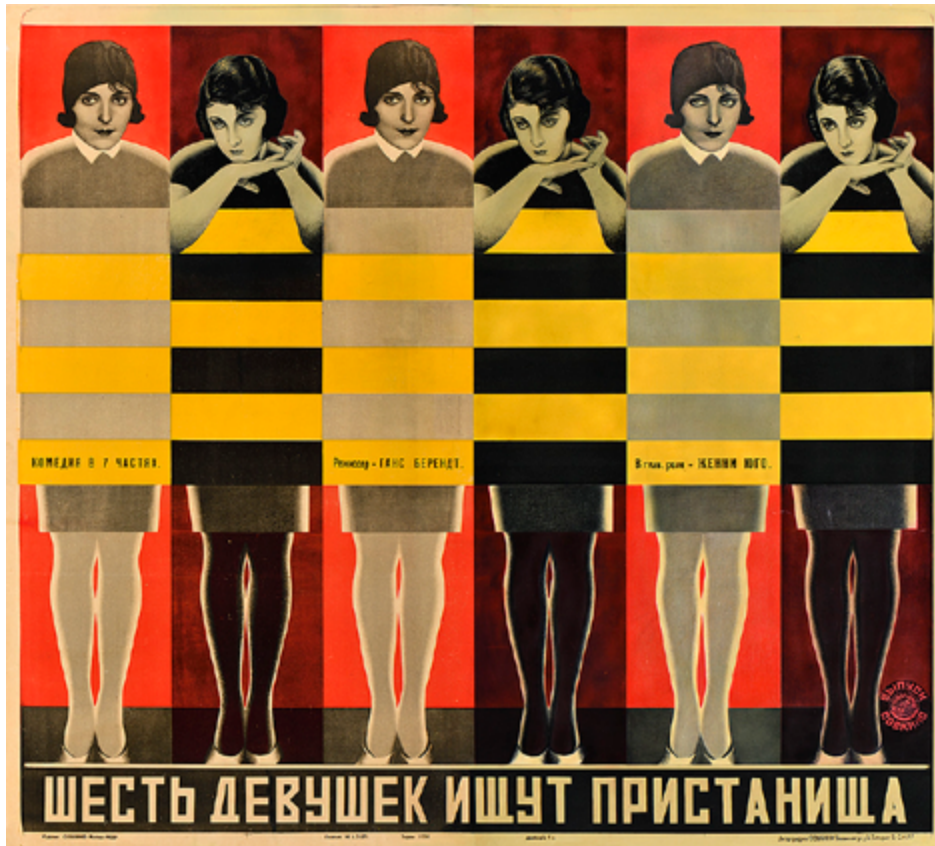
Turbine No. 3, 1927

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982),

Georgii Stenberg (1900–33),

& Yakov Ruklevsky (1884–1965)

- Cowritten by Adrian Piotrovskii and the controversial playwright Nikolai Erdman, *Turbine No. 3* is a lost film. In 1933, Erdman’s satirical writing resulted in his arrest and three-year exile to Siberia. This movie, however, supposedly fit within the Party’s ideology; it promoted the dedication of a group of workers to collective labor in the face of great danger.
- The poster composition is a notable blend of illustration, photorealism, and photomontage. The central portrait of the hero was produced by the Stenbergs’ unique method of projecting a film still onto paper and then copying the contours of the face with a lithographic pencil. Meanwhile, the smaller images in the checkerboard pattern in the lower register are photomontages of moments from the movie. Since most Soviet printing presses could not reproduce photographic images at a large scale, poster designers were forced to make compromises like these that ultimately resulted in more impactful advertisements.



Six Girls Seeking Shelter, 1928

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)

& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Considered to be one of the Stenbergs' strongest compositions, this design repeats the same two photorealistic female figures to create the titular "six girls" standing behind a Suprematist-inspired geometric fence. It is a key example of the way in which Soviet poster designers combined numerous artistic styles in a single image.
- While the specific details of the plot are unknown, the film was originally released in Germany in 1927 under the title *Six Girls in a Room for the Night*, and was advertised as a comedy in seven parts. Some sources note that the original title was *Trousers* or *Scandal in a Small House*.
- On March 12, 1929, the famed Russian director, Dziga Vertov, published a letter in the film magazine *Kinogazeta* complaining that his landmark film, *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), was not being shown in any of Moscow's major theaters despite favorable reviews in the film press. Instead, *Six Girls Seeking Shelter* (titled *Six Girls Behind the Monastery Walls* in his letter) was being shown in seven of the biggest cinemas accompanied by major promotional fanfare. This indicates that Soviet distributors were painfully aware that popular tastes did not really favor the high-brow, avant-garde material promoted by the government.



Shanghai Document, 1928
 Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
 & Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Funded by Prometheus, a German distribution company that promoted Soviet film abroad, *Shanghai Document* is a six-reel documentary about Chinese life in the late 1920s. It is considered one of the greatest examples of Soviet nonfiction film.
- While the original focus of the movie was the economic disparity between the domestic and foreign elite in China and the thousands of impoverished laborers within its major cities, the production crew happened to be on location during the Shanghai Massacre of 1927. On April 12, General Chiang Kai-shek ordered the extermination of all supposed Communists in the city, resulting in a major blow to Soviet influence within the country.
- This three-color poster is one of the Stenbergs' most interesting, incorporating actual Chinese newspaper clippings instead of photomontage. It had the second-largest run of any poster in this exhibition, with a first-run circulation of more than 20,000 copies.



In Spring, 1929

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)

& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- In December 1927, Stalin announced the first Five-Year Plan, an ambitious approach to rapid economic growth within the Soviet Union that focused on heavy industry and collectivization of agriculture. Its implementation undid many of the systems put into place under Lenin's New Economic Policy from 1922.
- Filmed in Ukraine by Mikhail Kaufman (Dziga Vertov's brother), *In Spring* is a blatant piece of propaganda showcasing the benefits of the first Five-Year Plan. The slice-of-life movie begins with images of snow melting and flowers blooming, but quickly segues into scenes of farmers plowing fields with tractors and machines churning rapidly inside factories. It ends with a display of healthy, happy citizens participating in a variety of sporting competitions on May Day.
- The poster blends the human parts of the film—a photorealistic image of an athlete in motion and a factory worker mid-task—with geometric design elements evoking the forms of modern industrialization; the presence of the movie camera in the poster underscores the movie's documentary nature. While posters highlighting similar themes became commonplace toward the end of the 1920s, in reality the first Five-Year Plan led to a significant shortage of consumer goods as well as to mass famine, particularly in Ukraine.



Sold Appetite, 1928

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)

& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- This film is based on “The Sale of an Appetite” (1900), a short story by the Franco-Cuban writer Paul Lafargue, best known as the son-in-law of Karl Marx.
- As with much of Lafargue’s fiction, this is a satire in which a wealthy man with digestive issues purchases the appetite of a poor bus driver. Now able to enjoy food, he grows increasingly corpulent as the movie progresses, ultimately eating himself to death. Meanwhile, the driver is no longer able to appreciate even the simple pleasure of eating, and slowly wastes away until he commits suicide.
- While perhaps not an intentional reference, the Stenbergs’ use of pattern in the bodies of the husband and wife in the lower register bears a striking resemblance to the technique used by German posterist Ludwig Hohlwein in many of his designs. Through the innovative use of flat pattern and negative space, the designers allow the viewer to conjure the depth and volume of human form.



PKZ (1908),
Ludwig Hohlwein



The House on a Volcano, 1928

Designer Unknown

- One of at least two posters created for this film, this composition by an unknown designer features both photomontage with scenes from the movie as well as a photorealistic enlarged drawing of a lead member of the cast.
- Shot in present-day Azerbaijan, the story follows a group of oil workers who discover that their employer has built their houses on top of unstable pockets of natural gas, risking the lives of their families. The pre-Revolution narrative is told in flashbacks by a witness to the labor uprising, and was clearly intended to conform to the Party's ideological support of proletarian rebellion.



Cement, 1928

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
 & Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- While at least three different posters were created for this Ukrainian film by a variety of artists, the Stenbergs' design is the most sophisticated, suggesting movement and intrigue.
- Based on Fedor Gladkov's 1925 socialist realist novel of the same name, *Cement* documents the growing pains of Soviet life in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution, primarily focusing on the struggles of workers in a cement factory.
- A key component of Suprematist design was the use of flat color and geometry to impart emotion into a composition. As inks were in short supply, the Stenbergs combined strips of only two colors in varying degrees of opacity to suggest forward motion and tension in the darkness.
- As in many posters from this period, organic elements like plants or animals are rarely seen. Instead, artists focused on the wonders of skyscrapers and machines—a constant reminder of the desire for modernity within the Soviet state.



Symphony of a Big City, 1928

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Directed by Walter Ruttmann and originally released in 1927 as *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*, this German avant-garde film documents a day in Berlin. Most scenes were shot from streetcars or trains, and the loose narrative is clearly influenced by the Soviet-invented style of montage.
- Social shifts in the 1920s meant that more people moved from rural areas to cities than ever before, making the idea of the modern metropolis in movies both novel and exciting.
- Rather than creating a unique image to promote the film, the Stenbergs copied portions of Bauhaus designer Otto Umbehr's 1926 photomontage portrait of Egon Kisch, the reporter and noted Communist. While he does not actually appear in the movie, Kisch's image is clearly intended to represent the idea of the modern man.
- The information in the lower margin indicates that this poster had the largest circulation of any in this exhibition, with 22,000 copies printed.



The Racing Reporter (1926),
Otto Umbehr



The Law of the Mountains, 1928

Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

& Grigori Borisov (1899–1942)

- This Soviet Georgian film follows two best friends—Dolgat and Ismail—in a 19th-century mountain town. Ismail unintentionally causes the death of Dolgat’s brother in a workplace accident. While Dolgat forgives his friend, the town demands justice.
- The poster shows the two lead actors in both photomontage and enlarged drawn portraits, perfectly demonstrating the differences between the two techniques. While the smaller photomontage images of the characters embrace the reality of photography, the larger drawn portraits subvert such literalness, enhancing the level of artifice and suspension of belief within the poster.
- Prusakov’s signature doubling of the central figure can be read as upper-class twins sharing a paper or a single man moving rapidly from one page to the next in rapt excitement.
- It is important to note that the newspaper is written in Turko-Arabic, in use from when Georgia was part of the Ottoman Empire. The word “sensation” is repeated twice in Cyrillic on each page.



The Glass Eye, c. 1928
Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

- *The Glass Eye* is a parody that contrasts the tropes of documentary cinema with those of the popular “bourgeois” films shown in Russia during the 1920s. Movie cameras were often colloquially referred to as “glass eyes”—an idea that Prusakov animates by transforming the body of the cameraman into a movie camera.
- The film was written and directed by Lilya Brik, the longtime lover of famed writer Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose suicide in 1930 would mark the unofficial death of the avant-garde. Brik was probably the most prominent muse of her generation, inspiring artists, filmmakers, designers, and writers with her beauty and intelligence.



The Policeman, 1928

Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)

& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- This is one of two posters the Stenbergs created for the Russian release of the Danish short film *Kisses, Slaps, and Tricks*, a slapstick comedy starring Pat and Patachon—a comic pair similar to Laurel and Hardy.
- Silent films like this one, emphasizing physical comedy and simple narratives, were easily understood by audiences from a wide range of cultures, and as a result were highly anticipated by distributors. Although this movie was released in Denmark in February 1929, the Soviet poster was printed in 1928. It was not uncommon for foreign countries to receive promotional materials in advance of an international release, especially for a series featuring prominent and popular actors like Pat and Patachon.



Wandering Stars, 1928
Mikhail Dlugach (1893–1989)

- Although he created more than 500 movie posters in his lifetime, this is the only design by Mikhail Dlugach in the exhibition. Like many of the other artists, he began his career as an architect, bringing a strong sense of three-dimensional space to his compositions. Unlike the other designers, though, he did not follow Constructivist or Suprematist principles, eschewing abstraction and geometry in favor of pictorial narrative.
- Based on a serialized story of the same name by Sholem Aleichem (best known as the author of the stories that inspired the 1964 musical *Fiddler on the Roof*), the plot follows a young Jewish couple escaping life in a shtetl by becoming actors in a traveling Yiddish theater. Tragically separated, they find each other again in America as successful performers.
- Dlugach incorporates the Roman alphabet to spell out the lead actor's name as well as a variety of invented signs, turning the English words into design elements rather than simply sources of information.
- Since the plot focuses on a love affair and does not glorify the Soviet state, critics deemed the film an example of decadent Western ideology and it was subsequently given only a limited release.

The Soviet Film Industry

From the Soviet government's perspective, the ideal film fulfilled three metrics: it was educational and promoted Party politics; it was artistic and glorified Russian modernity; and it was profitable. No movie ever actually met all three goals. Despite the fact that the Bolshevik party saw more potential in the power of film as propaganda than any other government, it failed to accept that, in reality, people—particularly the urban poor—just wanted to be entertained. To work around this, popular imported films were often bookended by live political speeches or recorded Communist shorts, known as “agitprop” (agitational propaganda); audiences were lured into cinemas by brightly colored posters promising pure entertainment only to be force-fed “reeducation” on the side. The other benefit of allowing unsanctioned movies to be shown was purely financial: citizens were more likely to spend money on low-brow comedies, Westerns, and romances, and that income, in turn, went to fund the domestic film industry that produced more “acceptable” content. The government collected taxes on ticket sales as well as rental fees from distributors, funnelling those profits directly into the creation of new propaganda.

As staunch members of the Bolshevik Party continued to criticize the bourgeois elements of Western films, the State Cinema Enterprise, Goskino, set up in 1922 (renamed Sovkino in 1926) began censoring imports. Films were already being released in Russia one to five years after their original debuts, allowing the state ample time to insert alternative intertitles (text cards in silent films that indicate dialogue or plot points), reedit the order of scenes, and change the names of the movies to something more aligned with a Communist viewpoint. Because of this, many of the foreign films screened in Russia during the 1920s bore little resemblance to their original releases. The posters also rarely reflected the actual content of the films, with multiple artists creating different designs for a single movie that situated the plot in a disparate range of existing genres.

Meanwhile, the domestic film industry embraced the vast potential of cinema to celebrate the progressive modernity of Soviet Russia. As the demand for film exceeded production capacity, newsreel footage became essential filler for every theater, with many minor events being turned into full-length documentaries. Almost anything of note, from factory openings to seasonal festivals, found its way into Soviet cinema, always accompanied by a dynamic poster. Major directors like Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein emerged, bringing a new type of artistic vision to the medium that would solidify Russia's reputation as the premier producer of avant-garde, cutting-edge films. These directors pushed the boundaries of what cinema could be and do, incorporating extreme closeups, unusual angles, and the particularly Soviet innovation of montage, all of which were reflected in the corresponding posters.



First Cornet Streshnev, 1928

Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

- Produced in Soviet Georgia, *First Cornet Streshnev* takes place during World War I, when a cornet player in the tsarist military orchestra discovers that his son's rebel unit will soon be attacked by government forces. Forced to choose between loyalty to the tsar or to his family, he decides to abandon his official duty and take up the cause of the proletariat.
- This type of story was melodramatic enough to be popular among Soviet citizens while also fulfilling the government's notion of an "appropriate" narrative since it emphasized that sacrifice for the collective good is the noblest cause.
- Nikolai Prusakov's approach to poster design typically involved bifurcating at least one main figure. Here, Streshnev Senior's body is composed of twin cannons, the ends of which are both simultaneously obstructed by and blasting out his own hands. His face is partially doubled, visually mimicking the quick progression of projected film.
- Prusakov's signature tetrahedron-shaped glyph that he used as the central image in *The Second Exhibition of Film Posters* (1926) can be seen in miniature at the lower right.



Jimmie Higgins, 1928
Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Based on the 1919 novel of the same name by Upton Sinclair, *Jimmie Higgins* is a Soviet interpretation of the American story of a foundry worker who embraces socialism while at the front during World War I, and is ultimately driven mad by internal conflict.
- The Stenbergs' design here is remarkably complex, incorporating two rows of faceless workers marching in cannon-shaped forms, a simplified geometric skyscraper, eerily-colored, aloof characters with sinister and remote expressions, and two photomontage images of Higgins himself, his face distorted by tension.
- In 1928, the Stenbergs became the chief designers of Red Square, tasked with rebuilding it for the glorification of the Soviet state by turning it into a constantly changing space for two- and three-dimensional propaganda projects. As a result, their production of film posters dramatically decreased during this period.

The demand for films was extraordinary.
—Peter Kenez, Russian historian



Junky, 1929

Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

- This Soviet film (also released under the title *Revolt in Guria*) was based on the book *The Guria Uprising* (1902) by Egnante Ninoshvili, and chronicles the 1841 peasant rebellion in Georgia against an oppressive tsarist tax policy. While some members of the Georgian nobility join the fight, they are ultimately defeated by the Russian imperial army.
- Movies like this that highlighted the evils of the former government and presented as martyrs the “good” peasants who fought back were essential to reinforcing the social popularity of the Revolution.
- Much to the government’s chagrin, most audiences preferred Hollywood-style romances and comedies to overt propaganda that celebrated the state. Rather than fighting this, many B-list Soviet directors simply set their stories in the context of war, thereby fulfilling the basic censorship guidelines of celebrating Russian heroism without sacrificing entertainment value.



The Business Man, 1929
Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
& Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- Originally released in Germany as *A Better Master* (1928), this film is a six-reel satire in which a British aristocrat poses as a butler in order to win the affections of an American businessman's saxophone-playing daughter.
- Since censorship regulations required that many foreign films be edited to present pro-Communist narratives, the State Cinema Enterprise favored cheaper, B-movies like this over major Hollywood productions, as they typically had simpler, more predictable plots that were easier to revise.
- Along with the poster for *A Commonplace Story*, this image appears as part of Vladimir Stenberg's 1928 set design for *Sirocco* at the Moscow State Chamber Theater. As the sketch is dated a year before the poster was printed but clearly features two photorealistic images of the stars, Vladimir must have had access to the film long before it was released in Soviet theaters.



Sirocco Set Design (1928),
Vladimir Stenberg



The General, 1929
Designer Unknown

- While the Stenberg brothers created at least two other posters for the Russian release of *The General* (1926), this work is by an unidentified artist. The design is based on a scene in the film in which Buster Keaton listens to a loaded cannon to find out if it has been fired. The similarities between the two indicate that the designer worked directly from a press photograph or film still.
- This is one of the few examples in which an international star is both featured and named on a poster. The Soviet Union rarely obtained American blockbusters, for reasons ranging from cost to availability to the content being unacceptable to government censors. Keaton was one of a handful of celebrities who transcended cultures, finding fans throughout Europe and Asia.
- Although the film is now considered a masterpiece, it originally received poor reviews and had a negative impact on Keaton's career. The story is based on a real account of Union soldiers commandeering a Confederate train to destroy the railway system between Georgia and Tennessee during the Civil War. Eventually, Confederate troops take back the train—in Keaton's version, he does this while also rescuing his fiancée.



Mounted on Kholm, 1929
 Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

- As with *In Spring*, *Mounted on Kholm* is a Georgian film that was created to glorify aspects of the first Five-Year Plan. In it, members of a newly converted collective farm attempt to negotiate the use of a shared tractor sent to service an entire village.
- While Prusakov typically doubles his central figures, here he triples one, creating a stack of faceless viewers using binoculars to watch the film. The tagline reads “Everyone’s straining to see *Mounted on Kholm*.” Designers often produced posters like this one that focused on the audience’s anticipation of a movie’s release when they were unable to view the film, creating intrigue without providing much information.
- As paper was still in short supply, unused posters were often recycled so new designs could be printed on the versos. A horizontal advertising image can be seen coming through the yellow background of this poster.



The Green Alley, 1929
 Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

- Based on the groundbreaking sociological work *The Sacred Scarab* (1909) by feminist writer Else Jerusalem, in which she documents the lives of Vienna’s 50,000 prostitutes, *The Green Alley* is a German film, originally released in 1928, in which the author’s scholarship is reshaped into a tragic love story between a waitress at a brothel and a doctor’s son.
- Prusakov’s composition stresses the essential anonymity of the upper-class customers, focusing instead on the eager eyes of the two female leads, their bare shoulders suggesting eroticism.
- The Stenbergs created a very different poster for the film in which the main female actor is shown isolated at an urban intersection. In order to generate ticket sales, it was important for designers to attract the attention of a wide range of potential viewers—these two images were intended to appeal to audiences who might be interested in romances or dramas.



The Green Alley (1929),
 Vladimir & Georgii Stenberg



Five Minutes, 1929 Anatoly Belsky (1896–1970)

- Produced in Georgia, *Five Minutes* is considered a lost film. Information that survives indicates that it takes its name from the five minutes of silence that occurred throughout the Soviet Union on January 27, 1924, six days after Lenin’s death.
- The beautifully rendered portrait dominating the poster is of the “evil” capitalist American who ignores the tribute to the Russian leader, ordering his Chinese driver to rush through the city in order to get him to an important business deal. This type of narrative demonstrating the typically insulting behavior of Westerners was embraced by censors as appropriate and educational for the masses.
- By extending the letter “T” into a lightning-bolt shape and enlarging the number 5, Anatoly Belsky has enhanced the text as a graphic element—the title itself cuts across the page, creating visual drama.

The Artists & Their Posters

In November 1917, the government established the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (also known as Narkompros), unifying art and education under singular leadership and establishing their equal importance in the creation of cultural propaganda. This organization also oversaw censorship, taxation, and advertising within the film industry, and was one of the few government agencies to support the enthusiastic young artists of the avant-garde, typically commissioning poster designers from backgrounds outside of the graphic arts. Many of the most prolific and notable participants, like the Stenberg brothers (Vladimir and Georgii) and Alexander Rodchenko, were also trained architects and engineers, who approached the concept of the poster from a three-dimensional perspective. They drew on the progressive theories of Constructivism, Suprematism, and Productivism that they themselves had formulated while students together at the major state art schools, and forged them into a new graphic language. Soviet cinematic innovations like montage, extreme use of scale, and jarring angles were reflected in their poster designs, linking them to the overall experience of each

movie. Such artists even attempted to suggest the motion of film by adding multiple panels of the same figure in slightly varying poses to some compositions. Typographic credit lines naming actors and directors also became part of the designs, while bold, bizarre colors reflected the influence of abstract art. These posters are the opposite of the typically saccharine designs produced in Hollywood: rather than focusing on the stars of a film, they capitalize instead on visual tension, distortion, and anxiety to sell a movie.

These designers were also all incredibly young. Many established artists left Russia during the Civil War, leaving a large cultural hole to be filled by a new generation. Idealistic, passionate, and with a strong belief that they were responsible for building a new Communist world, they saw art as a means of improving society. In the aftermath of the Revolution, these same student-artists filled the streets of major cities with vividly colored, celebratory posters and banners, all referencing the visual language of the avant-garde. Constructivism and similar movements became an accepted part of the architecture of the modern Soviet city and were understood by the average citizen

as signifiers of the new Communist State. The incorporation of elements of these styles into film posters reinforced their role as an extension of State propaganda.

Printing the posters was no easy feat. During this period, lithographic presses in Russia all predated World War I and were often noted as being held together by string and otherwise falling apart. Inks lacked vibrancy, and paper quality was also low and in short supply. While some designers were able to use photomontage in their images, rudimentary Soviet presses were generally not able to print photography at that scale. These restrictions led to extraordinary creativity, including the invention of a type of drawn photorealism that relied on projecting film stills onto a canvas and then tracing an actor's features. The turnaround time for these designs was also remarkably quick. A designer might have seen a film one afternoon only to have a completed poster by the next morning. In many cases, the artist never even viewed the movie, but instead relied on a press kit, a summary, or even just a few publicity stills to create a poster. The results are wildly novel images printed in runs of between 8,000 and 20,000, most of which were pasted over or destroyed by weather within a week.



