Three Women Artists in Early Non-Objectivity

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College: Arts & Sci. Department: School of Art
Faculty Mentor: Tim Hills (Art History)
PROJECT TITLE: Three Women Artists in Early Non-Objectivity

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: , Faculty Mentor
Date: 5/10/02

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional):

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Ashley Warriner  
Senior Honors Project  
Vanessa Bell, Sonia Delaunay, Olga Rozanova:  
Three Women Artists in Early Non-Objectivity  
Mentor: Dr. Timothy Hiles

You've presented an interesting collection of three essays! Your difficulty seems to be in tying them together. What is missing is an overall theme. Perhaps some overall conclusion should have been presented at the beginning. This would have given us some structure and guidance. Nevertheless, you have the credentials of a very accomplished
Women artists before the twentieth-century were often thought of as creators of their own genre of 'women's art' which expressed a feminine sentimentality. They were often relegated to their own academies, societies and exhibitions. With the advent of modern thought, came the liberation of women in modern art. It is in the origins of non-objectivity where we see the greatest potential for artists to break free from the restraints of the women's sphere. Three women, especially, were pioneers in the field of non-objectivity when very few women were even participating in abstraction: the British artist Vanessa Bell (1879-1960) (fig. 1 Vanessa Stephen, 1903), the French artist Sonia Delaunay (1885-1979) (fig. 2 Sonia Delaunay, 1913), and the Russian artist Olga Rozanova (1886-1918) (fig. 3 Olga Rozanova, Self-Portrait, 1912, oil on canvas, 52 x 62 cm., Museum of Fine Arts, Ivanovo-Vosnesensk).

Many of the modern art movements influential to these three artists' pre-non-representational work were male-dominated if not entirely exclusive of women. Cubism and Fauvism inspired generations of heirs, but women were not present at the forefront during their outsets. Nor were they at the outset of Futurism whose 1909 foundational manifesto boasted, "We want to glorify war- the only cleansing act of the world- militarism, patriotism, the destructive act of the anarchists, beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt of women... We want to destroy museums, libraries, to combat moralism, feminism, and all such opportunistic and utilitarian acts of cowardice." Women were perceived as lacking male latitude or the assertiveness and intellectual capabilities required to create bold, hard-edged abstract art and to

fully internalize its theoretical, philosophical bases. Bell, Delaunay, and Rozanova proved to be a challenge to such regressive thought.

Vanessa Bell 1879-1960

Vanessa Bell is reserved a space in the Western Canon as a member of the conservative ‘Bloomsbury Group’ against whose Post-Impressionist style more progressive modernists rebelled.5 Rarely recognized are her experiments in non-objective art, mostly because they constitute a very small portion of her oeuvre. Nevertheless, she is cited as an influential presence for other female contemporary abstractionists.6 Her experiments in non-objectivity encouraged her and other artists to explore what firm beliefs they may have about the connections between art object and content.

Vanessa, disillusioned by the Victorian ‘high art’ ideals of the painters who frequented her childhood home, sought something fresh. At the age of seventeen, her father sent her to a private art school which had a rather impressive record of sending students to the Royal Academy Schools where she later become a pupil of Old Master, High Victorian, even animal painting.7 Her parents afforded her the time and materials so she could turn to art as a means of self-expression. Vanessa’s even more well-known sister, Virginia Woolf, stated in her novel, “A Room of One’s Own,” that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write,”8 indicating that women must have independent means and independent circumstances in order to create.

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5 Vorticism is seen as a Wyndham Lewis’s direct break from the ideals of Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury Group.
6 Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry, “Modern Women, Modern Spaces,” Women Artists and Modernism ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 1998), 48. Modernists such as Helen Sounders were familiar with her framing of views through the threshold of a window and her depictions of urban interiors.
7 Frances Spalding, Vanessa Bell (New Haven: Ticknor and Fields, 1983), 34.
Ever weighing upon Vanessa’s conscience were the pressures to become the proper young lady her pedigree demanded. “She entered a society which, as it moved into the Edwardian period, grew ever more extravagant in its pursuit of two goals: pleasure and marriage.”9 Over the course of her lifetime, Vanessa most certainly broke the mold, marrying modern art critic Clive Bell; fending off the advances made by one of the Bells’ closest companions, the artist, critic, and entrepreneur, Roger Fry; and bearing the child of the indiscreetly homosexual Duncan Grant (who along with Vanessa and Roger Fry would be called the Bloomsbury Group). And through it all, all four remained respectful cohorts. “From the Feminist viewpoint Vanessa Bell seems at first glance disappointing. She never joined the suffragette movement, despised female exhibiting societies and on the whole preferred the conversation and company of men.”10 In addition, she disapproved of the traditional women’s salons and the segregation of women. Instead, what she found most fruitful were her brother’s Thursday night soirées host to several poets, writers, painters and other young professionals and similar gatherings that became customary to the Bell household.

