

# Alexander Rodchenko

Photography and Design

27 March – 21 June 2015

**KUNSTMUSEUM  
LIECHTENSTEIN**



## Alexander Rodchenko. Photography and Design

Alexander Rodchenko (1891–1956) is one of the formative figures in the development of early 20th century art. His capacity for invention, his originality, and his courage made him a spokesman of Constructivism, for which he not only defined numerous pioneering features of this style. Particularly thanks to his pronounced interest in all spheres of design and with his keen observations of everyday life, Rodchenko represented the fundamental concerns of constructivism at an extremely high artistic level. Like almost no other, he embodied the “artist engineer”, i.e. the type of avantgarde artist whose main interest is on rational methods of developing form. Consequently, he was engaged in practically all fields of artistic expression, alongside the traditional media of painting and drawing also in architecture, sculpture and the applied arts such as typography and design. In addition, he devoted himself extensively to photography and developed his own genres, for example his *Spatial Constructions*.

The exhibition *Alexander Rodchenko. Photography and Design* reflects this special interest of the artist by focusing on those spheres of artistic design that do not belong to the classical canon of visual arts. A major criterion in selecting the exhibits was the desire to showcase the whole breadth of Rodchenko's oeuvre in an exemplary manner.

Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein is also presenting Rodchenko's most extensive project of designing a specific space – the *Workers' Club* – ninety years after its design in 1925. Designed and realised for the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* at the Grand Palais, Paris, this synthesis of the arts has been exhibited on several occasions in the past in the context of large themed and retrospective shows. In Vaduz the *Workers' Club* will be presented for the first time in such a way that it can be used for its intended purpose as a place of education and social exchange. What is more, this room will also be used to provide current information. It will also be equipped with modern information technologies that visitors will be able to use during the exhibition. For the first time, it will thus be possible to review the “everyday practicality” of Rodchenko's very special design, that remains fascinating even today.

Friedemann Malsch

Director

## Photography

Alexander Rodchenko occupied himself with photography for more than thirty years: from 1924 until his death in 1956. He began making collages and montages in 1922. Owning at least three cameras, a 4 × 6 plate camera, a 9 × 12 universal camera, and a 13 × 18 large-format camera, he was already taking his own photographs in 1924. Photo portraits and reportage, technical reproductions and staged still lifes, photographic experiments, pictures of family members and friends, sports competitions, and circus acts were among his main themes.

Rodchenko's first efforts as a photographer were portraits of people close to him – painters, writers, poets, architects, and members of the LEF group, the Left Front of the Arts. **(1–7)**

In 1927 the *New LEF* magazine became Rodchenko's rostrum from which to proclaim his new conception of photography – a photography of discovering the world that depicts people and objects without any kind of enactment and from all possible perspectives. His photographs were printed in every issue: pylons, corners of Moscow, all presented from extreme perspectives. His photographs of buildings with extreme foreshortening are the basis of Rodchenko's unusual photos.

**(21–24)**

When Rodchenko was taking photographs with his "Leica" towards the end of the 1920s, he inclined the horizon line and introduced the diagonal as a principle of compositional intensity. Whether he was taking photographs of life and everyday situations in the city, student hostels or a radio station – his interest was always on engineering, unusual technologies, all possible types of industrial production.

With his photographic experiments Rodchenko looked towards the work of film directors, cameramen, photographers working for the press and engaged in photomontage, that is to say, media artists. He would, for example, place a vase or glass tankard on a pane of glass and photograph it from below. "Experiments of this kind allow us to change the familiar view of things around us. The camera's lens is the pupil of the cultivated person in socialist society." The still life entitled *Notepad, Fountain-pen and 'Leica' Camera* **(8)** that he photographed for the cover of *The Journalist* magazine can be seen as a photographic paraphrase of this assertion.

Rodchenko's school of photography is founded upon three guiding principles. The first is composition: the well thought-out system of distributing details in the image, the geometrical pattern of composition, the planning of photographs, the

special, project-based approach. The second is the clear sociocultural or documentary task: the comprehensive, diverse view of the reality of the person involved in shaping life. And the third – constant experimentation, commanding light, shadow and the lens as a structural means of representation. Photography is inquiry, photography is research.

