

"ALEXANDRA EXTER" ASSOCIATION¹



The life and artistic career of Alexandra Exter (1882-1949) were full of dramatic events. After very promising early work in Kiev and in Paris, where she established herself at the centre of Modernist action from the start, the young Cubo-Futurist returned to Russia in August 1914. From 1915 onwards her creative work became widely known, and as a talented stage designer and a truly original abstract painter, by 1917 she was at the forefront of the Moscow scene in both painting and theatre design. Exter herself was badly and permanently affected by the Revolution and the civil war she had to endure in Kiev and Odessa; a great many of her paintings were destroyed, with the result that her stage designs are better known today than her pictorial work, from which some important milestone pieces are irretrievably lost.

In 1924 the artist managed to emigrate to France, where she had already stayed at regular intervals before August 1914. The increasing loss of interest in abstract art in Paris in the nineteen twenties, together with poor health, cast a shadow over the end of her life. Nevertheless, in the late thirties she produced highly original work in book design and illustration, which is still virtually unknown. Despite poverty and dreadful living conditions, towards the end of her life Exter took care of her work. She restored her paintings and in December 1948 bequeathed her archives, studio contents and control of her moral rights to the painter Simon Lissim, a fellow Russian expatriate who had by then become a citizen of the United States. Thanks to the unfailing energy of this devoted friend, during the fifties and sixties Exter's work gradually found its way into the North American and British museum collections, to which her heir donated many works - sometimes employing subtle stratagems in the process.

I discovered Simon Lissim's collection in 1970 and organised the first posthumous exhibition of Exter's work in Paris in 1972. On that occasion I published a monograph, which was intended as an homage and follow-up to the Berlin monograph (1922) by the Russian critic Jacov Tugenhold, a friend of the artist and her first hagiographer. In 1974 a theatrical exhibition dedicated to Alexandra Exter was held at the Lincoln Center in New York: awareness of her work was finally extended to the general public.

In Russia, however, Exter's work was banned on ideological grounds, and remained censored and ignored. With the disintegration of the Soviet regime her painting was gradually reinstated in the cultural memory of her own country, and in the autumn of 1987 the artist's first individual exhibition in Russia took place at the theatre museum in Moscow. I was delighted to help the exhibition's young

organiser to assemble biographical and iconographical documentation that was, with some difficulty, published as a monographic album in Moscow in 1993.

Throughout his final years, Simon Lissim (1900-1981) encouraged research on Alexandra Exter, and my own investigations in particular. Shortly before he died he bequeathed the artist's moral rights to me, having already given me the artist's palette to ensure that I could fulfil my role as guarantor of the integrity and authenticity of the artist's work. So that I could establish a *catalogue raisonné*, Simon Lissim also handed over to me all the archives Exter had given to him, as well as his own archives related to her work, thus giving me possession of all his research material in addition to everything the artist had bequeathed to him, to enable me to carry out the weighty task of guarding the interests of her work.

With a view to preserving the memory of Exter and the authenticity of her artistic message, I recently called on the attention of a few competent persons aware of the importance of the artist's work and the need to safeguard it. In accordance with Simon Lissim's long-held wishes, an "Alexandra Exter" association was founded in Paris in September 2000 for the purpose of spreading knowledge of her work and preserving the integrity of her artistic message.

The Association aims to facilitate contacts among competent researchers and to stimulate serious undertakings of all kinds intended to promote the work of Alexandra Exter. It also has the duty of completing the inventory of works already begun by Simon Lissim. The concentration of reliable information of which the Association proposes to become the depository can only be beneficial to the knowledge and dissemination of her work.

The international ramifications of Alexandra Exter's creation meant worldwide contacts. From the start of her career this artist belonged to a Modernist trend bound by no national frontiers, and her visits to Paris as well as her Italian and German friendships became increasingly frequent before 1914. After 1924 she settled in Paris, where she taught, in addition to creating stage designs in Germany, England and Italy, exhibiting in Paris, Berlin, Prague, Vienna and Venice, and teaching Russian, French, American, Czech and Cuban pupils. There is no less variety in the number and range of institutions and individuals interested in her work today. Helping all of them to gain a deeper knowledge of the work of Alexandra Exter is the aim of the Association.

Andrei Nakov, President

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¹ Association governed by the law of 1 July 1901, art. 51 registered in Paris on 20 September 2000.