

Paris, Moscow, New York.

Week 3, Oil Painting Class, Sadie Murdoch

Hello Art Class,

Hope you're all doing well! This week we are going to explore the history of early 20th Century Oil Painting, focussing on artists who were often side-lined or overlooked. It forms a counterpoint to the main history of modern art and offers some insights into social and political history too...

We are going start off in France, hop over to the Soviet Union, and then cross the Atlantic to the United States of America. Virtually of course, no travel allowed!

As I was preparing this talk I found a copy of a Frieze Masters catalogue from 2015, and it fell open at this page. "We Must Not Be Isolated" the title of the piece states. On the right, we have a painting by Sonia Delaunay, a Ukrainian-born Russian artist who lived in Paris in the early 20th Century, over a hundred years ago.



Frieze Masters catalogue, 2015. Right: Sonia Delaunay, Simultaneous Robes, Oil on Canvas. 1925

Novelist Ali Smith has written a great piece here about Delaunay. The "not being isolated" element refers to Delaunay's system of 'Simultaneous Contrasts'. In her

exciting and original system, each colour on a canvas surface affects the others around it. So, basically a light red will be influenced by the bright green next to it, and the dark orange by the turquoise blue, even if it is a few inches away - the picture plane is interconnected, like a web of colours and shapes. Her paintings use strong hues and simplified geometric shapes.



Sonia Delaunay, Prismes Electriques, Oil on Canvas. 1914

Her paintings are exuberant and often included references to Paris, the city in which she spent most of her working life. Electric light had been popularised in cities at the turn of the last century and the Eiffel Tower had just been completed. The bands and prisms of vibrant colour convey the dazzling experiences of the early 20th Century European metropolis. In her early works, the oil paint is scrubbed across the surface - as if she couldn't wait to finish it and get on with the next one, or just run out into the evening to meet with friends and dance the night away. Let's hope we can all do

that again soon! These oil paintings give a sense of fleeting impression - like running through a city at night dazzled by the sights and sounds of the metropolis.

Delaunay's work also includes textiles, theatre design and shoes; in this multi-disciplinary way, her paintings were connected to her life, and the people in the city around her.