Alexander Lavrentiev

The quotation in the text is from Alexander Rodchenko.

**1**

**Portrait Vladimir Mayakovsky, 1924**

Original gelatine silver print

38.9 × 28.8 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**2**

**Vladimir Mayakovsky on a Chair, 1924**

Gelatine silver print

30.2 × 24.1 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**3**

**Lilja Brik on the Window at Gendrikow-Street,  
1926/1927**

Original gelatine silver print

12.7 × 18 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**4**

**Lilja Brik at the Datscha in Puschkino, 1928**

Original gelatine silver print

14.7 × 9.4 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**5**

**Student. Student Hostel in Lefortovo, 1932**

Original gelatine silver print

28.9 × 23.2cm

Private collection, Moscow

**6**

**The Pioneer, 1930**

Original gelatine silver print

34 × 29.4

Private collection, Moscow

**7**

**Student from Rabfak, 1924**

Original gelatine silver print, on cardboard

31.5 × 23.7 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**8**

**Notepad, Fountain-pen and “Leica” Camera, 1930**

Gelatine silver print from original negative, 1990s

30 × 23.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**9**

**Lilja Brik. From the Series “Journey from Moscow to Leningrad”, 1929**

Original gelatine silver print

16.8 × 23 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**10**

**Lilja Brik. From the Series “Journey from Moscow to Leningrad”, 1929**

Original gelatine silver print

17.1 × 22.9 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**11**

**Lilja Brik. From the Series “Journey from Moscow to Leningrad”, 1929**

Original gelatine silver print

17 × 22.8 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**12**

**Lilja Brik. From the Series “Journey from Moscow to Leningrad”, 1929**

Original gelatine silver print

16.3 × 22.8 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**13**

**Two Generations, 1934**

Gelatine silver print

23.8 × 16 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**14**

**Morning at Gendrikow-Street, 1926**

Original gelatine silver print

19.6 × 27.1 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

15

**Central Culture and Leisure Park. Reading Area, 1929**

Original gelatine silver print

22.5 × 29.5 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

16

**Central Culture and Leisure Park. People in front of the Stage, 1929**

Original gelatine silver print

23.9 × 29.7 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

17

**Playground at Skolnoki Park. Children on a Climbing Structure, 1932**

Original gelatine silver print

17.8 × 23.8 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

18

**Children in the Sandbox, 1931–1932**

Original gelatine silver print

24 × 29.7 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

19

**Bears at the Zoo, 1932**

Original gelatine silver print

29.6 × 23.7 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

20

**Apes at the Zoo, 1932**

Original gelatine silver print

19.3 × 29.2 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

21

**Pylon, 1927**

Gelatin silver print from original negative, 1980s

29 × 39.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

22

**The Mosselprom Building, 1932**

Original gelatine silver print

16 × 23.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**23**

**The Lock. White Sea Canal. Crossing-point to Lake Onega, 1933**

Original gelatine silver print

30 × 20 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**24**

**Konstantin Melnikov's Pavilion in Paris. Photo by Alexander Rodchenko, 1925**

Digital print

35 × 27.4 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**25**

**Jump into Water. Astafyev, 1934**

Original gelatine silver print

30 × 23.3 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**26**

**Jump into Water, 1932 (1934)**

Original gelatine silver print

Dimensions of the print: 44,2 × 29.8 cm

Dimensions of the sheet: 66 × 55.9 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**27**

**Pole-vault, 1936**

Original gelatine silver print

20.5 × 37 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**28**

**Sports Parade at "Dynamo" Stadium. The Uzbekistan Team, 1937**

Original gelatine silver print

17.2 × 29.3 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**29**

**Womens Team at the "Dynamo" Stadium, 1937**

Original gelatine silver print

24 × 30 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**30**

**Sports Parade on the Red Square. Dance, 1936**

Original gelatine silver print

29.5 × 40 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**31**

**Sports Parade at “Dynamo” Stadium. The Georgian Team, 1937**

Original gelatine silver print

19.7 × 29 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**32**

**Sports Parade on the Red Square, 1936**

Original gelatine silver print

29.6 × 22.6 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**33**

**Sports Parade on the Red Square. Rhythmic Gyms (Elevating Figure), 1936**

Original gelatine silver print

30 × 24 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**34**

**Sun-worshippers. From the Series “Student Hostel in Lefortovo”, 1932**

Original gelatine silver print

37.4 × 27.4 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**35**

**Sports Parade on the Red Square. The Ukrainian Team, 1936**

Original gelatine silver print, on cardboard

Dimensions of the print: 29.2 × 48.3 cm

Dimensions of the sheet: 44.1 × 63.8 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**36**

