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The Innovative Downtrodden: The Importance of Primitivism in Ukrainian Modernist Art

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In the early twentieth century, modernist art emerged as a reaction to modernity and sought to overthrow the predominant Western artistic tradition. European artists from across the continent challenged deep-seated artistic norms by creating innovative abstract art. Single-point perspective and representational art had been the default since the Renaissance — a direct approach to art through which the image contained all necessary information with no need for context or input from the viewer. Modernism subverted this tradition by adopting non-figural and non-representational forms and a flat, non-illusionistic canvas. European Cubist artists further challenged entrenched norms through “primitivism,” in which they were influenced by the art of Africa and Asia to explore non-Western ways of seeing and develop new artistic paradigms. Within the wider spheres of primitivism and Cubism, Ukrainian abstract art of the early twentieth century rose to prominence. However, Ukrainian avant-garde art is unique in the world of modern art due to its inward (as opposed to external) interpretation of primitivism.¹

¹ Primitivism has become largely discredited as a term. This article employs its use solely as a comparative aid. While primitivism had many incarnations, one contemporary understanding of the practice is of an unequal power relationship, resulting in an “othering” of foreign cultures. Several artists across Europe during this period used primitivism to establish a power dynamic of Westerners seeing “other” peoples, cultures, and practices, interpreting them in a voyeuristic fashion. For some, primitivism now represents an external perspective on ethnic life as lived in its own culture. In the context of this paper, Ukrainian “internal primitivism” applies this concept of primitivism as a view of ethnic practices, albeit in a different way. Ukrainian avant-garde artists were, at times, both outsiders looking at the “other” (cosmopolitan intellectuals looking at rural folk arts) and insiders (a people seeking unity and national identity). These artists were learning from their folk traditions after many years of cultural oppression, and they took ownership of these traditions instead of cultivating a city-country divide. Thus, “internal primitivism” here refers to this dual identification of the term, where an ethnic practice was viewed by
Ukrainian “primitivism” was unlike other Western modernist practices, as Ukrainian artists reinterpreted the “primitivist” perspective to look within its own culture instead of co-opting the culture of others. Visually, it held the same values of flatness and non-representational form as non-Ukrainian modern art. However, while many Western artists were challenged by the non-figurative and non-narrative elements of abstract art, “internal primitivism” in Ukraine allowed radical avant-garde art methods to be adopted easily. Broad interest in Ukrainian folk art was fuelled by anti-Russian-imperialist sentiments as well as the early Soviet regime’s Ukrainianization initiative.2 “Internal primitivism” thus functioned as a re-legitimization of Ukrainian culture and can be understood as an unofficial nationalistic process. As a result of nineteenth century Russian imperial studies into Ukrainian history and culture, and the Soviet period of Ukrainianization, Ukraine’s cultural heritage was vindicated and renewed after centuries of oppression, subjugation, and amalgamation by Russia and other colonial powers. The specific example of the Yiddish Kultur-Lige demonstrates the synthesis and ingestion of these ideas. Drawing inspiration from Ukrainian traditional practices, the Kultur-Lige complicates and expands the understanding of Ukrainian nation-building and society during the era. Following such themes, this article will detail primitivism’s key role in distinguishing Ukrainian avant-garde art from other modernist art practices at the time, and apply further nuance to the complex art historical term of “primitivism.”

“Internal primitivism” was a major concern and a unique signifier of the Ukrainian avant-garde in the canon of modern art. Using elements of their cultural past, artists such as Kazimir Malevich, David Burliuk, and Vladimir Burliuk developed a uniquely Ukrainian modernist artistic style rooted in Ukrainian folklore, iconography, and pastoral traditions. They “paraphrased their domestic heritage” by finding inspiration in Ukraine’s long-suppressed cultural history,3 and they expressed agency by celebrating artists that were both external voyeurs and “native” insiders. For more information on the legacy of Primitivism, see Thomas McEvilley, William Rubin, Kirk Varnedoe, “Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief: Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984,” Artforum23/3 (November 1984): 54-61.

