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Author(s): Natalia Adaskina

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Constructivist Fabrics and Dress Design

By Natalia Adaskina

Natalia Lvovna Adaskina, born in 1940, is an art historian who works at the All-Union Scientific Research Institute of Technical Esthetics in Moscow. A specialist in the art of the 1920s, she has published widely on particular institutions and artists such as VKhUTEMAS (Higher State Art-Technical Studios), Vladimir Favorsky, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, and Liubov Popova.

All photographs courtesy of VAAP, Moscow.

A

lthough the constructivists' participation in fabric and dress design was an entirely local phenomenon in Soviet artistic life of the 1920s, its importance was considerable and multi-faceted. Artistically, it was yet another instance of constructivist stylistic methods applied to the design of everyday objects. The constructivists' activity in the textile factory proved an important experiment in adapting artistic creativity to textile production, and to an industry which had previously operated by adapting foreign models to local conditions, often by the simple expedient of recombining parts of old patterns into "new" ones.

The painters of the avant-garde came to production art via two channels: theater design and the traditional arts and crafts. The fact that they turned to theater at different stages of their own artistic evolution made their work extremely varied, ranging from the flat decorative effect of the early Diaghilev "seasons" to the volumetric cubofuturism of Alexander Tairov's productions in the late 1910s to the constructivism of Liubov Popova and Vsevolod Meierkhold in the early 1920s. As for their interest in the traditional crafts, here, too, we see a link between the productionists of the 1920s and the older generation of the avant-garde.

One link that connected these two stages of Russian cultural life was the activity of Natalia Davydova.¹ Her aim was to infuse the degenerating *kustar* crafts with new artistic ideas and a new stock of designs, while at the same time finding a practical application for the art of innovative painters. Popova, later to be a production-constructivist, became involved in this work in 1917, during her suprematist phase and the preparation of the journal *Supremus*. Those of her sketches for Verbovka that have survived—miniature collages made of colored and white, gloss and matt finished paper, glued to white or grey, imitation linen cardboard—were used by the village embroidresses. All the designs were suprematist, with a restrained centripetal treatment of the compositional elements characteristic of Popova's paintings of the period. These designs are scaled-down models of larger, complete paintings, rather than fragments of something bigger, but it is difficult to see their decorative or applied intention.

1. Natalia Mikhailovna Davydova organized an art enterprise in the village of Verbovka in the Ukraine, where peasant women produced embroideries to designs by avant-garde artists from the capital. See "P," "Krestianskoe tvorchestvo Ukrainy," *Russkoe iskusstvo*, Moscow-Petersburg, 1923, 2–3, pp. 2–3; L. Shadowa, *Suche und Experiment* (Dresden: VEB, 1978), pp. 33–34, 121. Shadowa mistakenly calls her Natalia Yakovlevna, confusing her with Natalia Ya. Davydova who was connected with the Abramtsevo circle and also was involved with folk art. Also see Wendy Salmond's article in this issue.



**Fig. 1. Varvara Stepanova,
design for a sports costume,
early 1920s. (See page 147.)**



Fig. 2. Design by Vera Mukhina after a model by Nadezhda Lamanova. This is a sheet from the album *Iskusstvo v bytu* (Art in Everyday Life) (Moscow 1925) which was a supplement to the journal *Krasnaia niva* (Red Field).

Nevertheless, it was in these small sketches that Popova moved from the easel to the object. The lessons she learned in these suprematist collages were obviously included in her textile designs six years later.

In the early 1920s, Alexandra Exter and Vera Mukhina, motivated by practical necessity, began making bast hats and belts for sale, using their experience and imagination as theater designers. Commissioned by Nadezhda Lamanova for the Kusteksport Corporation, they designed dresses and compiled ornamental motifs to decorate them. As for the experience which the leaders of constructivism had in designing everyday clothes, here, too, sheer necessity was often a motivating factor. Thus, Vladimir Tatlin's suit design belongs in the same category as the stove he built with his own hands. Warmth, ease of movement, and a simple cut determined the form of the object that was later to become a standard for constructivist dress and constructivist esthetics (revealing the technological method, honest use of materials, et cetera).