**Moscow. Red Square. Sports Parade, 1936**

Original gelatine silver print, on cardboard

Dimensions of the print: 29 × 49 cm

Dimensions of the sheet: 44 × 64 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**37**

**Circus. The Vavilovs, 1940**

Original gelatine silver print

16.3 × 11.6 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**38**

**Gym Wheel. Circus, 1940**

Gelatine silver print from original negative, 1990s

28.5 × 38 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**39**

**Circus. Equitation, 1940**

Original gelatine silver print

40.6 × 28.2 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

## Design

As for many of Rodchenko's contemporaries, the traditional hierarchy of the arts no longer applied. To them, all artistic media were equal, serving merely a particular design interest. This is particularly true of Alexander Rodchenko as his fundamental artistic interest was founded upon the precise observation of the world of modern means. It is, then, understandable that photography was for him on the one hand a means of illustrating the modern view of the world, but that, on the other, design in the realm of "applied" art constituted that "constructive" side of artistic activity which enabled him to translate modern life into reality. Architecture in this respect was but one way of capturing life.

The design of his *Workers' Club* (61–73) of 1925 is without doubt Rodchenko's most comprehensive project in the sphere known today as "design". However, there are countless further designs demonstrating the artist's interest in creatively shaping all realms of life.

To begin with he worked in graphic design in the early 1920s, designing numerous publications with illustrations and covers. In studies for further magazine and book covers, Rodchenko also experimented with collage, integrating photography as well. Typography and graphic design assumed a central communicative function at this time, in which the printed press played a key role for social communication. (47, 48, 50, 51)

Of comparable importance for this modernist perspective was the role of advertising. We thus find outstanding examples of this domain in Rodchenko's work too, for instance in his designs for the cigarette industry, both for packet design and advertising posters. (52–55)

The highly symbolic pins and tie-pins that he created for the shareholders and members of a newly founded airline played a similar role. (56)

But Rodchenko's design interest also focused on the domestic realm (57–60). One outstanding example is the design for a teapot. Tea was and is an extremely important beverage for communal life in Russia, and so the artist understandably devoted special attention to the most important utensil, the pot, in which tea is prepared and served. The aim was not only to devise the ideal form of the object itself. Equally important was the idea of the décor. This articulates with great clarity the formal programme of constructivism with Rodchenko's characteristic colours red, black and white, and the basic stereometric figures, the rectangle, circle and their variations. (58)

And the role of architecture? Even this is incorporated into Rodchenko's fundamental formative impetus. Not only did he create designs for temporary or demountable, i.e. mobile, architectures, for example for newspaper kiosks (45, 49). There also exist numerous experimental studies for architectures that may serve many different purposes. Their fundamentally "constructive" nature, i.e. their montage-based structure, that was essentially geared to the new possibilities of using metal in architecture at the beginning of the 20th century, is of course particularly suitable for constructions that may serve propaganda or memorial purposes (40–44). Nevertheless, Rodchenko also broadened this design practice to embrace larger structures too, as demonstrated by his watercolour sketch for an airport (46).

Hence, in a comprehensive sense, Alexander Rodchenko's work was one of creative formation that is today best described by the term design. His distinctly modern stance retains its rhetoric force today, still capable of instilling enthusiasm. The *Workers' Club* is the most powerful example of this.

