

The Traveler: A Formal Analysis



Lyubov Popova
The Traveler (1915)
56x41-1/2 in.
Oil on canvas
Norton Simon Museum of Art
Pasadena, CA.

Abstract

The Traveler is a fascinating work of Cubo-Futurism whose rapid geometry sensualizes the early 20th century. Popova creates a visual synthesis of human estrangement confined within the promise of a new world order. Text provides an existential grounding within a chug-a-chug-a-choo-choo-shriek-flash-symphony of scalene triangles hurling a fashionable demimonde into an unforeseen future where iPhones await.

The Traveler (1915) is a Cubo-Futurist painting by Russian artist Lyubov Popova (1889-1924) on display at the Norton Simon Museum of Art.¹ Popova was an avant-garde artist residing in Italy when World War I erupted. She was familiar with Cubism and viewed Italian Futurist artworks. After returning to Russia, she made paintings that combined Futurist dynamism with French Cubism to create Cubo-Futurism. Popova died at the age of thirty-five from scarlet fever.²

The Traveler depicts a woman seated on a train and reading a magazine. She wears a yellow necklace and deep blue dress beneath a black collared cape. With a white (or gloved) hand she holds a green umbrella. The train seems to race past fleeting scenes of people, timetables, and outdoor cafes. The folded umbrella, her magazine and bodily position indicate she is seated on a train. Tall conical shapes emit small curves that may represent smoke stacks of the coal-powered machine. Another hint to location is the handle and body of a valise on the wall behind the passenger, held back, perhaps, by a wire mesh; this was a common way of storing hand luggage in train compartments. The subject is sectioned by intersecting lines and shapes creating a sense of movement, characteristic of Futurism; on the left we see what may be half of a woman's face with reddish-blond hair and a large eyebrow. On the right we can see a nose, jaw, chin and eye, beneath a neck encircled by yellow pearls. Six nearby black lines imply eyelashes. The woman sits within a rapid passage of objects and geometric shapes meant to imply passing scenery. Russian words are interspersed throughout the painting and translate into

¹ Museum display card.

² Mullins, Edwin, and Reiner. Moritz. *Lyubov Popova: Portrait of a Philosopher*. Art and Architecture in Video. Germany: ArtHaus Musik, 2012.

“2nd class,” “gazette” and “gas.”³ The overall content is an organized arrangement of geometric shapes, richly colored and used to represent the moving world of a fashionable woman on a train.

Popova’s style incorporates Futurist dynamism and Cubist representation. Contrary to analytical Cubism, her use of bold colors reflects Russian indigenous primitivism. *The Traveler* joins the oeuvre of mechanical celebration found in artists like Malevich (for example, his Cubo-futurist *The Knifegrinder* (1912-13, Yale University art gallery, fig. 1). The dynamic motion is playful yet jarring; one can almost hear the cacophonous shrieks of steam and metal and the coughing chug-chug pistons of the iron juggernaut. The traveler rests calmly within this mechanized chaos, self-obsessed with fashion, gossip and status. Painted two years before the Revolution, Popova creates a poignant image of the middle-class; willing stowaways on the Industrial Revolution, striking a defiant bourgeoisie pose. With a riotous elegance, she surrenders to the power of the future while gripped in a triangular vice of conformity. Was Popova aware of the coming overthrow of the Tsar? Or was she, like the traveler, oblivious to the winds of history? The traveler does not confess to Popova’s consciousness, yet she seems to know that the past is dead.

The Traveler’s palette has primary and secondary colors such as blue, red, yellow and green offset by monochromes of white, black and grey. Popova makes a fascinating color reflection of our everyday world: earthy browns, yellows and greens are placed in the upper area that we normally equate with “sky,” while “sky” colors like blue and sun-red descend into the lower strata of the canvas. I do not know if Popova intended any meaning, I just find the topsy-turvy interesting. There is also an odd curly-cue near the middle of the painting that could

³ Museum display card.

represent a carved wooden hand-rest of the train chair or a spinning eyeball of insanity; it is a unique symbol in the painting that sparks a feeling of circular rotation.

The Traveler uses other shapes and color to imply motion. In the background, red and white stripes form different rectangular segments that dance along the outer frame from upper right to lower left. Centrally, Popova arranged scalene triangles into two groups of four. The upper group painted in black and grey create the moving form of the traveler's cape; the lower group, painted in blue, form a billowing dress or fashionable pantaloons. Four inverted triangles of green construct a trembling umbrella. Ingeniously, Popova connects green umbrella to blue dress by means of an oblong hemisphere. She furthers this organic connectivity throughout the painting with twenty-two additional hemispheres that bridge the various geometries. I am deeply impressed by Popova's mastery in knowing where to place them. Her interaction of round to angular shapes, along with a color palette that is rich but not overly bright, makes a connective flow within the disturbing content. As an aside, the red-and-white stripes precede the 1920's Constructivist fashions of Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958).

Words in the painting give a literary aspect to the work, reminding me of the Neo-Primitivism love for hand-made books, or *lubok*. *The Traveler* is like a storm of whirling pages begging for a visual reassembly. The words mimic passing speech in a train station, but also refer to the mental dialogue with which we define our personal world. Speed and light make communication instantaneous. Gaslight and electricity increased man's ability to live without sunlight in a private world; the telegraph, telephone and wireless radio sped up man's pace of living as personal space began to shrink. The Traveler lives in a confined world, buffeted by the rate of progress, fooled by the illusion of privacy. Popova's use of text within the painting is vital to its success as work of art and reminds us of the human element. The words ground our human

identity within a painting that is relatively inhuman. We cannot relate to it except in the abstract. The words, however, are concrete, recognizable (even in Cyrillic) and reassuring. All else is a frightening nightmare. Without words, this future is bleak.

At the end of every tunnel there is light, however, and its appearance within *The Traveler* deserves notice. Popova illumines the black and blue scalene triangles by shading their edges with white paint. The triangles blink like passing lights seen through a moving train window. Popova's shading adds dimensionality to her non-linear Cubist perspective. Striped rectangles and other background elements along the borders are painted with minimal shading or flat, allowing the animated triangles to pronounce.

Popova's use of shape, light and shade reminds me of *Lamentation* (c. 1306) by Giotto. The shapes in *Lamentation* (fig. 2) are representational yet organically geometric. Haloes, heads, faces, backs and arms harken to Cezanne's reduction of nature to a cylinder, square or cone. *The Traveler's* face shares the profile of those in *Lamentation*. Giotto used simple shading to create depth, and Popova is centuries ahead in detail but there are resemblances. Any learned Russian might laugh at the comparison, but I like the simple relationship between Popova, Cezanne and Giotto.

Popova's brushwork moves in many directions, replacing Renaissance gestural flatness with a bolder emotional Modernism. Like Cezanne, Popova makes abrupt color distinctions in some places and gradual separations in others. In the grouping of green and blue triangles (fig 3), we see simple yet textured tonal gradations. Textures alternate from smooth to stippled and thickly raised, only visible upon closer inspection.

Formal line is implied more than obvious; meaning, Popova outlines one shape with black then uses wider strokes of color to create linear distinction. Her ability to decide upon such

linear construction is impressive; lines join into crystalline shapes like the facets of a diamond. Sketches by Popova, if any survive, would be interesting to compare with the final product.

The Traveler is a masterful creation of Cubo-Futurism whose style and content give a distinct feeling of early 20th-century technological experience. Riding on the dreams of the Industrial Revolution prior to the collapse of empire, our Traveler hopes for a better future. Today we have bullet trains and drones, the Internet and cyber warfare. What would Popova paint today, were she alive? Perhaps another copy of *The Traveler*, this time holding an iPhone X, surrounded by a few emojis and the words, “Будущее – сегодня” (“the future is today”).

Appendix



Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935)
The Knifegrinder (Principle of Glittering)
(1912-1913)
31.3125 in × 31.3125 in, oil on canvas
Yale University Art Gallery



Giotto di Bondone (1267–1337)
Lamentation (c.1304-1306)
78.74 x 72.83 in.
Fresco
Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy



Lyubov Popova
The Traveler (detail, 1915)



Author with *The Traveler*
Norton Simon Museum of Art
Pasadena, CA