Consequently, by the early 1920s, several artistic groups had come into close contact and even joined forces in the field of dress design. The professional dress designers (for example Lamanova, Evgeniia Pribylskaia, and Nadezhda Makarova) were joined by painters with experience designing theater costumes who had recently become interested in designing clothing (Exter, Mukhina), while the production-constructivists (Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and Popova) also turned to the problems of dress. Common to all three groups were the problems of *prozodezhbda*,² an issue which had

2. The concept of *prozodezhbda* which appeared in the early 1920s was not confined to that of *spetsodezhbda* (clothing for specific jobs requiring a specific dress). It was understood more broadly as clothing for the working man of a specific category for specific occupations, whether labor, relaxation, or sport.

already been debated in Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Enlightenment) in 1919, as well as the functional design and production of clothing for the masses. In 1925, for example, Mukhina and Lamanova designed a series of models for everyday wear that were published in the album *Iskusstvo bytu* (Art in Everyday Life) and intended for the home sewer (fig. 2). They were extremely simple and logical in cut and construction.

The work of Lamanova's group was based on two contradictory trends. On the one hand they fought for a constructive and logical approach to clothing design and dreamed of organizing mass production, while on the other hand they produced refined models for a select few, making lavish use of embroidery and lace. In other words, the Atelier of Fashions, to which these artists belonged, both welcomed the ideas of production art and constructivism propagated on the pages of the Moscow magazine *Lef*, and at the same time came into sharp confrontation with them.

The central tenet of constructivist clothing design was the development of so-called *prozodezhda*, an aim pursued by Tatlin and Rodchenko, Stepanova and Popova, Lamanova and Exter. All shared a number of basic views on the subject: they declared war on the notion of universal dress, and upheld the principles of expediency in clothing and functionalism in its production. As Stepanova stressed in a lecture at a meeting of the Moscow InkhuK (the Institute of Artistic Culture): "A basic principle governs clothing constructed today: comfort and expediency. There is no one single type of clothing, but rather specific clothing for a specific productional function."³ Stepanova designed specialized clothing for surgeons, firemen, and pilots, as well as sports clothing whose functionalism was combined with a typically constructivist play with geometric forms. It is no coincidence that her clothing designs for sports teams are so close stylistically to the costumes she designed for the play *The Death of Tarelkin* performed in Meierkholt's theater in 1922 (figs. 1 and 3).

For the production-constructivists of the 1920s, theater design was no longer the materialization of cherished plastic ideas about color and volume, but the arena for experimentation in designing a new everyday environment, whether it was realized in a conventional, grotesque form as in Stepanova's *The Death of Tarelkin*, a conventional constructivist form, as in Popova's *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, or as an ideal model for living, more or less true to reality, as in Rodchenko's stage designs. The costume designs for such performances likewise ceased to function as painterly or constructive characterizations of the characters, becoming instead a self-contained form of propaganda for the new artistic ideas and the new model for living, which often contradicted the plot of the play and reflected only its emotional content. This was true of the *prozodezhda* which Popova used for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*.

A vital part of the constructivist ideology was the equation of the activity of art with that of production, and the conviction that technical developments leave their mark on art and make certain demands on it. When, in 1923, Stepanova and Popova began their work with textiles, they were fully convinced that the mechanized nature of modern industry was essential for the further development of art. Popova wrote: "The epoch which modern mankind has just embarked on is one of industrial prosperity, and so in organizing the elements of artistic production we should turn to the arrangement of the material elements

3. Quoted in T. Strizhenova, *Iz istorii sovetskogo kostiuma* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1972), p. 84.

Fig. 3. Dress realized in the 1980s after a design by Varvara Stepanova of the 1920s. Model is the Moscow architect E. Khudiakova who also made the dress.



of life, i.e., to industry, to so-called production.”⁴ The path to production grew logically out of the evolution of their art and their theoretical ideas.

Moreover, industrial production, for its part, was extremely interested in them. The initiative to invite the artists to the First State Textile Print Factory came from Alexander Arkhangelsky, who had been appointed director in June 1923. An active role in the negotiations was also taken by Professor Petr Viktorov, a chemist and textile expert. Stepanova and Popova arrived at the factory at a time when there was still a great deal to be rebuilt and much had been completely lost. Only a percentage of the experienced personnel had returned, and contacts with Paris, the supplier of textile “samples,” were completely severed. It was essential to establish textile production based on home-grown artistic ideas. As they got down to work, Popova and Stepanova composed a memo to the management in which they set out their plans:

1. Participation in the work of industrial production either working closely with or directing the artistic side of things with the right to a deliberative vote (on production plans, models for production, acquisition of designs, and hiring of workers in the art sector).
2. Participation in the work of the chemistry laboratory in the capacity of observers of the coloration process.
3. The production of designs for block printed fabrics.
4. Contact with the sewing workshops, fashion ateliers, and journals.
5. Agitational work for the factory in the press and advertisements in journals. At the same time we may also contribute designs for store windows.⁵