Vanessa spent a considerable amount of time in her home painting, entertaining, and also raising her children so it is not surprising she had an affinity for domestic themes. Consequently, these and her paintings of English landscapes, interiors, flowers and still-lives might lead viewers to believe she was merely a creator of ‘woman’s art.’ Her figurative painting Nursery Tea (fig. 4 1912, oil on canvas, Private Collection)11 combines the modern aesthetic of accentuating line and reducing detail in order to emphasize the essential forms and features of the subject. Even so, the subject matter is so typically ‘feminine’ that even a recent biographer writes, “her choice of forms may reflect on her maternal experience for there is an emphatic

10 Ibid., xv.
11 Ibid., viii.
fulness in the sweep of certain lines, in the curve of the tablecloth in *Nursery Tea.*"\(^{12}\) Sixty-nine
years earlier we find the same sort of commentary about her *Woman and Baby* (fig. 5 The main
hall at Durbins, Guildford, showing Vanessa Bell’s *Woman and Baby*)\(^{13}\):

Her large subject ‘*Woman and Baby*’ is one of the most poignant designs that one
remembers in modern painting. The broad sculpturesque composition may be derived
from Puvis de Chavannes, but it has an intensely human interest, clothed in a primitive
passion, that seems to sweep aside all conventional barriers. . . . *None but a woman,* none
but a great artist, could have so perfectly expressed, with a new sympathy, all the pathos
and bewilderment of this time-worn theme.\(^{14}\) *Pall Mall Gazette,* 8 January 1914.

At the same time she was engrossed in her figurative paintings, she was also co-directing
and designing for the Omega Workshop, an applied arts workshop founded by Roger Fry in 1912
for the creation of furniture, wall hangings, pottery, textiles and other finely crafted items made
to enliven the home. The artists pooled their designs, sold the items anonymously, and each took
home a portion of the daily profits. In comparison to her formal paintings, her product designs
are vigorous displays of the modern elements of design. One of her most exuberant abstract
designs done for the workshop is *Design for Omega Rug* (fig. 6 1914, oil on paper, 30.5 x
60.5cm, Private Collection)\(^{15}\) that is characterized by three scarlet-framed sections each
containing jaunty diagonals of thick black, yellow, and gray lines balanced by negative spaces of
a hazy green.

For Vanessa, her designs were an essential part of her view that everything in life had the
potential to be art. She was known to have (flashed) such brilliant streaks of spirit not only in her
Omega designs, but in her dress as well. She was said to have displayed such audacity that even
her sister Virginia whose tales of womanhood are ones about ‘murdered creativity’ (and whose
“image of women confined and constrained, isolated, embittered and embattled has, however,

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 126.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., plate before page 81.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 127.
It's time to move beyond quotations like this. You can certainly paraphrase the sentiment and been immensely influential, shaping much subsequent feminist literary analysis in ways that have also been replicated in feminist art histories16) was taken aback. Virginia gives an amusing appraisal of her sister's creations:

“My God! What clothes you are responsible for! Karin’s clothes wrenched my eyes from my sockets- a skirt barred with reds and yellows of the violent kind, a pea-green blouse on top, with a gaudy handkerchief on her head, supposed to be the very boldest taste. I shall retire into dove colour and old lavender, with a lace collar and lawn wristlets.” Virginia Woolf, Letters, vol II, p. 11117

Her clothing was simply another outlet for her creativity and for reflecting her identity.

If Vanessa was as assertive about her individuality as her clothing designs suggests, why is it that she did not fear that the communal aspect of the Omega Workshop would perpetuate the anonymity of the artists? One response is that her extra income from the Omega Workshops gave her additional funding for her private studio work. Perhaps she and other Omega workers' success was ultimately stifled by homogeneity in their art. On the contrary, artists could experiment more freely on paper because their designs were anonymous and because they would not be expected to uphold the pretensions of fine art when designing utilitarian objects. Grant maintained that designing for the Omega workshops in 1913-1915, “far from curtailing his own studio painting, helped to generate ideas and induced a liberal attitude toward materials.”18 Like Grant's, Vanessa Bell's experiments at the Omega workshops would also filter through to her work on canvas.