Friedemann Malsch

40

**Architectural composition of spatial elements, 1920**

Paper, pencil

35.7 × 22 cm

Private collection, Moscow

41

**Architectural project, 1920**

Paper, pencil

35.8 × 22 cm

Private collection, Moscow

42

**Architectural composition. From the series "City with Façade", 1920**

Paper on card, ink, pencil

36 × 22 cm

Private collection, Moscow

43

**Architectural composition. (Construction), 1919**

Paper, coloured pen

37 × 24 cm

Private collection, Moscow

44

**Sovdep. Design for the Deputies building. From the series "City with Façade", 1920**

Paper, ink, pen

36.5 × 26.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

45

**Design for a newspaper kiosk, 1919**

Paper, gouache, watercolour

50 × 30 cm

Private collection, Moscow

46

**Design for an airport, 1919**

Paper, watercolour, coloured and black ink

35.5 × 22 cm

Private collection, Moscow

47

**Aleksei Gan. Constructivism. Cover sketch, 1922**

Paper, gouache, ink

22 × 15 cm

Private collection, Moscow

48

**Cover of the catalogue of the Soviet section of the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts in Paris, 1925**

Paper, gouache

27 × 19.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

49

**Design for a book kiosk, 1924**

Paper, gouache, ink

33 × 44.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

50

**"New LEF" No. 6. Cover of the magazine, 1927**

Typographical print

22.7 × 15.3 cm

Private collection, Moscow

51

**"The Radio Listener". Cover of the magazine, 1929**

Typographical print

32 × 23.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**52**

**Design for an advertising board for Papirossy “Klad”,  
1923/1957**

Paper, gouache, ink

Dimensions of the illustration: 19.5 × 42 cm

Dimensions of the sheet: 21.2 × 44.6 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**53**

**Design for an advertising board for Papirossy “Lux”,  
1923/1957**

Paper, gouache, ink

19 × 45.5 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**54**

**Design for an advertising board for Papirossy “Lux”,  
1923/1957**

Paper, gouache, ink

17.1 × 41.2 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**55**

**Design for a Papirossy box “Esmeralda”, 1925**

Paper on cardboard, gouache

12 × 9 × 2 cm

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**56**

**Design for an advertising poster for the DL (Dobrolyot)  
airline, n.d.**

Digital print (2015)

29.7 × 21 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**Pins, badges, cuff-links, tie-pins and clips, and  
commemorative badges, 1923–1926**

(embossed) images of an aeroplane

Caption: DL (Dobrolyot)

Silver, silver-plated metal, gold-plated metal, white metal,  
copper, brass, enamel, guilloche

Set of 28 items

Different dimensions

Sepherot Foundation (Liechtenstein)

**57**

**Pattern for fabric, 1924**

Paper, coloured ink, ruling pen

13 × 30 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**58**

**Pot for hot water. From the series of designs for a tea-set,  
1922**

Paper, ink, gouache

27 × 37.2 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**59**

**Design for a lamp for Café Pittoresque, 1917**

Paper, pencil

70 × 46 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**60**

**Design for a lamp for Café Pittoresque, 1917**

Paper, pencil

70 × 46 cm

Private collection, Moscow

“Traces and outcomes of my work in Paris will remain for the future.”

Alexander Rodchenko, 1925

## Workers' Club

“At the suggestion of Volodya\*, who was a member of the committee for the Paris World Exposition in 1925, I received the commission for an exhibit – a ‘Workers’ Club’. [...] The ‘Club’ was accepted, both the model and the drawings. In view of the short time available, it was decided to build the design on site. I thus had to go to Paris.”

The *Workers' Club* would be one of the exhibits of the Soviet section of the *Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* (61, 63, 64, 72), built to real scale. It was to be an exemplary *Workers' Club* – exemplary in terms of design and a model with regard to the functionality of the space.

Rodchenko was of course familiar with the subject matter, but he was not versed in the niceties of planning furniture. His search for form and construction of the Club's furnishings can be retraced with the aid of sketches and drawings. The first version of the chair, for example, was a bulky seat with armrests and a two-part backrest. From this traditional chair Rodchenko arrived at an intermediate solution with maximum geometrical formulation of the structural elements: the seat was round, the backrest consisted of rectangular battens. Starting out from this solution, split up into its component parts, he arrived at the final version in which the seat was semicircular, while the legs, elongated upwards, became backrest supports, with the entire contour of the chair encompassed in an elementary three-dimensional schema, the semicylinder. (62)

The design project for the *Workers' Club* comprises drawings, a model, and photos of the model describing the various levels of designing the Club.