The two artists immediately made an effort to understand the specifics and technological demands of the industry, but this did not protect them from complications in their work and conflicts with the factory specialists. The critic D.M. Aranovich wrote:

The sketches by L.S. Popova and especially by Stepanova... were realized only after they were extensively reworked by the factory’s art production team.... Moreover, this “reworking” was so extensive that the coloring specified in the sketches was changed completely, while the actual design was kept intact in relatively few cases.⁶

Despite the authoritative tone, Aranovich’s opinion should not be accepted without question. Those rare sample fabrics by Popova and Stepanova that have survived (in the State Tretyakov Gallery, The Museum of the First State Textile Print Factory, and in private collections) show an almost complete correspondence between the artists’ sketches and the completed fabrics (figs. 4 and 5). In actual fact, there were clashes as well as compromises on both sides, caused in part by difficulties with the dyers which forced the artists to change their design sketches.

Popova’s and Stepanova’s work in the textile factory should also be seen as a stage in their own artistic evolution and as an experimental realization of the

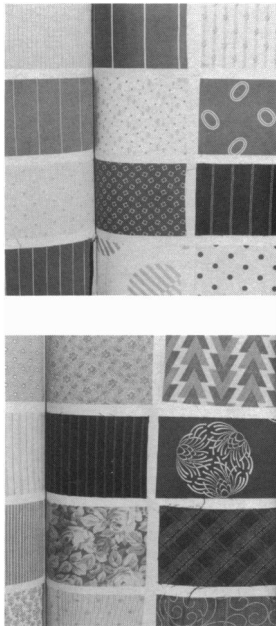


Fig. 4. Fabric samples from a sample album in the Museum of the First State Textile Print Factory, Moscow. Among the samples are designs by Liubov Popova.

4. Manuscript section of the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, f.148, ed.kh. 17, 1.3.

5. Quoted in A. Lavrentiev, “Poeziia graficheskogo dizaina v tvorchestve Varvary Stepanovoi,” *Tekhnicheskaya estetika*, Moscow, 1980, no. 5, p.25.

6. D. Aranovich, “Iskusstvo v tkani,” *Iskusstvo odevat’sia*, Leningrad, 1928, no. 1, p. 11.



Fig. 5. Fabric samples of the late 1920s taken from a sample album in the Museum of the First State Textile Print Factory, Moscow.

production-constructivist program. Textiles were a convenient medium for creating designs in a constructivist style, with rectilinear geometric shapes, color contrasts, and sharp rhythms. At the same time, this new kind of textile was treated, as we know from Stepanova's "Notes of an Artist"⁷ and Popova's practical output, not as a form created for its own sake, but as something inseparable from the shape of the garment and the wearer's lifestyle. In accordance with the logic of production art, textile design was one more link in the total reconstruction of life.

To some extent, this new phase was a continuation of Davydova's attempts to take the canons of the new art out of the studio and apply them to everyday objects. It paralleled the attempts of Sonia Delaunay and E. Courteau in France to create a thoroughly contemporary style for objects of everyday use. However, the conditions under which these problems were addressed were quite different. In the first place, the designs of Popova and her colleagues lacked the *élite* clientèle which Davydova before them and Delaunay in contemporary France enjoyed. The period of NEP (New Economic Policy) did create a public with sufficient affluence to fulfill this role but without any artistic ideals of its own. Instead, it surrounded itself with outmoded fashions from the West and remnants from the houses of the dispossessed upper classes. Second, and most important, artists like Popova had no desire to concentrate on a narrow *élite* circle, and their insistence on catering to the masses really complicated the creation of a new style for everyday objects. Judging by her sketches, Popova tried to solve this problem simultaneously and totally. They range from extraordinarily simple and modest patterns inspired by folk art to designs that are

7. Several years later, Stepanova developed this idea in an article. See "Ot kostiuma k risunku tkani," *Vechnaia Moskva*, Moscow, 28 February 1928.

intricate, spatially irrational, and quite magical in effect. At the same time, she tried to meet the consumer halfway, trying to fathom the “mysterious taste of the Tula peasant woman,”⁸ and going against established tastes. “They didn’t pander to current tastes, which was perhaps both their strength and their weakness,” writes Elena Murina of the constructivists’ work, “They formed these tastes.”⁹ They used their fabrics to agitate for a new style, to transform everyday life.