Although Vanessa's 1914 trial in non-representational art produced only a few works,19 only four of which are extant (two oil on canvas, two on paper) they provide an evolutionary

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18 Ibid., 152.
19 Richard Shone, *The Art of Bloomsbury* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1999), 160. Duncan Grant's letters, which are now part of the Tate Gallery Archives, indicate that Vanessa only painted a few non-objective works.
view of her movement from naturalism to a form of abstraction much more potent that that of her fellow Bloomsburians. Vanessa's earliest non-objective painting to date, her 1914 Abstract (fig. 7-1914, Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London)\(^2\), is still a rather conservative move towards non-representation. She seems unable to see art an invention of the viewer's mind which searches for meaning and symbolism among the forms. In applied art, pattern is taken for granted, but in painting the artist must honor some higher form of communication, and, therefore, she keeps her early Abstracts firmly rooted in representation. She paints decorative circles of green and yellow atop a red stem and employs an intricate dot pattern to 'shade' certain areas of the canvas. The light and dark lines on the surface of the cutouts reveal her brushstrokes. When analyzing her naturalistic style, one wonders if she did not see a horizon line, a tall tree rising from the earth, coupled with a bright golden sun. This overly literal translation is extreme but it exhibits how naturalism can detract from the true aim of non-objectivity. Her subsequent works would be more experimental, eliminating the hints of imitated nature.

While Vanessa was painting her Abstracts, Clive's first book, Art, a treatise on aesthetics, had just been published. Clive hailed cubism as a culmination of Cezannesque theory in which "Nothing could be more logical. Art is not representation, but expression."\(^2\) Vanessa, Roger, and Clive would visit Picasso's studio and welcome the concept of liberating form from content. Nevertheless, Vanessa questioned the reasoning behind non-objectivity this excerpt of a letter she wrote to Virginia:

> The picture does convey the idea of form . . . but not the idea of form associated with anything in life, but simply form separated from life. As a matter of fact we do first feel the emotion and then look at the picture . . . at least I do. The reason I think that artists paint life and not patterns is that certain qualities of life, what I call movement, mass, weight have aesthetic value. But where I should quarrel with Clive . . . is when he says one gets the same emotion from flat patterns that one does from pictures. I say one

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doesn't, because of the reason I have just given— that movement etc. give me important aesthetic emotions.  

No doubt, Vanessa and Clive were instrumental in the progress of each other's work. She must have convinced herself, if only for a short time, of the incredible power of form and color, for with every step, she comes closer and closer to true non-objectivity.

In her 1914 Abstract (fig. 8, 1914, gouache and oil on canvas, 44.2 x 38.8 cm, Tate Gallery, London) she daringly removes any figurative allusions, placing a burnt orange rectangle near the center to act as a fulcrum balancing a set of overlapping vertical bars on the left and a light pink square in the top right hand corner. She begins play with negative/positive spatial illusions, albeit in a limited way, in the bottom left hand corner where yellow, in its fledgling stages of shapedom, causes blue to recede as a hint of yellow is cast upon its surface. Her painting is brilliant but one senses perhaps a bit of an unwillingness to commit to the concept of non-objectivity when 1951 she labels this work merely 'A test for chrome yellow.'

Even though some of the Bloomsbury paintings are barely distinguishable at times because Duncan and Vanessa worked in the same styles and with the same subject matter, Vanessa's Composition (fig. 9, 1914, oil and gouache on cut-and-pasted papers, 55.1 x 43.7cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Joan and Lester Avnet Collection) exhibits a sophistication colleagues' lacks. Composition is a collage of her standard choice of squares and long rectangles that typically border her paintings. It appears that she painted some of the shapes before they were cut and pasted, but that she unified it by applying paint to the surface before calling it finished. Grant, on the other hand, is obsessed with a sort of neatness in which the

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22 Frances Spalding, Vanessa Bell (New Haven: Ticknor and Fields, 1983), 126. Spalding also states that, "Though she asserts that she looks at form separated from life, it is separated not from visual and tactile experience, but from concepts of use, value, from sentimental associations and other non-visual content."