The first level is the architectural one: the space was defined with means of graphic design and information technology – the solution in terms of architecture and colour graphics.

Rodchenko was from the beginning convinced that individual areas should be separated inside the Club room. He illustrated these areas by means of the wall colour and details of décor attached directly to the walls.

The second level of the interior design for the *Workers' Club* was the furnishings and furniture. The function of the room was defined by the two largest elements: a multifunctional podium with a screen and a reading table. “All objects are built on the

basis of the principle of mobility. I regard this principle as fundamental in planning a modern object.” (68–71)

The transformation enabled him to implement one of the central requirements that he had set himself: economical use of space and maximum functional efficiency of the furnishings.

The third level, finally, was defined by facilities for games and other activities. These included hexagonal “drums” that could be rotated on horizontal rods for viewing photos or slides (65) and a display case for viewing posters.

Rodchenko loved chess as a beautiful game of logic in which dramatic abstract situations unfold. The chessboard itself, a composition of regular geometrical structure, was to his taste. What is more, chess was very popular in the Soviet Union at that time, which is why Rodchenko designated one area of the Club for this purpose. Instead of installing an isolated booth for the players, however, he planned an original place for playing chess, around which chess enthusiasts could gather to watch. (66, 67)

This kind of furnishing for use by amateurs was without doubt an invention of the designer Rodchenko. Starting out from the construction of the object and the purposeful organisation of material, he went on to influence the situation in which it was used and to establish a certain culture in the use of the object.

Alexander Lavrentiev

\*Vladimir Mayakovsky, trans. note

All quotations in the text are from Alexander Rodchenko.

**61**

**Interior of the Workers' Club. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, Paris. Photo by Alexander Rodchenko, 1925**

two digital prints, 2015

21 × 29.7 cm each

Private collection, Moscow

**62**

**Working drawings for the Workers' Club design, 1925**

Tracing paper, pencil

37 × 55 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**63**

**Interior of the Workers' Club. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, Paris. Photo by Alexander Rodchenko, 1925**

two digital prints, 2015 and n.d.

29.7 × 21 cm

35 × 27.4 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**64**

**Showcase. Photo by Alexander Rodchenko**

Digital print, n.d.

35 × 27.4 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**65**

**Design for a showcase for the Workers' Club, 1925**

Paper, ink, coloured ink

36.2 × 25.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**66**

**Design for a display table for the Workers' Club, 1925**

Digital print, 2015

29.7 × 21 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**67**

**Design for a display table for the Workers' Club, 1925**

Paper, ink, coloured ink

30 × 25.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**68**

**Design for (unrealised) furnishings for the Workers' Club, 1925**

Digital print, 2015

29.7 × 21 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**69**

**Design for a convertible podium for the Workers' Club, 1925**

Paper, ink, coloured ink

36.2 × 25.5 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**70**

**Design for (unrealised) furnishings for the Workers' Club, 1925**

Digital print, 2015

29.7 × 21 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**71**

**Design for a shelf with books for the Workers' Club, 1925**

Digital print, 2015

29.7 × 21 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**72**

**Shelf with books. Photo by Alexander Rodchenko, 1925**

Digital print, n.d.

35 × 27.4 cm

Private collection, Moscow

**73**

**Workers' Club, 1925 (2015)**

After the realisation in 1925 for the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* at the Grand Palais, Paris.

Fitted with modern information technologies, it will be presented for the first time in such a way that it can be used for its intended purpose as a place of education and social exchange.

Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz

Text

Alexander Lavrentiev, Friedemann Malsch

All texts in the visitors' booklet are based on contributions of the catalogue, published in conjunction with the exhibition *Alexander Rodchenko. Photography and Design*.

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**Alexander Rodchenko**

**Photography and Design**

27 March – 21 June 2015

Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein

**Opening**

Thursday, 26 March 2015, 6pm

**Guided tours**

Thursday, 2 April 2015, 6pm

Thursday, 11 June 2015, 6pm

with Friedemann Malsch

**Take Away**

Short guided tour during the lunch break (30 mins.)

Thursday, 30 April 2015, 12.30pm

**Finissage**

Sunday, 21 June 2015, 11am

Lecture by Alexander Lavrentiev, Moscow



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