Sonia Delaunay, court shoes. 1925

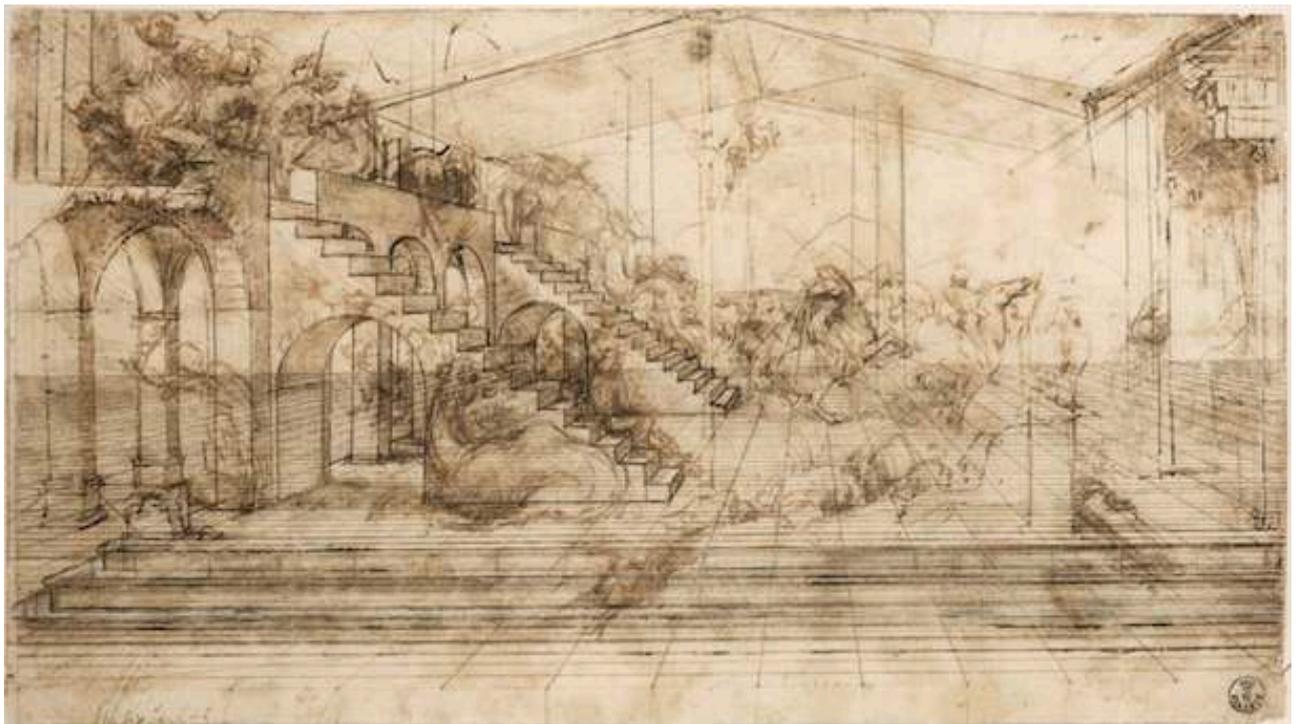


Sonia Delaunay, 1926

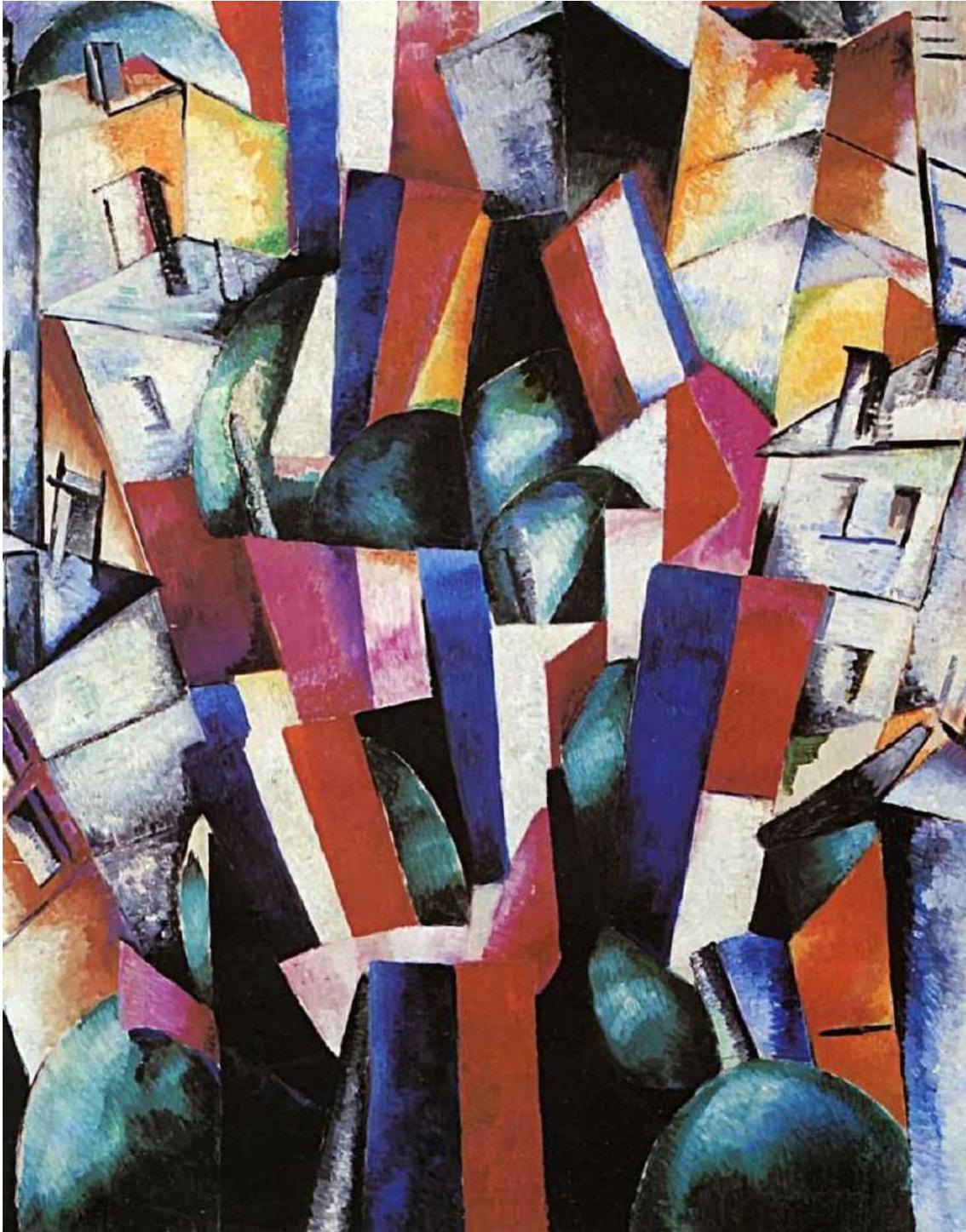
With her husband Robert, Delaunay co-founded the Orphism art movement, and was the first living female artist to have a retrospective exhibition at the Louvre in 1964. Her paintings became increasingly hard-edged and simplified, like giant pattern studies, so that the relationship between fabric designs and painted canvas became more evident. So, nothing was isolated, everything was connected!