2 Ukrainianization was a mini-Renaissance of Ukrainian culture, during which the Soviet authorities allowed for the exploration of Ukrainian history and the use of the Ukrainian language, reviving Ukrainian culture after the long dominance of Russian language and culture. For further information see: Paul Robert Magocsi, A History of Ukraine: The Land and its People, 2nd ed. (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010), 569, 573.

this history and using it as a foundation for their art. This method of “internal primitivism” dictated the visual composition of Ukrainian modern art and enabled the Ukrainian avant-garde to quickly find a place in the contemporaneous artistic movement across Europe. While Western European primitivism drew from the racialized other as a source of inspiration, Ukrainian artists took a different approach, focusing on the “primitive” art of the Ukrainian peasant. Avant-garde artists in Ukraine looked inwardly to the culture of their own people to find a pristine form of art, and “went native” much like the primitivist artists of Western Europe.

In their internal approach to primitivism, Ukrainian artists looked to the visual culture of the Ukrainian countryside — textiles, religious icons, and Pysanky (Easter eggs). The modernist artist Alexandra Exter, who found fame not only in Ukraine, but also in Russia and France, used these folk-arts to inform her teachings in her studio in Kiev. The revival of Ukrainian language and culture due to Ukrainization justified the use of such reclaimed visuals in modern art. Furthermore, many Russian and Slavic artists were convinced that a Slavic cultural revival was impending, and thus forged their own cultural identity based on the “unique, non-Western features” displayed by their cultures, which complemented the modernist interest in primitivism. For Ukraine, this meant creating an individual identity to separate the country from other Slavic cultures during its revolutionary periods and the eventual integration into the United Soviet Socialist Republic.

Many artists felt that the turn towards Ukrainian history and culture would usher in a “self-proclaimed Renaissance.” Instead of solely adopting modernist language, some artists would thoroughly mix in elements of their own cultural past, creating a unique version of primitivism. By borrowing from indigenous art forms, the artist David Burliuk demonstrated an “eclectic mix of cubism, futurism, and Ukrainian folklore.” One can observe Burliuks’s combination of symbols of the Ukrainian countryside with his interest in the formal modernist elements of perspective and

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4 Bowlt and Misler, Twentieth-Century Russian and East European Painting, 13.
7 Bowlt and Misler, Twentieth-Century Russian and East European Painting, 60.
collapsed ground of in his work *Bridge. Landscape from Four Points of View* (fig. 1). The form of the “bridge” is fragmented and difficult to discern, but elements such as water, a horse, and a peasant are recognizable. The image synthesises analytic cubist ideals of several viewpoints with traditional symbols of rural Ukraine. Through this synthesis, Burliuk’s art helped revive the folk tradition of Ukraine by including it in his oeuvre, elevating it to the level of avant-garde modernist art.

Many artists would travel to the cities to “overthrow dominant intellectual and artistic trends by introducing perspectives learned elsewhere.” On occasion, the historical past of Ukrainian artists would manifest itself in their later work. The 1915 exhibition of Malevich’s work in Moscow at “0.10: The Last Futurist Exhibition” used the repeated motif of the “Black Square” (fig. 2). The perfect and pure square was placed on an angle in the corner of the exhibition room, looming over the rest of the Suprematist works. The “Black Square” here served as an icon — a form with a long tradition in Ukrainian art. Malevich’s upbringing and artistic training as a young adult took place in Ukraine, and he was certainly familiar with the emblematic idea in the region of the icon as a prominent visual profession of religious belief. The religious art of the Byzantine *Kyivan Rus* included “richly painted icons with their sense of cosmic space and the simultaneity of time.” Malevich’s use of a looming “Black Square” treats the form as an icon, placing it in a position where it appears that one could view and worship it in the hope of attaining the higher level of spirituality that Suprematism desired.