The effect of many of Popova’s sketches comes from her refined color combinations and the way she applies them, brilliantly drawing on her own experience with painted “color constructions” (figs. 6 and 8). The shallow, unspecific spatial depth which we find in her fabric designs recalls both the space of her late “rayist,” “criss-cross” paintings, the “flat” space of her stage design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* which was so hotly debated at Inkhukh, and her favorite open-work construction of metal girders, used in her sketches for *Earth on End* and her graphic designs.

While Stepanova’s designs are close to Popova’s in style and spirit, they naturally have their own rhythm and compositional methods (fig. 7). By comparison with Popova’s, they are certainly more linear and graphic and seem to stress the fact that they are composed with compasses and ruler. Her designs are based on combinations of the circle, triangle, and square, a deliberate self-limitation in which we see “the mechanization of the artist’s work that brings her methods closer to the principles of mass production technology.”¹⁰ Her sketches from the late 1920s are noticeably more complex than the early ones. As Alexander Lavrentiev notes: “The multiplanarity of the design becomes especially deep, and she stresses the difference in scale between the basic structure of the background and the compositional grid superimposed over it. Most of all we see illusory kinetic forms in a state of constant transformation....”¹¹

The dynamism of both Popova’s and Stepanova’s textile designs is especially noticeable when compared to the fabrics of the time. Contemporaries were stunned by the unexpected, unaccustomed color combinations and designs, which now look so harmonious to us. As a rule, the regular geometry of the designs made them quite symmetrical, and it is typical of the artists’ commitment to the esthetic principles of constructivism that they rejected the idea of introducing free, non-objective, suprematist- or cubofuturist-inspired compositions to their fabrics (fig. 9). Production requirements also played a role, since cotton printing typically used small repeat motifs; and designs which used a few simple compositional layers and could be repeated in different directions were especially suited to this kind of printing.

A comparison of Popova’s late textile designs with her sketches for the Verbovka embroideresses shows similarities and differences, in terms of both the ideas behind them and their formal, artistic treatment. There is a striking closeness in the methods used. In the late works, Popova resurrects her favorite collage method, with its literal imposition of spatial layers; unlike her Verbovka collages, however, she superimposes entire systems rather than separate elements. Moreover, in accordance with the constructivist esthetic, the compositional element is simplified down to its most basic elements, while the rules governing the combinations of parts become, on the contrary, complex.

8. “Pamiati L.S. Popova,” *LEF*, Moscow, 1924, no. 2, p.4.

9. E. Murina, “Tkani Liubvi Popovoi,” *Dekorativnoe iskusstvo SSSR*, Moscow, 1967, no. 8, p.27.

10. Lavrentiev, op. cit., p. 26.

11. Ibid.

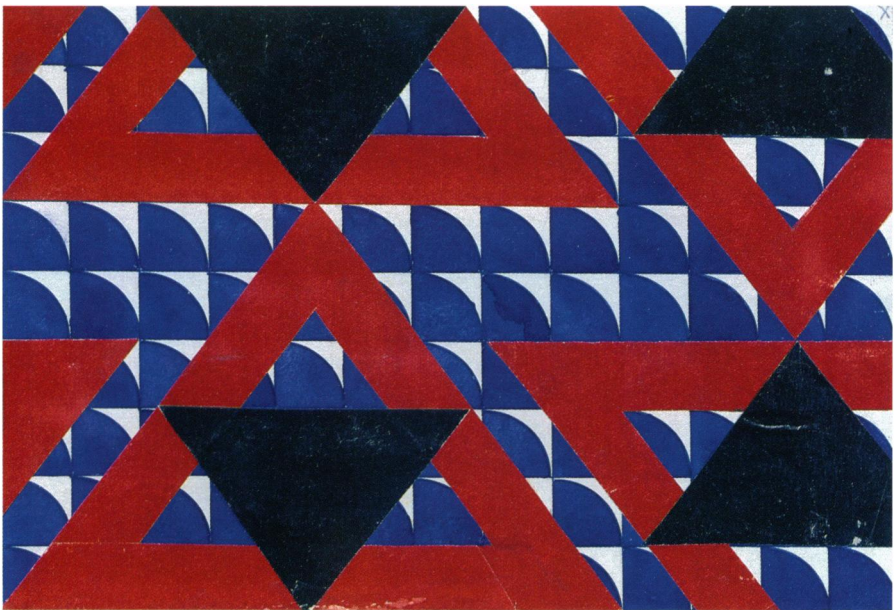
Fig. 6. Liubov Popova, fabric design, 1923–24.

