

## AVANT-GARDE AND INNOCENCE



CHILDREN'S BOOK ILLUSTRATION BY  
RUSSIAN NON-CONFORMIST ARTISTS  
IN THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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## AVANT-GARDE AND INNOCENCE: CHILDREN'S BOOK ILLUSTRATION BY RUSSIAN NON- CONFORMIST ARTISTS IN THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Walter Havighurst Special Collections  
Miami University Libraries  
Free and open to the public  
Monday-Thursday 8:30-5:30 and Friday 8:30-5  
January 9 - May 4

Featuring:  
*Aleksandra Ekster*  
*Natalia Goncharova*  
*Feodor Rojankovsky*  
*Boris Grigor'ev*



## Introduction

The first three decades of the 20th century was the most productive time for experimental art in Russia. The 1905 revolution and emerging industrial civilization inspired art and literature. The Russian avant-garde was developing very quickly during that time, producing experimental movements in a matter of months. Futurism, cubo-futurism, constructivism, neoprimitivism, acmeism, and suprematism are just a few movements that originated during that time and anticipated the later and better-known Western movements, such as abstract expressionism.

The Russian political and economic situation was changing just as quickly. The revolution of 1917 was a major event that restructured, reorganized, and industrialized not only the country, but its art, as well. Russian avant-garde artists, most of whom came from modest, proletarian backgrounds, welcomed the revolution with enthusiasm. Machines became their muses and the overall aesthetic changed drastically from cool and static to tense and restless. It was a period of bold colors and sounds, when shapes became more important than their subject matter. This aesthetic also affected other media: film, theater, political posters, and photography.



Despite their enthusiasm for the revolution and the changes it brought, avant-garde artists were not favored by the new Soviet government and many had to leave the country, along with other intellectuals and White Army officers. The same people, who found inspiration in industrial concepts and objects were now considered bourgeois, formulaic, and anti-Soviet only because they were not interested in the propaganda purposes of socialist realism.

The four artists highlighted in this exhibit settled in France, where in the 1920s publishers of children's books were looking for an infusion of new ideas and fresh talent. Russian émigré artists became an important factor in the rejuvenation of French children's book trade. One of the most influential book series in the 1930s, "Père Castor," which aimed to develop children's imagination, skills, artistic taste, reading ability, and manual dexterity, employed many Russian illustrators, including Aleksandra Ekster and Feodor Rojankovsky. Forty-nine of the ninety books published in this series were illustrated by Russian artists. Some of them became better known for their illustration work rather than their fine art. Ironically, the unfortunate circumstances of their emigration and limitations on their artistic freedom produced some of the best and most enjoyable examples of children's book illustration.



Reynier, Marguerite, and Feodor Rojankovsky. *En famille*. [Paris]: Flammarion, 1934.



## Aleksandra Ekster (1882-1949)

Aleksandra Ekster was one of the most important constructivist designers and avant-garde painters in the beginning of the 20th century. Her very original style was influenced by Cézanne and Picasso and by her collaborations with other constructivist and futurist Russian artists, such as Olga Rozanova, Liubov' Popova, Kazimir

Malevich, Natal'ia Goncharova, and Aleksei Kruchenykh. Even before moving to Paris in 1924, she kept a studio there and maintained personal friendships with Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. Her work included costume and set design, painting, manuscript illumination, and design of household items – particularly lamps. The last two decades of her life she illustrated children's books for the French publisher Flammarion. She created stunning panoramas, which are very different in feel, texture, and color from her fine art work. This difference likely came from her paying close attention to color in relation to space and seeing countries as having different color feelings: Russia as intense bright colors and France as having more subtle tonal variety.



Aleksandra Ekster.  
*View of Paris, 1912.*



## Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962)

An extremely prolific painter, designer, and illustrator, Natalia Goncharova contributed greatly to the legacy of her ancestors (her great-aunt was the wife of Aleksandr Pushkin). Her styles changed drastically and quickly, producing the most interesting and stunning results. She was a strong proponent

of using and reinterpreting old Russian painting traditions, such as icons. Many of her costume designs look like constructivist icons and her illustrations of Russian fairy tales are probably the most thoughtful and expressive. In contrast to the simple, flowing lines of her illustrations, which were influenced by Russian folk art, most of her paintings of landscapes, still lifes, and portraits are in cubo-futurist or rayonist style. She developed this style together with her husband, Mikhail Larionov, who was also a distinguished avant-garde painter. The Walter Havighurst Special Collections has many resources on Natalia Goncharova, as well as an original print of a St. Andrew costume design for an unrealized production of "Liturgie" in 1915.



Natalia  
Goncharova.  
*Airplane over a  
Train, 1913.*



## Feodor Rojankovsky (1891-1970)

A White Army soldier, a painter, and a traveler, Rojankovsky identified two childhood events that influenced the course of his life: he was taken to the zoo and while his admiration of exotic animals was running high, he was given a box of colored crayons. His later illustrations of animal books convey his childlike admiration of these animals in their bright colors

and simple shapes. His primary genre before 1931 was advertisement posters, theater design, and magazine illustration. In 1931 he was commissioned to illustrate *Daniel Boone* by Esther Averill, which started Rojankovsky's very prolific and successful career in children's book illustration. In addition, the publication of this book was considered a revolutionary event in children's book publishing in France. Its subject of adventure in American wilderness, Indians, pioneer life, and hardship was a drastic change from the traditional French stories that were becoming obsolete. Rojankovsky was recognized for his achievements in 1956 by receiving the Caldecott Medal for his *Frog Went A-Courtin'*.



Lida and Feodor Rojankovsky. *Panache l'ecureuil*. Paris: Flammarion, 1934.



## Boris Grigor'ev (1886-1939)

Boris Grigor'ev was a member of the Mir Iskusstva (World of Art) group and an active participant in the Bohemian scene in St. Petersburg in the 1910s and 1920s. Although he was not well-known in Russia and was only recognized after emigrating to South America and later to France, he was given credit by Alexander Benois, a prominent Russian art

critic of the time, for capturing the essence of Russia in his portraits of peasants. In addition to a very important album of peasant life, which reflects the way Russian intelligentsia was viewing the Russian village and peasantry, he painted portraits of fellow members of the intelligentsia as well. Emphasizing the importance of knowing one's place in the universe, he referred to himself as the "first master in the world." At 40 he claimed to have led a god-like existence due to the amount of intensely felt hard work he had done in 40 years.



Boris Grigor'ev. *Portrait of M. Gorky*, 1926.

The items in this exhibit have been drawn primarily from the  
André and Catherine de Saint-Rat Collection of Russian  
History, Literature, and Art.

The cover image is an illustration by Natalia Goncharova in  
*Conte de tsar Saltan et de son fils, le glorieux et puissant  
prince Gvidon Saltanovitch, et de sa belle princesse cygne* by  
A. Pushkin, N. Goncharova, and C. Anet. Paris: Se trouve à  
La Sirène, 1921.



Aleksandra Ekster. Costume designs for the 1917 production of *Salome*.

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