24 Ibid., 160.

25 Ibid., 160, 162, plate 84.
textures, colors, and patterns of a shape are self-contained, never integrating adjacent shapes as in Vanessa’s painting.

Even though it offered her the ability to test out the independent values of geometry and color, non-objectivity would not be sustenance enough for Vanessa Bell. Even when she decided that her paintings would remain firmly embedded in her post-impressionist style and sentiment, we can glean an architectonic quality in her paintings. “Although the uncertainty of her work in 1915-1917 owed much to outward circumstances, her brief interest in abstraction chastened the natural flow of formalized representation.” She would return to representation and paint in this mode for the rest of her life, claiming as she had earlier that she found a deeper emotional connection when painting from the people and things around her, but her experiments in non-objectivity would bring a new-found formalism to her painting.

Sonia (Sarah Stern Terk) Delaunay 1885-1979

Sonia Delaunay, Russian born, German trained, Parisian at heart, was a cosmopolitan woman of the avant-garde, as bold and brash in her art and her textile and fashion designs, as she was in life. Nevertheless, her husband Robert was more prolific during the early years of the twentieth century and therefore, she is recognized more widely than she. She and Robert collaborated on their theory of simultaneous color that forms the crux of Orphic Cubism. She was an advocate of the applied arts which feminist theory highlights as the very limitation to her success in fine art. If we look at some of her original non-objective works, their dynamic compositions, some playful, some forceful, far outweigh the commercial value of the art object.

26 Ibid., 160.
Since she was an accomplished painter, why is it that a baby’s quilt (fig. 10, 1911, appliquéd fabric, 42 7/8 x 31 7/8 in., Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris27) is the work by which we identify Sonia Delaunay? The quilt, taken from traditional Russian folk quilt designs was the perfect embodiment of the modern grid. And it put Cubist principles to work in the realm of the everyday, in what is perceived as a beautiful, naïve display. Yet this piece, her first non-objective work, is certainly no fluke—it is a testament to her innate sense of design and artistry.

Apparently, Sonia was well known for keeping her house well stocked with these little treasures of modern aesthetic and folk sentimentality28, but she was not wholly consumed by her home life. She also frequented the Bal Bullier, a cabaret where other avant-garde spent their evenings immersed in conversation, dancing, and reverie. She painted a scene from the Bal Bullier (fig. 11, oil on mattress ticking)29 in her experimental style of Orphic Cubism. Shattered crescents and force lines explode across the length of the painting like a mural or a scroll which might be expected to reveal a grand epic. In this case, the horizontal composition is a conduit for Futurist principles of movement. The effect results in one continuous dance floor that seems to stretch out into eternally swirling figures. Sonia comes close to breaking away from nature, but it is practically antithetical to Futurism to have neither figure nor narrative content.

Another one of her early experiments in non-objectivity is her 1912 design in which she pasted pieces of roughly cut fabric onto book cover (fig. 12, fabric on leather).30 With this medium she could be spontaneous and was able to imbue her fabric collages with a painterly

30 Ibid., 39, plate 10.
quality. She would go on to decorate several of these bookbindings for her poet friends. In essence she was providing a colorful skin for an otherwise banal leather binding. Therefore, book covers were the perfect place for her to experiment with non-representation. Book covers were not as subject to the critique of the haut couture, and they offered her another venue to disseminate her work. Plus, she was not merely illustrating the content of the book but ambitiously seeking a better way to reflect the complexity of its contents.

Her greatest gain and some would say her greatest loss was her unwillingness to subjugate the applied arts to fine art. This ideology allowed her to be fluid in her use of various or unconventional media—she actually painted Bal Bullier in oil on mattress ticking because she could not afford canvas. She was clear to point out that she always gave her husband Robert the independence to paint without restriction while she managed their finances, cared for their family, and painted in her spare time. Consequently, she was apt to seek alternative materials for her paintings, and, not surprisingly, was inspired by the materials found in her home.