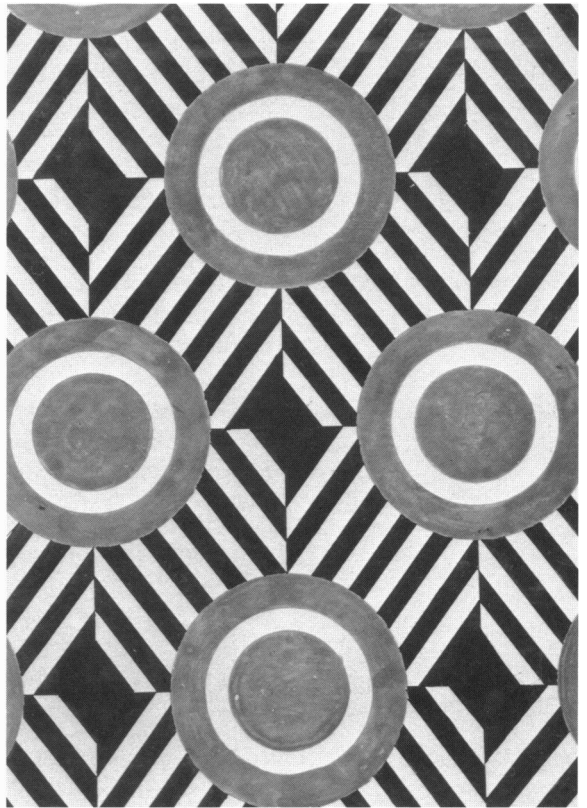
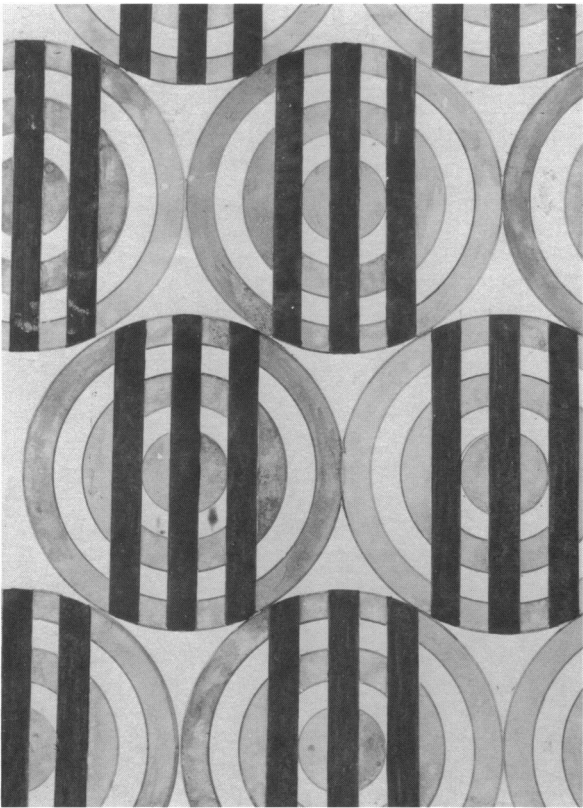
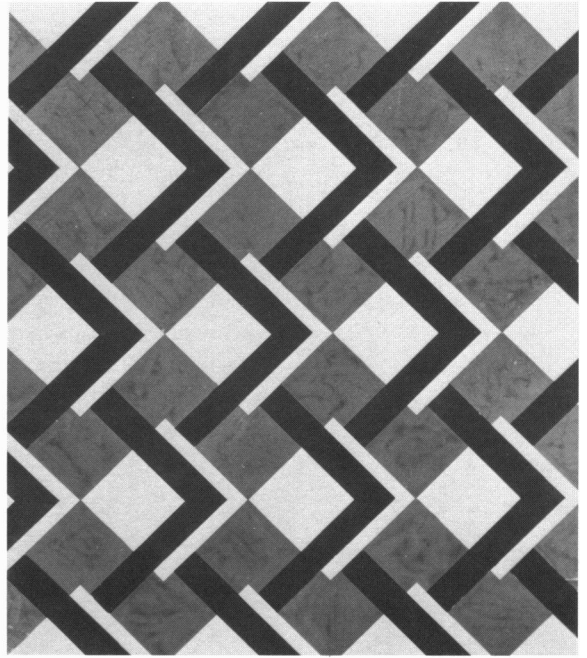
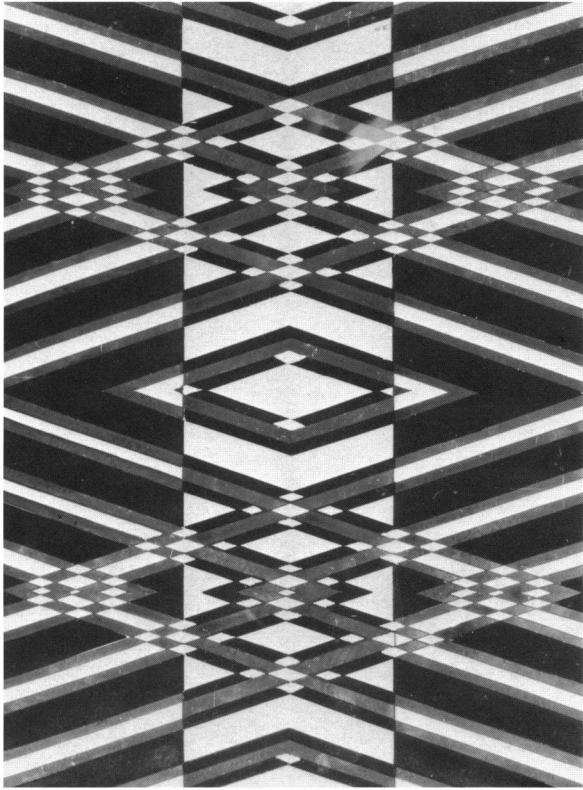
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Fig. 7. Varvara Stepanova, fabric designs, 1924.