The Communard's Pipe, 1929

Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

- Based on a story by the Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg, *The Communard's Pipe* is a Georgian film that takes place in the spring of 1871, in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War, when the Commune briefly seized power in Paris. The young son of a revolutionary obsessively holds onto a pipe belonging to his father—but this gesture of defiance eventually results in his own death.
- Prusakov's restrained design and bold use of black ink would have stood out dramatically on the streets and piqued the curiosity of many passersby. In it, a photorealistic cannon emerges from a red pipe—a revolution starting with a modest gesture.



Man of Fire, 1929
Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

- Originally released in Germany in 1926 under the title *The Man in the Fire*, this film follows a wounded fireman who must prove to his superiors that he is still capable of performing his duties.
- Prusakov uses much of the same visual vocabulary as propaganda posters of the period, including extensive use of the color red and a photomontage of a raised hand. This poster anticipates some of the best compositions by Gustav Klutsis, whose photomontage design promoting the first Five-Year Plan seems to have been directly inspired by this image.



Let's Fulfill the Plan of Great Works (1930), Gustav Klutsis



To Your Health, 1929
Semyon Semyonov (1911–86)

- Taking its name from a common drinking toast (“za Vashe zdorovye”), *To Your Health* was a didactic film intended to educate Soviet audiences about the dangers of alcoholism. Since 1914, the production of alcohol had been illegal within Russia, leading many people to attempt to make their own at home. In 1925, the Soviet government lifted the ban in order to regain tax income on alcohol sales.
- Semyonov’s composition exemplifies the way that designers used fear and tension to bring drama to a poster rather than relying on the beauty of a film’s stars.
- By the late 1920s, fewer films were being imported into the Soviet Union. As the desire for cinema remained strong, though, even short public-service documentaries were promoted by impressive posters, while the profits from ticket sales were funneled back to the government.



Turksib, 1929

Semyon Semyonov (1911–86)

- The completion of the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad (often abbreviated as Turk-Sib) was one of the major projects undertaken during the first Five-Year Plan. This documentary dramatizes the final days of construction, with workers shown rushing to finish the railway on time.
- In one of the rarest and most impressive compositions of the era, Semyonov uses railway signals to create the figure of a shouting worker. The hands, feet, and solarized face were inserted through photomontage.
- Many Soviet films at this time stressed the positive impact of Communism on its more remote citizens, especially those in Central Asia. Movies like this were as much educational propaganda for the State as they were a means of demonstrating the universal prosperity and modernization provided by the central government.



Giant to the Virgin Soil, 1930

Yakov Ruklevsky (1884–1965)

- Directed by Lidiya Stepanova, *Giant to the Virgin Soil* was a documentary celebrating the triumphs of modern agricultural practices through mechanized farming. The promotion of such themes to the masses was of the utmost importance to Stalin's first Five-Year Plan, which partially focused on establishing collective farms.
- While the tractor became a symbol of modernity in Russia, the reality was that 88.5% of Stalin's collective farms lacked this equipment. Many farmers pushed back against collectivization, withholding grain supplies or destroying livestock in protest. Combined with the unrealistic quotas placed on farmers and poor government planning, enforced collectivisation resulted in mass famine throughout the Soviet Union in the early 1930s and the deaths of millions of people.
- Yakov Ruklevsky was not only a poster designer, but also ran the department within Sovkino that controlled poster production throughout the Soviet Union. He was in charge of hiring designers and approving posters for display.



Cinema was the medium where the imagination of the Russian avant-garde shone the brightest.

—Hiroshi Unno, designer

The Great Tragedy of a Small Woman, 1929
Nikolai Prusakov (1900–52)

- Set against the backdrop of the Russian Civil War, this Ukrainian film follows a woman who is unexpectedly separated from her husband during the chaos. Years later, despite remaining faithful to him, she discovers he has remarried.
- This is one of Prusakov’s finest compositions, deftly combining photomontage and illustration to tell the story of a woman whose life is driven off course by an absent partner.
- Eagle-eyed viewers will notice that the hat is identical to the one the designer used in his poster for *Man of Fire* from the same year.
- Just as the Stenberg brothers frequently incorporated skyscrapers into their compositions, Prusakov heavily favored automobiles in his designs. Here he uses the grille of a car to push the title aside, elevating the typography to an essential graphic component of the poster.