Her combined interest in textiles and in abstract design led her to experiment with what she called simultaneous dress (fig. 2), like a colorful patchwork gown cut straight out of her painting of the Bal Bullier. Her first dresses were made of “squares and triangles of taffeta, tulle, flannelette, moiré, corded silk, and any other materials she could find.” The costumes were a dynamic combination of shapes that would dramatize the wearers’ gestures in a warped prismatic effect. These first experiments looked and functioned more like costume than like clothing. They were absolutely gaudy, to say the least, and caused quite a frenzy in Parisian social and artistic circles at a time when corsets, ankle-length hemlines, and pastel colors were the mode of

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31 See Ibid., 46 for more book designs
32 Ibid., 33.
33 Ibid., 31.
dress. Sonia’s first simultaneous dresses would inspire a deep devotion to textile and fashion design that would become a thriving business (fig. 13 Sonia in 1923). Her brightly colored geometric designs were seen at Parisian charity balls, artistic gatherings, films and plays, as well as in her very own Simultaneous Boutique at the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs. In the twentieth century it was largely fashion that “translated the principles of abstraction to, and defined modernity for, a broad public.”

It is argued that her designs, as part of a larger schema of fashion design, became the basis of the ‘commodification of women’ and defined the women’s role as household consumer. Modern fashion catered to the New Woman, who was more of an ideology than a reality, indicating that “despite much rhetoric about the rights and liberation of women, and despite a coherent visual imagery celebrating the sexually free working woman, no fundamental changes in women’s traditional roles are evident .” It is also interesting to note Sonia’s psychological connection to her own designs. Twenty years after she began creating her career in fashion she would admit, “I was timid, actually, but as soon as I was disguised, wrapped in my scarves, I felt secure. I could protect myself; I was more who I was.”

Quite unintentionally her fashions may have actually begotten the bravado of the Modern Woman, ultimately undermining social progress.

Of course, it was Sonia’s commercial success in fashion and textile design that would cause people to define her as a decorative artist and not as a true painter, as if the two were

38 Ibid., 277.
39 Ibid., 278.
mutually exclusive and her pioneering work in non-objectivity is downplayed by its connection with the applied arts or and women's arts. Of course, Sonia did not identify herself as a creator of specifically women's art, and she refused to exhibit in women's groups because of the apparent implications. She recognized the lack of women artists in modern art movements.

There were no founding Fauvist or Cubist women. According to Sonia many artists had been a part of the avant-garde because of their relationships with famous men, such as Gabriele Münter's with Kandinsky.\textsuperscript{41} Even though this idea may have displeased Sonia, one writer states that "she has no hesitation or evident regrets in saying that from the day they lived together, she put herself in the background and never appeared in the foreground until the 1950's (he died in 1941.)"\textsuperscript{42}

**Olga Rozonova 1886-1918**

The reality during Olga Rozonova's lifetime was that women's participation in the art world was much more significant than the art historical canon may suggest. One explanation for this sense of equality stems from the Russian society's embrasure of pre-bourgeois ideologies. Women were not seen as merely consumers of their husband's wealth but were viable members of the work force just as capable of contributing to the general welfare as men. Consequently, they possessed more freedom than was typical in the Western world. Even so, there was a large constituency of feminists rallying in Russia on a range of issues from the plight of women workers to the fight for the educated woman's right to vote.\textsuperscript{43} After the February Revolution of


\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 51.

1917 female Socialists tried to focus their energies on revolution rather than reform. To be Russian and to be remembered was to be political.

A Marxist reading of early twentieth-century Russian history can help explain the somewhat counterintuitive idea that Russian women were afforded liberties that European women may have been denied. "The Marxist argument was, of course, that a state based on the ownership of private property would never eradicate women's oppression and that (while its short-term reforms might be welcomed) only the destruction of the state would pave the way for a socialist economic system that did not have women's oppression necessarily built into its very structures."\(^{44}\)

The art world also proved to be an atmosphere conducive to the upward mobility of women. By 1871, women were admitted to the Academy of Arts where they could study from nude models, and eleven years later seventy-three women banded together to form the first supportive artists association for women painters. As might be expected, women artists in the early twentieth century were most likely from wealthy families or they turned to the applied arts which provided steady patronage. Upon entering the twentieth century it was not at all unusual to find that "men and women painted and exhibited together, cosigned manifestos, illustrated the same books, spoke at the same conferences and seemed almost oblivious of gender differences and gender rivalry."\(^{45}\) Most surprising is that it was not unheard of for the number of women exhibitors to equal the number of men.\(^{46}\)

Rozonova was a strong leader of the Russian avant-garde art world. She was a member of the Union of Youth, the Trade Union, and the Cooperative, and was a delegate and secretary

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 119.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 26.
of the Supremus group, attended sessions of the Artistic Enlightenment Commission attached to
the Soviet of Workers’ Deputies, and participated in the Professional Union of Artist-Painters
from which she withdrew after failing to achieve the creation of a separate federation for the
support of young artists. She published articles in these societies’ journals and participated in
so many artistic circles she once attributed her increasing fatigue, waning health, and loss of
valuable painting time to her intense involvement.