Fig. 8. Liubov Popova, fabric design, 1923–24.

►
Fig. 9. Liubov Popova, fabric designs, 1923–24.





Popova's dress designs have long been thought of as exclusively democratic, as a version of the "proletarian style." Certainly, a great many of her designs are modest although workmanlike, and are a far cry from the severely prosaic *prozodezhbda*. They call to mind the image of the female toiler, not perhaps the "proletarian worker," but rather the teacher, the office worker. However, a large percentage of her designs was intended for another human type, another social status. She might be "the lady from Kuznetsky Most"¹² of the NEP period or, probably, a more artistic type, a little more extravagantly liberated, representative of both the Roaring Twenties and that paragon—the film star and the *artiste* (fig. 10). Popova's clothing designs do not fit within the framework of the purely productionist esthetic and have more in common with the work of her two old friends Exter and Mukhina. It is quite possible that it was Popova who succeeded in linking the two main trends in clothing design during those years: those who gathered around the Atelier of Fashions and the journal *Atelier*, and the productionists from *Lef*.



Fig. 10. Liubov Popova, dress design incorporating the fabric design in Fig. 9, 1923–24.

Essential differences can be seen in the artist's perceptions of dress as a spatial form and those aspects of the textile which were designed to enhance it.¹³ In this respect, Popova was closer to Exter and Mukhina than to Lamanova and Pribylskaia. Unlike Stepanova, she accented the natural proportions and structure of the female figure and rejected geometric abstraction in designing clothing (fig. 11). At the same time, however, Popova conceived of the human figure as just a constructive frame holding and bracing the clothing at points specified by the designer. In all other respects, the construction of the body and the fabric covering it were independent of each other. Thus, emancipated from the body, the spatial element of the fabric made it possible to use large, highly decorative geometric patterns and to express the design's own logic. Such a view allowed for the explicit "spatialness" of the fabric. In addition to addressing general problems, Popova's designs demonstrated a more detailed study of the subject, and a search for the maximum correspondence between fabric and dress. In almost every design, for example, she suggested combining plain and ornate fabrics, a combination that became almost obligatory in producing brightly colored, rhythmically tense textiles (fig. 12). It is not by chance that Sonia Delaunay propagandized the form of the cutout pattern as a way to regulate the correspondence between plain and ornamental fabrics.¹⁴

It is typical of Stepanova's work that, despite her avowed principles, there was no real connection between her textile and dress designs. All her known clothing designs are constructed by contrasting combinations of fabric fragments in the same color (fig. 13). Lacking Popova's rich experience in cubofuturist and suprematist painting, and more devoted to the constructivist doctrine, Stepanova was, apparently, unable to escape the confines of orthodox constructivism, with its emphasis on schematic treatment.

After Popova's death in May 1924, the constructivist style in textile design went into decline. At the time, this was explained by the overall changes in style. However, we know that constructivist tendencies were successfully developed

Fig. 11. Liubov Popova, design for a store window display, 1924.

12. V. Rakitin, "Liubov Popova," *Künstlerinnen der russischen Avantgarde 1910–1930*, catalog of exhibition at the Galerie Gmurzynska (Cologne, 1979), p. 205.
13. The source for this "spatial" approach to costume may be found in Lev Bakst's theater costumes for the Diaghilev ballets. See, for example, John E. Bowl, "From Pictures to Textile Prints," *Print Collector's Newsletter*, New York, March/April 1976, p. 16.
14. In 1928, Sonia Delaunay published an article in the Soviet journal *Iskusstvo odevatsia*, 1928, no. 2, which promoted the production of cutout textiles.





in many artistic fields, especially architecture, until the early 1930s. No doubt the rejection of constructivist textiles was linked to the general inertia that greeted this particular branch of the arts—in its attempt to reconstruct everyday life in a constructivist style. But for the theory and practice of production art, the value of what Popova and Stepanova set out to achieve is undeniable. Their designs were appreciated not only by art critics and exhibition organizers but also by rank and file designers from the Textile Print Factory; and the Factory's museum provides some idea of their mastery of constructivist stylistics. The geometric designs are simpler, even primitive, their drawing is less assured, the compositions are less daring, and they are marred by trivial detail and a surfeit of forms. Nonetheless, they show a definite gravitation towards new motifs and rhythms.

◀
Fig. 12. Liubov Popova, coat
design, 1923–24.

Until the early 1930s, ideas about the reconstruction of everyday life according to the principles of functionalism and constructivism were disseminated through discussions on the problems of dress design and production. The critic Alexei Fedorov-Davydov wrote in 1931: “*Prozodezhda* will undoubtedly develop hand-in-hand with collectivization, with the elimination of individualism in everyday life and the individual forms of labor.”¹⁵ A functionalist approach to dress design expanding on the ideas of the productionists from *Lef* was a condition of the competition for new clothing announced in 1931 by the Visual Arts Section of Narkompros in association with the Scientific Research Institute of the garment industry.¹⁶ The results of this competition show clearly that, by the early 1930s, the problem of the artist's place in industry which the production-constructivists had discussed in the early 1920s, was still unresolved.¹⁷

Of all the attempts made by the production-constructivists throughout the 1920s to realize their extensive program for the reconstruction of life, the role played by Popova and Stepanova in textile production was perhaps the most practical. Through them the constructivist esthetic really did enter into an alliance with industrial mass production. Through them the consumers of the new artistic ideas really were the toiling masses. In an article on Popova's posthumous exhibition, the critic Yakov Tugendkhold wrote:

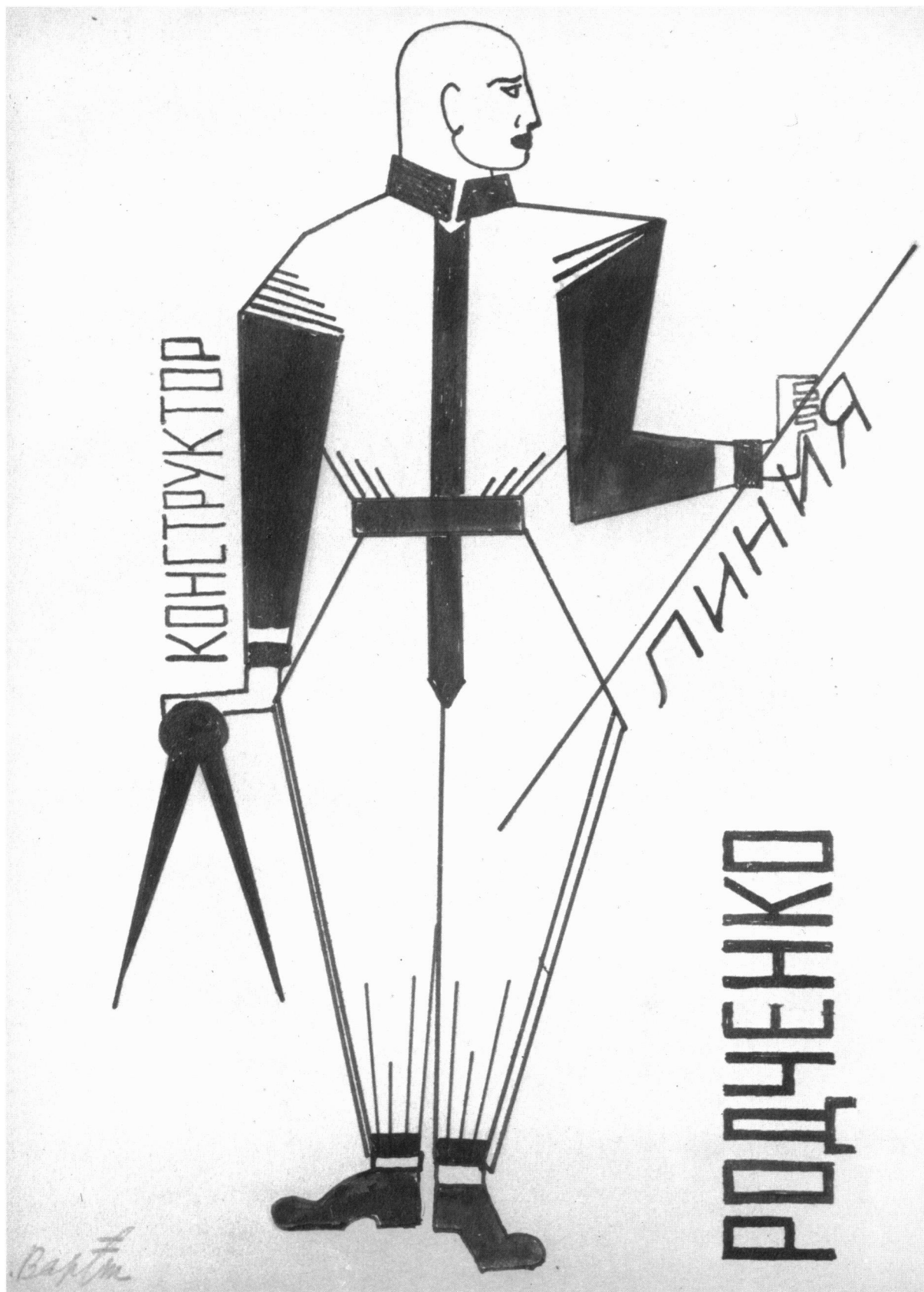
Perhaps Popova's most significant accomplishment was her attempt to reform mass industry. Her straightforward nature was not satisfied with the illusions of the theater. She was drawn to the ultimate logical step, the introduction of art into production itself, into everyday life. She was the first to make a breach in the Bastille of our factory conservatism with her designs for the Textile Print Factory (formally the Tsindel Factory). She used to say that not one of her artistic successes ever gave her such deep satisfaction as the sight of a peasant woman and a worker buying lengths of her material. And, in fact, last spring, without even knowing it, all of Moscow was wearing fabrics which Popova had designed, fabrics with bright, strong designs and full of movement, like the artist herself.¹⁸

15. Quoted in A. Fedorov-Davydov, *Russkoe i sovetskoe iskusstvo. Statii i ocherki* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975), p.138.

16. “Konkurs novoi odezhdy,” *Brigada khudozhnikov*, Moscow, 1931, no. 7, p. 29.

17. M. Alpatov, “Konkurs novoi odezhdy,” *Brigada khudozhnikov*, 1932, no. 6, pp. 50–52.

18. Ya. Tugendkhold, “Po vystavkam,” *Izvestiia VTsIK*, Moscow, no. 26 (235), 1 February 1925



If the first step in bringing artistic creativity to the routine work of factory “designers” was the arrival of Popova and Stepanova in the textile factory, then the second was the coming of graduates from VKhUTEIN to the Moscow and Iranovo factories at the end of the 1920s. Equally important for the development of industry in the Soviet Union were the theoretical aims of production art in the 1920s and the formal, plastic ideas contained in the experimental art of the Soviet constructivists. Popova’s participation in the production art movement, which by rights earned her the title of artist-constuctor, obliges us to take a broader view of constructivist textile and dress design. Her design work was not limited to developing different types of *prozodezhda* and uniforms, or to the rational decoration of day-to-day processes. The breadth and variety of her esthetic enthusiasm were rooted in something other than the orthodox constructivists’ conventional notion of man and cultural values; they derived from her experience as an artist operating within the framework of the Russian avant-garde, an experience that drew on the cultural achievements of both past and present. □

**Fig. 13. Varvara Stepanova,
caricature of her husband
Alexander Rodchenko wearing
a suit designed by her, 1922.**