

[Milbach on Makaryk, 'April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo'](#)

Review published on Friday, November 27, 2020

Irena R. Makaryk. *April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. Illustrations. 328 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), [ISBN](#)

[978-1-4875-0372-7](#). 

Reviewed by Juliette Milbach (École des hautes études en sciences sociales) **Published on** H-SHERA (November, 2020) **Commissioned by** Hanna Chuchvaha (University of Calgary)

Printable Version: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=55574>

Conceived and partly received as an apotheosis of modernism, the Paris Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes undoubtedly deserves the analysis devoted to it by Irena R. Makaryk. For about six months in 1925, the exhibition attracted millions of visitors with its ambitious goal of creating a new style that reflected scientific, industrial, and technological advances, as Makaryk states in her introduction. The first section of the book is attractively titled “April in Paris 1925: ‘As Important as the Renaissance’” from a quotation of Yvanhoë Rambosson, a member of the organizing committee. The wording invites the reader to feel the enormous impact of the subject of this study. Richly illustrated, *April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo* investigates the process and the legacy of the exposition as a combination of fair (amusement, commerce), exhibition (display), and show (“theater”). The visual material, which is presented in abundant black-and-white reproductions within the chapters and in eight additional color plates—giving a real sense of the incredible works by Alexandra Exter—offers a unique opportunity to visualize the show. The book includes maps of the exhibition, views of the expo from contemporary postcards (both as a whole and particular aspects), reproductions of stenographic studies, costume sketches, etc.

The exhibition is well known through numerous analyses that focus on the art deco style (such as Emmanuel Bréon and Philippe Rivoirard’s edited collection *1925, quand l’Art déco séduit le monde* [2013]) or the national particularity, highlighting Soviet participation (see S. Frederick Starr’s *Le pavillon de Mel'nikov, Paris, 1925*, with an introduction by Jean-Louis Cohen [1981]), but the theatrical aspect of the exhibition’s program has not received similar attention. Makaryk’s goal is to go beyond an exclusively national (by pavilion) and/or stylistic (focusing on art deco style) approach by inspecting instead the theatricality in a broad sense, taking the reader far outside the walls of the exhibition itself. By theatricalization, Makaryk understands the reconfiguration of the lived space in a modern festival city. To explain this, the author divides her book into seven chapters, all of which work from and with the concept of space, reminding the reader that theatricality is the key concern of the study. The analysis thus falls within the renewal of theater studies, with close attention being paid to theaters as architectural, physical, and social spaces and not only in their relation to the texts. It also claims to borrow from fashion theory the ambivalence of the material/non-material and the definition of the fashion process as a complex, dynamic mechanism, in order to incorporate these

Citation: H-Net Reviews. *Milbach on Makaryk, 'April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo'*. H-SHERA. 11-27-2020.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/166842/reviews/6869713/milbach-makaryk-april-paris-theatricality-modernism-and-politics-1925>

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theories into cultural studies.

April in Paris offers the reader an idea of the spatial and visual organization of the show, and it highlights the fundamental contribution of the Soviets. This importance is underlined by how the sources, such as articles by the Soviet art critic Boris Ternovets (1881-1941), give a unique view of the exhibition and the Soviet project itself.[1] One of the original aspects of Makaryk's book is the dialogue between the USSR and France, without ever minimizing the other conversations at stake, such as the British experiments. This dialogue is visible from the first chapter. "Theatricalizing the City" examines the role that electricity played in the exhibition and puts into perspective its interplay with modernization in the Soviet Union, that is, the ideology behind electrification. The relevance of the connection highlighted in this chapter between the Parisian experience and the Soviet narrative is principally theoretical (through the reminder that the USSR was one of the important participants in the exhibition). But the stories behind the scenography of exterior space in the young Soviet state and the electrification of the country offer interesting examples for understanding how international exhibitions, such as that in Paris in 1925, played a role in the urbanization of the city in terms of both ephemeral (as most of the constructions were supposed to be destroyed after the show) and permanent scenery. The USSR experienced a similar situation in terms of articulation between the temporary and the permanent installations.

The modernity brought by the Soviets is discussed under all points, in particular in a critical parallel drawn between the creations of Konstantin Melnikov and Aleksandr Rodchenko and works by Le Corbusier. However, Makaryk's main arguments reside in the theater. One of her key points is that, unlike the British and French—two great theater nations—who purposely ignored modernity in their stage design, the Soviets used it to great effect. Makaryk insists that the Soviet display focused on the idea of the relationship between space and time, which made a preeminent contribution to the idea of modernity that lay at the heart of the 1925 exhibition in general and is notably contextualized in the book by the discussion on electricity in the first chapter. Makaryk insists that the Soviet display was important because all the innovations in the Russian performing arts (that is, not only the stage design and costumes but also the professions of actor and dancer), including those that appeared before 1917, were being presented on this international scale for the first time. The second chapter highlights the correlation between aesthetic and technological progress and the embodiment of this idea of progress in the theater. Chapters 3 to 5 focus on the concept of space, highlighting the Soviet proposition for show followed by the theater art experiments in this area and concluding with Soviet theater art in its particular relation to space.

The sixth and penultimate chapter is dedicated to a new vector from Paris to New York and gives a sense of how modernity that appeared in Paris as a result of the exhibition spread afterward to the rest of the world via New York. Makaryk sees in this a sort of apotheosis of modernity representing the 1925 exhibition and its repercussions, especially in the United States. In attempting to summarize the legacy of the expo, Makaryk identifies a one-way system of influence and, in my understanding, simplifies a little bit the Soviet situation after 1934, when, according to Makaryk, all experimentation was prohibited. This gives a somewhat black-and-white impression of a history of theater, which would henceforth be played out exclusively outside Soviet borders. To counterbalance this impression, the concluding pages highlight the works of Soviet emigrants in the United States, in particular Boris Aronson. All these detailed analyses and these few shortcuts allow Makaryk to demonstrate her central point: how a theatrical style appeared in Paris and became dominant in the

United States until the 1960s. The combination of analysis of theatrical art and a chronological and geographical expansion of the history of the 1925 expo makes this book an important study for understanding the pivotal moment that this international show represents in Western cultural history.

Note

[1]. B. N. Ternovets, *Pis'ma, dnevnik, stat'i*, comp. and ed. L. S. Aleshina and N. V. Iavorskaia (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977).

Citation: Juliette Milbach. Review of Makaryk, Irena R., *April in Paris: Theatricality, Modernism, and Politics at the 1925 Art Deco Expo*. H-SHERA, H-Net Reviews. November, 2020. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=55574>

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