Like many artists in Europe at the time, Delaunay was influenced by Cubism. When we think of Cubists we think of Picasso and Braque, but there were many other artists around at the time who took a leaf out of Cubism's book and used it to develop their own visual language in oil painting. What Cubism supplied to artists was a new way of constructing pictorial space. Shape and colour were simplified, the spatial 'depth' flattened. Paintings are flat as we all know, but convey an illusory sense of three dimensionality- an optical illusion if you like. Our ability to interpret of a flat painted surface as a landscape or still-life comes from our understanding of pictures, built up through centuries of looking at them. We have learnt to fool ourselves if you like. So, Cubism give many painters the idea the you didn't have to paint the world objectively- as it looked through the lens of the camera, or through the conventional channels of Renaissance perspective. Renaissance, or 'Linear' perspective is a mathematical system used to create the illusion of space and distance on a flat surface. The system assumes a single viewing point, and usually contain one or two 'vanishing points' to arrange objects and people so that they appear smaller the further away they are. It is generally assumed that perspective makes images more realistic, and therefore closer to 'reality' we think we know it.

Leon Battista Alberti wrote about perspective construction in his highly influential *De Pictura* in 1435. In this book, Alberti formalised perspective as an artistic technique. In this study by Leonardo Da Vinci from 1481, who had clearly had a peek at *De Pictura*, we can see the vanishing point clearly as a type of receding 'grid'.



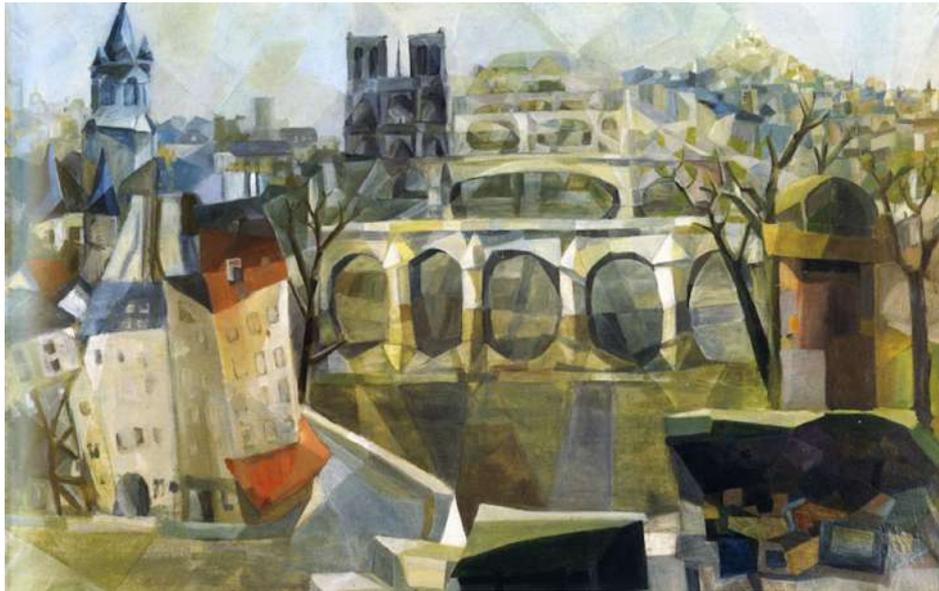
Cubism on the other hand suggested multiple viewpoints. Cubist painters proposed that you could subjectively interpret and 'change' the world as it was conventionally seen. If this sounds radical, it was! They were challenging what we see as 'reality'.



Alexandra Exter, City, Oil on Canvas, 1913

Meanwhile over in Moscow, things were heating up. During the first World War there was a revolution in Russia, after the Tsar mistakenly sent Communist dissidents to

fight on the front. There was mass rebellion in the ranks, the soldiers came back, and Bolshevism was born. Artists, theatre designers, architects and poets were invited to be part of the Russian Revolution too. Vladimir Lenin, head of now Soviet Russia, got them on board to produce radical new modern art for a radical new political system. Along with artists Alexandro Rodechnko and poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, the Bolsheviks welcomed many women artists and designers. Alexandra Exter, Luby Popova and Varvara Stepanova, were part of a group of artists variously referred to as Constructivist, Cubo-Futurist and Suprematist who produced Cubist-influenced oil paintings along with posters, theatre and costume design. Exter divided her life between Kiev, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Vienna, and



Alexandra Exter, View of Paris, oil on canvas, 1912



Alexandra Exter, Costume design for Romeo and Juliette, 1921

Paris. Her paintings synthesise the experience of cities in the same way as Delaunay, but included elements taken from traditional Russian folk art. And like Delaunay she worked across fine art, costume and theatre design. However, it was the amazing Varvara Stepanova who dedicated herself most fully to the Revolution. With her husband and collaborator Alexander Rodchenko, Stepanova involved herself in poetry, philosophy, painting, graphic art, textiles, and stage and scenery design. Her oil paintings, such as *The Billiard Players*, often celebrate the everyday life of the revolutionary class, the proletariat.

In the years following the revolution, there was a division between painters like Kasimir Malevich who thought that art was a spiritual activity, and those who believed that they must work directly for the revolution and the Soviet. In 1921, together with Aleksei Gan, Rodchenko and Stepanova formed the first Working Group of Constructivists, which rejected painting and sculpture altogether in favour of graphic design, photography, posters, and political propaganda.



Left to right: Anton Lavinsky, Olga Rodchenko (Alexander Rodchenko's mother), Alexander Vesnin, Lyubov Popova, Nikolai Sobolev, and Varvara Stepanova (in foreground), Moscow, 1924.



Varvara Stepanova, Billiard Players oil on canvas, 1920

Okay, back to France! As well as Delaunay there were other women artists in Paris such as Marie Laurencin, (who Delaunay disliked intensely) and Tamara de Lempicka. They were part of a Parisian scene of avant-garde artists, writers, poets and art collectors. This scene is referred to as 'avant-garde', as it was at the forefront - the 'avant' - of a cultural movement.



Marie Laurencin, Dance in the countryside (Apollinaire et ses Amis), oil on canvas. 1909

The members organised exhibitions, hung out in each other's studios and at various 'soirees' and salons. It was probably a bit like the London art world of today a - bit cliquey and factionalised, organised around a few patrons and collectors - but a good deal smaller.

This painting by Marie Laurencin from 1909, *Dance in the Countryside (Apollinaire et ses Amis)*, depicts her husband the poet Guillaume Apollinaire and various members of the Parisian art set of the early years of the 20th Century. See how the Cubist inspired devices create a self-contained world sort of embracing the figures and holding them together. She was a member of the circle of Picasso, and Cubists associated with the Section d'Or, and had relationships with men and women, as was common with members of the avant-garde European circles of the time.

Tamara de Lempicka a Polish émigré, also participated in the artistic and social milieu of Paris and New York between the two World Wars and had an unusual take on Cubism in her oil paintings.



Here she is smoking a cigarette and looking a little bit like some of the women in her work. De Lempicka painted highly stylised, Cubist influenced, Art Deco portraits of wealthy and privileged women, that oozed glamour. The bodies of her women look like examples of Art Deco Design, fused with Baroque and Neo-classical elements. Art Deco was a design style in architecture, design and interior decoration which was derived from the formal aesthetics of African sculpture – we'll be coming back to this later! The bodies of De Lempicka's female figures appear as if chiselled and polished, like art deco furniture, and are often framed by a setting which looks like a modernist city, such as Chicago or New York. Her women seem contained, but also 'trapped' within this pictorial space of skyscrapers and geometric forms. In this shallow Cubist-style space, the planes of bodies and folds of drapery turn towards the surface of the painting, the way plants turn towards the light.