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9 The *Kyivan Rus* were a political entity in the eastern Slavic lands from the ninth to fourteenth centuries. They are often regarded as some of the cultural predecessors of Ukrainians (as well as other Slavic groups in the area).
Fig. 1. David Burliuk, *Bridge. Landscape from Four Points of View*, 1911, oil on canvas. The State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

Fig. 2. Picture of room dedicated to Malevich at the 0.10 Exhibition. *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures, Petrograd*. In Altshuler, Bruce ed., *Salon to Biennial – Exhibitions that Made Art History, Vol. 1: 1863-1959* (London: Phaidon Press, 2008), 177. FADIS.
Modernism in Europe was reacting to a transforming world. While many artists were fascinated by these changes, exploring new ideas, sensations, and cultures, some artists expressed worries about the transition to the alarming world of capitalist production and the loss of integral parts of their social identity. As a result, Western European modernism often reflected a sense of discontinuity, fragmentation, and alienation. Ukrainian avant-garde artists responded to this situation with a different approach – they used the changes of modernism as a means to restore the historical and cultural continuity of the Ukrainian people. Thus, they used modern art to reject an imperial past and regain autonomy. Strengthened by commissions and projects dealing with their cultural identity, many Ukrainian artists devised to create an innovative modern image of Ukraine. Whether inspired by political, nationalist, or artistic aims, many Ukrainian artists contributed to a distinct artistic practice that rejected the conventions of both Western visual traditions and their own colonial past.

Ukrainian avant-garde art was in dialogue with its own past, not something alien or outside. As a result, early-twentieth century Ukrainian artists were comfortable “domesticat[ing] the ‘primitive’” by using their own past, which had been characterized by many as savage and backwards for centuries. Removing itself from both elitist and self-deprecatory narratives, this period in Ukrainian art practice was able to join the avant-garde art scene by mixing its long-subjugated “low” culture with the “high” culture of Western art. In doing so, Ukrainian art was democratic and accessible to all, which was a key element in the future visualized by many modernist and avant-garde artists. Such democratic ideals, whether consciously intended or not, suggest that the Ukrainian avant-garde had a more nuanced version of modernism than that of Western Europe.

The synthesis of Western modernism and Ukrainian modernist ideals resulted in an art that was distinguished by its “extraordinary feeling for materials.” Due to the ease of collaboration and collective work, Ukrainian art quickly integrated cubism and primitivism. Ukrainian avant-garde art was particularly adaptable due to its willingness to embrace both the outside West as well as its local history. This adaptability lent Ukraine an important position in the trajectory of modern art during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Due to its radically different visual language, most avant-garde art required justification to its audience. However, Ukrainian art was more easily able to ingest many modernist

12 Ibid., 19.
14 Ibid., 234.
15 Ibid., 232.
16 Ibid.
ideas by exploring them through the lens of their cultural past. A study of the formal characteristics of the Ukrainian avant-garde illustrates this more clearly.

Western modernism’s visual language was easily adopted in Ukraine due to “internal primitivism,” since Ukrainian folk art was already characterised by the use of abstract forms and symbolic colours.\(^\text{17}\) Because of elements such as the decorative florals on textiles and *Pysanky* created by countryside peasants, Ukrainian modernists were already familiar with painting non-illusionistic and “flat” art (fig. 3). The concept of a two-dimensional picture plane was not as alien to the Ukrainian avant-garde as it was for other Western artists, as such practices were part of Ukrainian artists’ cultural background.

\[\text{Fig. 3. } \textit{Pysanky} (Ukrainian Easter eggs) from the Podolia region. Ukrainian Museum, New York. In } \textit{Ukrainian Folk Art}, 14.\]

\(^{17}\) Shkandrij, “Politics and the Ukrainian Avant-garde,” 233.
Western ideals entering Ukrainian avant-garde teachings were quickly fused with native Ukrainian art. In their workshop in Kiev, Alexander Bohomazov and Alexandra Exter taught elements of abstract modernist art which they had gleaned from their Western-European contacts. Following Western practice, existing narratives had to be filtered through the new artistic processes of the modernists.\textsuperscript{18} The meaning of an abstract work was to be found in its use of form and colour, not the story it was trying to tell. Exter taught students a non-objective approach based on Western artistic ideas through the aforementioned \textit{Pysanky}. Using the decorative elements of the yearly tradition of dyeing eggs, as well as the carpet and ceramics designs of the peasants,\textsuperscript{19} Exter taught her students the theories of Picasso and Cezanne on the volumetric elements of art and how to flatten them so as to understand the picture plane as two-dimensional and flat. In doing so, Exter used local traditional arts to teach her students the concept of “painting as painting” — that it was the process of creation and not the painting’s subject matter which made it profound. This teaching process proved effective, as two students proclaimed in their own writings, “form is the essential element, while the content is a bad distraction.”\textsuperscript{20} The synthesis of Western art with Ukrainian visual tradition created a unique group of artists who reached similar conclusions as their Western counterparts, albeit in a more organic and multifaceted way.

The unique nature of Ukrainian “internal primitivism” and its use in understanding modern and abstract art became a foundation on which some artists sought to develop their own national identity. In comparison to the West’s idea of “nationhood as given fact” that allowed for the comfortable exploration of other cultures, Ukraine’s historical subjugation meant that many artists questioned why “nationalism” was not a term used in art at the time.\textsuperscript{21} Even those artists unconcerned with “national art” would nonetheless draw inspiration from their Ukrainian roots,\textsuperscript{22} or they would seek to have an emphatically non-Russian artistic practice.

The perception of Russia as an imperial and colonial power was the drive for many Ukrainian artists in creating a new artistic style – one which


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{22} Makaryk, “Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation,” 21.
could express regional agency free of Russian influence. The Ukrainian avant-garde created art which “instead of willingly assimilating to the ‘superior’ Russian culture,”23 competed with the artwork of its previous colonizer. Ukrainian artists were disenchanted with their past of being overrun and degraded as part of Russian imperialist cultural dominance.24 Thus Ukrainian avant-garde artists were contending that the strength of Ukraine lay in its identity as a crossroads, borderland, and uniquely creative power.25

After Russia’s imperialist colonization of Ukraine’s provincial countryside in the eighteenth century to create pastoral estates for Russians, Ukrainian artists were fuelled by innovation in working to escape the narrative of Russian imperialism.26 The beginning of the abstract modernist period was seen as “a flinging open of all the old imperial doors and windows.”27 The Ukrainian avant-garde were hoping to transcend the impositions of external influences and “forge a continuum of culture” in conjunction with contemporary artistic practices in order to reclaim dignity of their national identity.28 As such, their “internal primitivism” was a means to fight against the concept of the Russian city in Ukraine by taking folk art from the countryside, putting it front and centre, and thereby re-establishing the narrative of the peasant.29 In this way, the Ukrainian avant-garde catered to the goal of national liberation through the use of its own cultural heritage.30

Another way in which the Ukrainian avant-garde tried to establish its own identity independent from Russia was in its effort to differentiate itself from the Russian art of the time. The goal of art for many Russian artists paralleled the ideology surrounding the communist movement and the October Revolution — to overthrow “bourgeois culture and its mechanisms of domination and control.”31 While Russian artists were rebelling against bourgeois control of their lives, Ukrainian avant-garde artists were trying to overthrow the historical Russian control over art by legitimizing the folk arts of the Ukrainian countryside. Whereas Russian avant-garde communism provided a dogma that was anarchistic, apocalyptic, and yet, simultaneously messianic, the Ukrainian avant-garde had more muted

25 Ibid., 22.
26 Ibid., 18.
27 Ibid., 19.
28 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
approach and focused instead on criticizing its colonized past.\textsuperscript{32} Too much criticism of Russian colonialism by Ukrainians could result in sharp reprimand, especially when it was overtly denouncing historic Russification and imperial conquest.\textsuperscript{33} This is perhaps why many Ukrainian avant-garde artists chose to participate in their “internal primitivist” national revival – it undermined Russia’s imperial legacy indirectly. Using “internal primitivism,” artists were free to explore modern and abstract techniques, while continuing to make a covert nationalistic statement.

The rapidly changing revolutionary period of 1914-1917 meant that many artists would shift their political leanings and adapt to prevailing ideologies. For avant-garde artists, their goals of remaking and seeing the world anew were coupled with their politics.\textsuperscript{34} Many tried to stay apolitical, or, if required, would capitalise on a particular political situation. The ability to have multiple and shifting loyalties was in the artist’s favour. With the creation of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the imposition of communist ideology had a major effect on the trajectory of Ukrainian modernism. During the late 1920’s, the rise of compulsory use of Soviet Realism ended the avant-garde movement’s independence. Just as artists began to grapple with the duality of national and communist identities, their exploration of “ambiguous and divided loyalties” came to an end under Soviet influence.\textsuperscript{35} “Internal primitivism” played into the ambiguity of Ukrainian loyalties by simultaneously being an artistic reaction to avant-garde art across Europe, a nationalistic reaction to imperialism, and a political reaction to communism.

As the artistic intelligentsia had played a key role in creating the Ukrainian national republic during the revolutionary years,\textsuperscript{36} the incoming communists posed a threat to the newly burgeoning national rediscovery. The Bolsheviks made three attempts to take over Ukraine,\textsuperscript{37} and when they finally succeeded, they “felt entitled to take revenge on ‘the counter-revolution by repressing Ukrainian culture.” This was easy to accomplish, since the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine (CP(b)U) was over a third Russian and a third Jewish, with Ukrainians only making up less than a quarter of the membership.\textsuperscript{38} Since the CP(b)U claimed Ukrainian art was unrefined and antisemitic, its leadership pitted the Russian “culture of the city” against the Ukrainian “culture of the village” and, in elitist fashion,

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\textsuperscript{32} Makaryk, “Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation,” p. 20.
\textsuperscript{33} Shkandrij, “Politics and the Ukrainian Avant-garde,” 228.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 220.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 223-224.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 224.
\textsuperscript{37} For an overview of the history of Communism in Soviet Ukraine see Magocsi, \textit{A History of Ukraine}, 565-584.
\textsuperscript{38} Shkandrij, “Politics and the Ukrainian Avant-garde,” 224.
\end{flushright}
assumed the quick triumph of Russian culture.\textsuperscript{39} However, the Ukrainian national cultural revival would eventually witness a reversal of this oppressed status, later becoming supported by the party.

The policy of Ukrainianization brought about “indigenization,” which created a Ukrainian culture “national[istic] in form but socialist in content.”\textsuperscript{40} The CP(b)U was willing to support the anti-Imperial Russian rhetoric of the Ukrainian avant-garde, as it meshed with their goal of emancipating Ukraine from bourgeoisie ideals, but they needed to eliminate the concept of national liberation.\textsuperscript{41} Nonetheless, Ukrainian avant-garde artists continued to strive to combine social and national liberation. Modernist avant-garde artists seemed able to work no matter the political climate, even in Ukraine, where it changed so often. Historically, Ukraine’s political culture was seen as more Western, with emphasis placed on individual rights and the separation of church and state.\textsuperscript{42} The repression of Ukraine’s national and political culture may have played a role in strengthening the avant-garde,\textsuperscript{43} as many citizens expected the rights that they had been long denied.

A case study of a later, but prominent, Ukrainian avant-garde group exemplifies the themes discussed in this article. The Yiddish \textit{Kultur-Lige}, a Jewish artistic organization founded in Kiev, which later opened many other branches around Europe, focused on creating an identity and an art that uniquely integrated the past and looked inwards towards their own culture, similar to the practices of the “internal primitivists.” The \textit{Kultur-Lige} demonstrates not only how “internal primitivism” could manifest in various forms in the same geographic region, but that the legacy of this nationalistic and ethnic approach to modern and abstract art in Ukraine was significant and distinct in the canon of European art.

The \textit{Kultur-Lige}, founded in 1917, was a group of modernist-oriented artists who were banded together by their shared Jewish and Yiddish identity. Ukraine’s tumultuous revolutionary period allowed for several advances in Jewish and Yiddish emancipation. The political turmoil meant many parties could form a coalition,\textsuperscript{44} and Yiddish was made an official language by the Central Rada, the Ukrainian government of the era.\textsuperscript{45} The

\textsuperscript{39} Shkandrij, “Politics and the Ukrainian Avant-garde,” 224.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 226.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 229.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 230.

\textsuperscript{43} See Magocsi, \textit{A History of Ukraine}, 234.

\textsuperscript{44} Hillel Kazovsky, ed., \textit{Kultur-Lige: Artistic Avant-garde of the 1910s and the 1920s}, (Kiev: Dukh I litera, 2007), 34.

\textsuperscript{45} Kazovsky, \textit{Kultur-Lige}, 50.
ousting of Hetman Pavlo Skoropadski and the abolition of the Ministry of Jewish Affairs, which had previously been in charge of organising Jewish and Yiddish cultural efforts, meant that the newly minted Kultur-Lige would inherit all of the Ministry’s financial assets and establishments. The Kultur-Lige thus became the “representative organ of Jewish autonomy in Ukraine.” Its socially and politically diverse activists’ foundational goal of united action is reflected in its use of “league” in its name. Even in the face of pogroms and discrimination, the Kultur-Lige were part of the Pan-Yiddishists – those of Jewish faith who believed in remaining in Europe in contrast to the Zionists’ desire to leave and create a Jewish homeland. These artists were interested in establishing and cementing their own culture, both distinct from and a part of the larger Ukrainian nation. This meant that the Kultur-Lige, in a similar manner as the larger Ukrainian avant-garde movement, sought to connect its new national art with the developments in modern European art of the era.

The Kultur-Lige’s interest in using ideas from European art also required “internal primitivist” elements to complete its synthesis. Much like Ukrainian avant-garde looked to their past to create their innovative work, the Kultur-Lige were interested in absorbing folk tradition to create a new Jewish art. The Kultur-Lige was willing to adopt modernist trends, as they believed that the “creative activities of the masses” would generate a modern Jewish culture. Many elements of traditional Jewish and Yiddish life would advocate isolated adherence to religion, which influenced the possibility of art production. In some Jewish traditions, restrictions are placed on drawing or painting human images. The advent of non-mimetic and non-representational abstract art, foregoing figural representation as subject in favour of shape, line, and colour, signalled the “manifestation of Jewishness in art” in the eyes of the Kultur-Lige. Modern culture had formally aligned with Jewish artistic limitations as such abstract artwork

Pavlo Skoropadski was the Hetman (chief of state) of Ukraine from April to December 1918. His short-lived governance was characterized by its conservative and right-of-centre nature, including the reestablishment of private property and authoritarian rule. See Magocsi, A History of Ukraine, 518-523.


Kazovsky, Kultur-Lige, 34.

Ibid.

complied with this prohibition on reproducing the human image. This signalled that Jewish artists were welcome and encouraged to work within this Western avant-garde art practice.

When comparing Ukrainian and Jewish artistic styles of the period, one can draw many parallels. Ideologically, the synthesis of a traditional past and a burgeoning Western future forged vibrant and new national identities. Formally, the parallels are even more evident. Nearly all of the Kultur-Lige members studied in Exter’s workshop, and it was there that they learned from her fusion of national Ukrainian art with her knowledge of the Parisian modernist discourse. Exter’s teachings inspired members of the Kultur-Lige to look even further within their own Jewish culture for inspiration. The Hebrew alphabet was one key cultural source. In Mark Epstein’s cover for Itzik Kipnis’ collection of poetry, Oksen (fig. 4), he combined the new style of abstraction with this linguistic tradition. The letters of the Hebrew alphabet, here forming the Yiddish word for “oxen,” are broken into geometric shapes and placed on a diagonal, drawing attention to the flatness of the picture plane and showing influence from the emergence of the modernist art movement of Futurism. In using such traditional references, the art of the Kultur-Lige exhibits the same “principled localism [and] determination” showcased by “internal primitivist” Ukrainian avant-garde art.

The Kultur-Lige exemplifies the formal characteristics of “internal primitivism” in Ukrainian art in the early twentieth century in addition to the conditions influencing this reinterpretation of primitivist borrowing. The fluctuating political climate of the time allowed for the organization and facilitation of Jewish groups in Ukraine, and the floodgates were opened for Jewish cultural research by the elevation of Yiddish to a national language in 1917. Combined with an interest in Western modernism, the Kultur-Lige created a national art that held many of the same formal characteristics as the larger Ukrainian avant-garde movement. The practices of the Kultur-Lige, however, should not be seen as separate from Ukrainian avant-garde artists. In addition to sharing many artists as members, these two groups shared an excitement in exploring their own “native” cultures, both of which were deeply enmeshed in Ukrainian history.

53 Kazovsky, Kultur-Lige, 54.
54 Susak, “Parallels”, 121.
As a whole, Ukrainian avant-garde art stands out from the wider artistic movement of modernism during the early twentieth century as a result of its “inwardly-focused primitivist” practices. This form of “primitivism” had many benefits for Ukrainian avant-garde artists. Firstly, the use of ethnic folk arts provided a foundation to learn from and adopt Western artistic ideas. Secondly, “internal primitivism” made radical avant-garde concepts more accessible, as the abstracted forms and flattened two-dimensional picture planes of modern art could already be seen in Ukrainian religious icons and decorative art. Lastly, it provided a way for Ukrainians to develop national art that was autonomous and democratic, in addition to being politically and ethnically independent. “Internal primitivism” fuelled by the political and social circumstances of the revolutionary and early Soviet period gave artists the will to create a uniquely national art. Other groups in Ukrainian society were also inspired by such approaches, including the Kultur-Lige in their search for a new Jewish art. Many Ukrainian artists of the period, Malevich in particular, have rarely had their Ukrainian background studied or mentioned.\(^\text{56}\) Scholarship often ignores this background, relegating the Ukrainian avant-garde to a fringe artistic movement under the larger banner of the “Russian” or “Soviet” modernist movements. However, the unique visual and theoretical impact of this heritage on abstract and modernist art is clear.

Ukrainian avant-garde art had a more nuanced understanding of primitivism than many Western counterparts. While Western artists were more concerned with changing their own artistic traditions through the observation of other cultures, Ukrainian artists sought to rediscover their own culture through the practice of ethnic anthropology, fusing it with modernist Western influences. The Ukrainian avant-garde not only produced an art that was formally and socially revolutionary — this artwork was tied to a historically significant political and national hegemony and began to dismantle generations of the subjugation of Ukraine, which had been conflated with other cultures. Western modern art is, of course, an enormous step in the historical legacy of European art, but in some regards the Ukrainian avant-garde achieved an even more significant shift during the first two decades of the twentieth century. With an inwardly-focused self-awareness, Ukrainian artists produced work that has gone largely overlooked and understudied. A true appreciation of the nuance found in the “internal primitive” practices of the Ukrainian avant-garde contributes an important chapter to the story of the wider artistic tradition in Europe during the early twentieth century.

\(^{56}\) Shkandrij, “Politics and the Ukrainian Avant-garde,” 230.
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