Rozanova’s painting from 1910 onward was indebted to three major movements:
Cubism, Futurism, and Suprematism. She looked to Cubism for a different perception of the
object, to Futurism for the fusion of the subjective with the objective, and to Suprematism for the
justification of painterly content of a picture over the practical meaning of the object. Her
colleague Kazimir Malevich, before he founded Suprematist painting, also worked in a Cubo-
Futurist style. The Italian Futurists captured the modern world’s reckless pace and dynamic
movement in their art, and Malevich praised those who he said, “forbade the painting of female
nudes, the painting of portraits and guitars in the moonlight. They made a step forward: they
abandoned meat and glorified machine.” The abandonment of figuration meant the
abolishment of classical nude painting which perpetuated the objectification of women. The
Suprematists, disinterested by the figure, turned to what they would call a pure color, pure form
painting.

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Rougle (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International and Overseas Publishers Association, 2000), 122.
48 Ibid., 122.
49 For more on her stance on ‘evolution’ of modern art see the translation of Rozanova’s article “Cubism, Futurism,
Suprematism,” in Nina Gurianova’s *Exploring Color, Olga Rozanova and the Early Russian Avant-garde 1910-
50 Gen Doy, “Russia and the Soviet Union c.1880-c.1940: ‘Patriarchal’ Culture or Totalitarian Androgyny?” in
Seeing and Consciousness: Women, Class, and Representation (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995), 117, for Malevich,
‘From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism,’ in John Bowlt ed. *Russian Art of the
Her 1916-1917 painting *Abstract Composition* (Color-Painting) 1916-1917 (fig. 14 1916-1917, oil on canvas 71 x 64 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Simbirsk\(^5\) is an authoritative example of Suprematist painting. She is extremely reductionist in regard to her choice of geometric shapes: a trapezoid, a rectangle, and a triangle. The edges are straight and clean, but the interior of these shapes is not entirely flat or formless. She employs Cubist faceting and curved lines to add dimension and shading. It appears she has simplified the color scheme by using only red and blue tints and shades on a white background. In her 1913 “The Bases of the New Creation and the Reasons Why it is Misunderstood,” Rozanova gives a riveting defense of the essential elements of modern art that we find in her work:

Only modern Art has advocated the full and serious importance of such principles as pictorial dynamism, volume and equilibrium, weight and weightlessness, linear and plane displacement, rhythm as a legitimate division of space, design, planar and surface dimension, texture, color correlation, and others. Suffice it to enumerate these principles that distinguish the New Art from the Old to be convinced that they are the Qualitative- and not just the quantitative- New Basis that proves the ‘self-sufficient’ significance of the New Art. They are principles hitherto unknown that signify the rise of a new era in creation- an era of purely artistic achievements.\(^5\)

Rozanova’s greatest contribution to modern art is her color theory, *tsvetopis*, which has been described as her “attempt to combine the mystical spiritual element in Kandinsky’s theory of color with Malevich’s utopian philosophy of form and space.”\(^5\) She saw representation as an impediment to the birth of painting in which color, not the imitation of nature, was the true objective. Rozanova says that space, atmosphere, texture, and a seemingly infinite number of other factors effect the quality of light that is reflected off of an object. If one removes the need to imitate objects, one is able to more fully explore the properties of color and light. Her


\(^5\) Ibid., 118.
experiments with paper collage (fig. 15 Abstract Composition 1915, collage on paper, 22.5 x 15 cm, State Russian Archive of Literature and Art54) must have been instrumental in the development of her theories that would play out in works such as Abstract Composition (Color Painting) (fig. 16 1917, oil on canvas, 58 x 44 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg55) and Green Stripe (Color Painting) (fig. 17 1917, oil on canvas, 71.5 x 49 cm, Rostov Kremlin State Museum Preserve56). She mixed colors and created textures by laying thin pieces of paper one on top of the other to achieve certain luminous effects. One of Rozanova’s contemporaries, the artist Varvara Stepanova, wrote of her work: “Here we can trace the transition from the planes of suprematism into color that is broadly thinned to liberate it from its dependence on form and plane.”57