The Great Tragedy of a Small Woman, 1929
 Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982)
 & Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- This design by the Stenberg brothers stands in sharp contrast to that of Prusakov, focusing solely on the female lead of the film, Zoya Valevskaya, flanked by claustrophobic bands of color.
- After 1928, the Stenbergs produced fewer posters, turning their attention instead to larger civic projects commissioned by the government. However, as they had designed more than 300 film posters during their joint careers, the brothers were still famous enough to be called upon to create work for specific movies, even if the results rarely matched the innovative quality of their earlier compositions.
- As indicated in both the margin of this poster and the one by Prusakov, 10,000 copies of each were printed to be displayed around Moscow. The posters that survive today have never been pasted on walls.



SEP, 1929, Vladimir Stenberg (1899–1982) & Georgii Stenberg (1900–33)

- SEP is an acronym for Sbornyaya Eksperimentalnaya Programma (Combined Experimental Program), a training course for the Red Army. Taking its name from the program, this series of episodic films was intended as a recruitment tool.
- The posters present an army career as the most modern, cutting-edge, and exciting lifestyle. The image on the left includes a futuristic snowmobile, while the one on the right shows an impressive armored car and a gun-toting female recruit. As in many of the Stenbergs' compositions, angled skyscrapers draw the eye across the page, linking the film's content with the allure of urbanization.



Worldly Name, 1931
 Designer Unknown

- This 1930 dramatic comedy follows the director of a film studio and his fight against the production of popular movies that cater to bourgeois tastes from before the Revolution.
- The central image of a film reel shows various decadent scenes typical of Western films—a musical chorus line, a glamorous actress swaddled in an expensive fur, a romantic couple, and four champagne flutes raised in a celebratory toast. All have been crossed out in red by the director, indicating what he will not tolerate.
- The face of the figure on the left features the letter for the pronoun “I”—a playful visual pun indicating that the “Worldly Name” is “me.” This is a possible reference to the avant-garde Futurist poetry of Aleksei Kruchyonykh and Vladimir Mayakovsky.

The Death of the Avant-Garde Poster

After Stalin instituted the first Five-Year Plan in 1927, the Soviet Union fell into a period of cultural upheaval, with new, ever-changing regulations going into effect daily. In 1930, Soyuzkino was founded, centralizing all decisions about cinema, from production to distribution, under one governing entity. Foreign films became progressively harder to import until they were banned altogether in 1931. Without competition, the quality of domestic films deteriorated significantly, especially after Stalin's "movies for the millions" mandate in 1935 shut down all individual artistic expression, rejecting experimentation in film in favor of universally understandable and direct messages. Unlike his immediate predecessors, Stalin did not share the view that art could be used as a means of transforming society. Instead, he believed that its sole purpose was propaganda.

In April 1932, the Central Committee released the decree "On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations." It immediately put an end to all independent artistic groups. Every manner of expression would now be controlled by the State. By

1934, Socialist Realism—a style of art that presented idealized, instructional interpretations of proletarian life—was the only type of art that could be created or shown in the Soviet Union. Artists adapted their styles to conform to the government's regulations, changed careers entirely, or, like Vladimir Stenberg, faced "reeducation" in camps throughout the country. Avant-garde filmmaking ceased; Constructivist and Suprematist posters were dead. After less than a decade, the golden age of Soviet graphic design was abruptly cut short, remaining unknown to the rest of the world for the next 50 years. While design historians celebrate the incredible posters in this exhibition, it is important to remember that they were produced during a time of social upheaval and terror. Millions of people were murdered under the Soviet regime; millions more were stripped of their property, separated from their families, and exiled to labor camps for the remainder of their lives. Today, these posters allow access to a period of Russian history in which chaos and political uncertainty were briefly outshone by the progressive idealism of some of the greatest graphic designers of the 20th century.







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