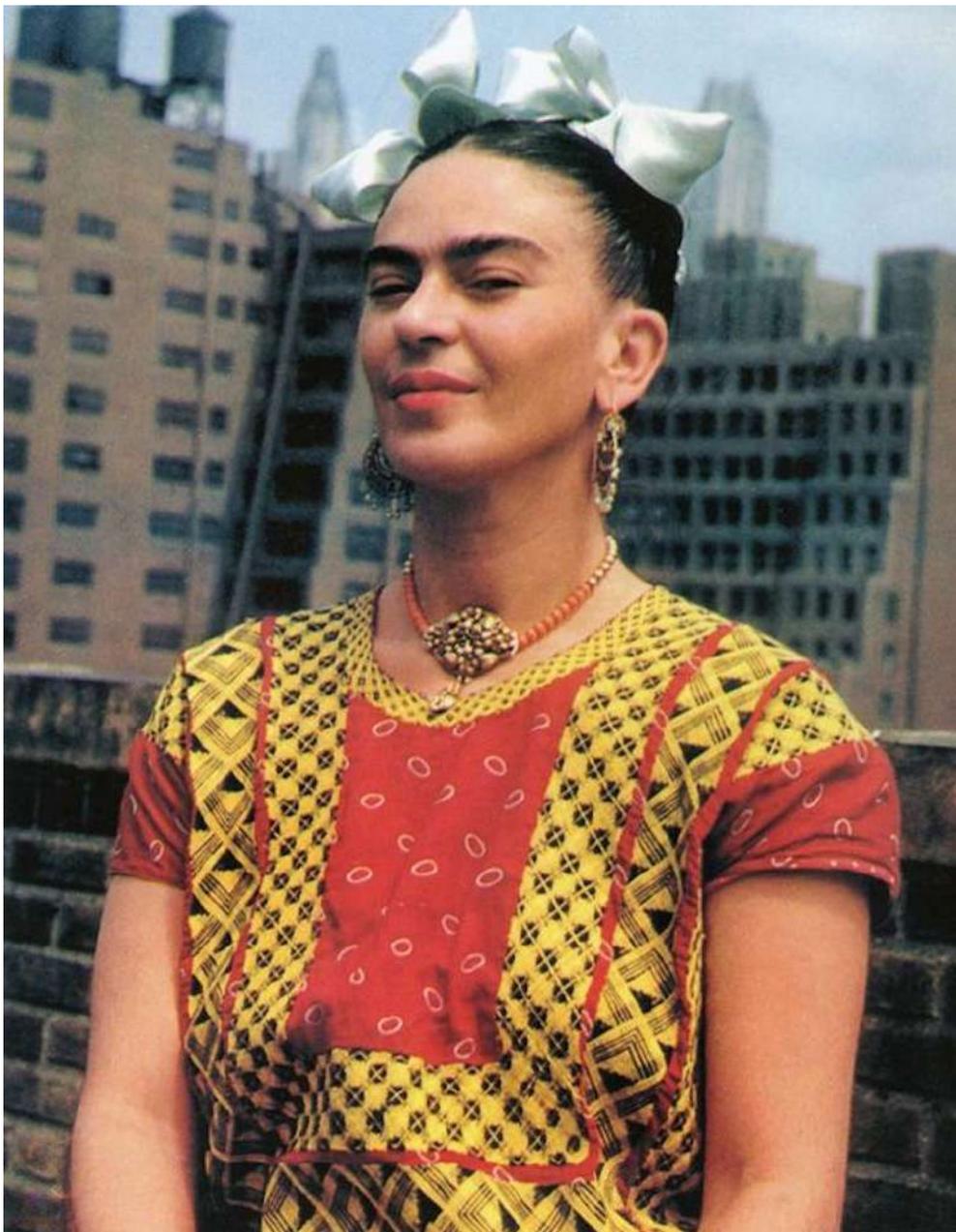


Tamara de Lempicka, The Girls, Oil on Canvas. 1930



Tamara de Lempicka, Madame M, Oil on Canvas. 1930

De Lempicka's oil paintings also depict a life of pleasure and leisure, where glamour and modernity come are paramount. What is also evident to me is how the new urban spaces, the teeming European metropolis's, buzzing with life and electric light, are where new freedoms took place. For LGBTQ+ and Black and Minority ethnic people, the jazz cafe's and nightclubs as well as more tolerant legislation made the period between the two World Wars at time of creative and personal freedom. The 'New Woman' was an icon of this - independent and androgenous - who was revered in some social circles, but also aroused a level fear and suspicion, as her very presence threatened the status quo. Her presence was also incredibly generative to the North American and European avant-garde, as we shall see in the next episode..



Oh, and talking of which, here's someone we all recognise - Frida Kahlo. She is framed on a roof top in New York City, like something beamed in from another world.

Which is true in a way. I'll be talking about her paintings next week. And while we are at it, let's have a sneak preview of another important historical figure we will be looking into, one who inspired artists and architects, poets and musicians: actress and entertainer Josephine Baker whose life and work was inseparable from jazz, Art Deco and early 20th C Modernism.



Josephine Baker