Her solid symmetry which moves beyond the frame and her adept ability to create sophisticated color translucencies make Abstract Composition (Color Painting) (fig. 16 1917, oil on canvas, 58x44 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg58) one of her most cohesive integrations of form and color theory. Her work was also about elevating art to spiritual expression. In fact in this work the viewer notices the implied shape of a cross. Malevich and other Suprematists would took the symbol of the crucifixion, as seen in the myriad of icons which pervaded Russian culture, and transformed it into the representation of infinity and unity

54 Ibid., plate 30.
55 Ibid., plate 31.
58 Ibid., plate 31.
which were the foundations of the Mystical Sensation of Suprematism developed from 1916-
1917.59

Rozanova’s art facilitated her spiritual exploration which is why she adamantly drew the
distinction between painting and the applied arts, the sacred and the profane:

Most people are used to looking at works of painting as items of everyday domestic life—
still a luxury for the few, but, ideally, for general consumption. But we protest against such
vulgar utilitarianism. The works of pure painting have the right to exist independently and not in
relation to banal interior furnishings. To many, our efforts and endeavors— as well as those of our
Cubist and Futurist predecessors— to put painting on a course of self-determination may seem
ridiculous, and this is because they are difficult to understand and do not come with glowing
recommendations. Nevertheless, we do believe that a time will come when, for many people, our
art will become an aesthetic necessity— an art justified by its selfless aspiration to disclose a new
beauty. (1916-1917)60

Rozanova, like her fellow Russian avant-garde artists, clung to a utopian vision of the future, its
realization entailing great struggle against an old vanguard. In 1918 she wrote “Only in
Independence and Absolute Freedom is There Art!”61 in which she expressed her faith in the
continuity of change and her disdain for an artistic conservatism that scoffed at non-objectivity.

“Is it not the artist who renews life?”62 Unfortunately Rozanova’s life was cut short after
contracting diphtheria only months after writing this statement, but her innovations would
greatly shape modern art as we know it.

Vanessa, Sonia, and Olga came from varied backgrounds, each with its own various
institutions which secured certain gender roles. Fortunately, each artist was encouraged to

59 Patricia Railing, On Suprematism, 34 Drawings. (East Sussex: Artists Bookworks, 1990) for a discussion of the
phases of Suprematism.
60 Olga Rozanova, “Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism from Nina Gurianova, Exploring Color, Olga Rozanova and
the Early Russian Avant-garde 1910-1918. trans. Charles Rougle (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International and
61 Olga Rozanova, “Only in Independence and Absolute Freedom is There Art!” Anarkhiia, 91, 1918, trans. Charles
62 Ibid., 203.
pursue art at a very young age and were allowed to pursue a formal art education. However, being a professional female artist was practically unheard of in Vanessa’s and Sonia’s circles. They both found that the convention of marriage (and ironically both of their first marriages eventually failed) gave them more freedom to circulate among more affluent societies since they were perceived as adhering to societal norms. Olga, on the other hand, may not have been subject to the same pressures most Western cultures imposed upon women. One of Olga’s contemporaries, Alexandra Korsakova stated:

At that time artists were never labeled as men or women. Rather, you saw that some of them were artists, while others were designers... Still, at the beginning no one fenced off the women artists. At that time there was nothing of that sort being done... But basically so many things were not the way they are now. Conditions were entirely different. At that time everyday life was not ruined to the extent it is now. Women were not so aware of their femininity. It worried nobody if a woman artist had no children or not, or if she took her children with her and left them and went away alone. In Russia, there was a completely different concept of women’s independence.

Of course, both adhering to and rebelling against societal conventions had serious implications concerning the economic status of these women. Vanessa was able to maintain a considerably high standard of living by ‘marrying well’ and becoming the co-director of a popular applied arts workshop. Sonia, who was raised by a wealthy aunt and uncle and who had drawn a substantial income off of property given to her in her youth, as stated earlier, found herself in the position to sacrifice for the sake of advancing her husband’s artistic career. Olga, as an unmarried woman and an independent artist, had to seek other work to support her art. She performed banal office work which did not always ensure the purchase of the necessary canvas or paints. “I have a job,” she later joked, “which to me amounts to firewood and a bowl of porridge.”63 Her economic situation made it difficult to consider traveling as freely about

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63 Ibid., 5.
Europe as did her fellow Russian avant-gardists. Rozanova never left her home country, quite unlike Sonia who found herself in Spain at the same time Gertrude Stein was escorting Vanessa to Picasso's studio in Paris before Germany's declaration of war against France.

Regardless of whether these women's beginnings were humble or well heeled, their individual merits and contributions to modern art should determine their place in history. Needless to say, history does not always prove so judicious. By looking at two current texts, H.H. Amason's *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography* and Sam Hunter, John Jacobus and Daniel Wheeler's *Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, likely the most widely used texts for modern art history survey classes, one can see that these three artists, Vanessa Bell, Sonia Delaunay, Olga Rozanova, are allotted varying degrees of significance in the history of art.

Vanessa's contribution of facilitating non-objectivity's introduction in Britain goes wholly unnoticed by Hunter, Jacobus, and Wheeler although it is not incorrectly stated that "Bell and Grant adhered to a highly personal vision- shaped by membership in the Bloomsbury group, with it's 'significant form' aesthetics than by the latest Continental experiments." They are also said to have been painting at a place and time that was characterized by "the spirit of English insularity." The author's build upon this theme by highlighting the fact that groups such as the Vorticists rebelled against the Bloomsbury for this very reason. It seems negligent to play up any cautious tendencies and forget to mention Vanessa Bell's and Duncan Grant's experiments in non-objectivity as well as their Omega designs strayed considerably from the conservative

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64 Ibid., 18. Other members of her circle whose biographies speak of international travel include David Burluiik, Liubov Popova, Nadezhda Udaltsova, Alexandra Exter, and Aleksander Shevchanko.
Fauvist manner of painting by which they are identified. On the other end of the spectrum is Arnason’s text which fails to even mention either Vanessa or the Bloomsbury Group.

The reverse phenomena occurs when looking at Sonia’s place in the texts. Arnason gives Sonia’s 1911 quilt the most prominent placement as the cover illustration for his 4th edition, implying its extreme significance in the history of modern art. As is expected, her husband Robert’s paintings, and understandably so, receive greater attention since they were pivotal to the formation of ingenuitive theories. After getting the impression from Arnason’s text that Sonia was her own independent genius, Hunter, Jacobus, and Wheeler deny any mention of her work altogether.

Olga Rozanova is discussed by both texts, most likely because she is the artist with the strongest theoretical basis for her work in non-objectivity. Rozanova also makes for a nice comparison across time. Art historians like that in her Green Stripe, ‘the result seems to reach across the decades to the 1950s and Barnet Newman’s more monumental, but scarcely more radical Zip paintings.” Still Hunter, Jacobus and Wheeler do not praise her for her autonomy, calling her “almost as precocious an abstractionist [as Malevich].” Rozanova was chosen for discussion by both sets of authors because she is viewed as the most progressive. Unfortunately, there exists still very little because she came into her own style and produced her best work in the two years before her death. After analyzing Bell’s, Delaunay’s, and Rozanova’s individual accomplishments and advances they made in the area of non-objective art, and after discovering the biases of even general art history texts, one can understand the importance of being a discerning critic of art history.

Bibliography


Your sources are generally good — particularly the collections of essays. You need to look beyond the collections, however. It is there you will find more in-depth information and analysis.
6.SELF-PORTRAIT, 1910.
OIL ON CANVAS. 52 X 62 CM.
COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, IVANOVO-VOZNESSENK.
The main hall at Durbins, showing Vanessa Bell's *Woman and Baby* in the top right corner

Fig. 5
Fig. 9
Fig. 10
The masterpiece of Sonia's early period: *Bal Bullier*, oil on mattress ticking, 1913. She painted four versions in all of this subject; this is the largest and most fully integrated – a prime example of Orphic Cubism.
OIL ON CANVAS. 71 x 64 CM. COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, SIMBIRSK.
Fig. 15

30. ABSTRACT COMPOSITION, 1915.
COLLAGE ON PAPER. 22.5 x 15 CM. COURTESY OF THE STATE RUSSIAN ARCHIVE OF LITERATURE AND ART.
Fig. 16

31. ABSTRACT COMPOSITION (COLOR-PAINTING), 1917.
OIL ON CANVAS. 58 x 44 CM. COURTESY OF THE STATE RUSSIAN MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG