

Nadia Khodassievitch Léger: la griffe du siècle.

'Nadia Léger, la griffe du siècle' *Hommage aux donateurs*, Musée Fernand Léger, Biot,

http://www.musees-nationaux-alpesmaritimes.fr/pages/page_id18106_u112.htm

*There may be a problem with the dating of the *Maternity '1943'* (see note 16). SW

So who was Nadia Khodassievitch-Léger? An artist, mother and teacher who played a vital role in Léger's life. Nadia Léger's remarkable trajectory, from the humblest of origins to the instigator and *doyenne* of the Musée Fernand Léger in Biot, claims the attention of new generations of art historians. *elle est marquée depuis 1920 par la griffe du siècle*, claimed her friend the painter Marcelle Cahn – who will also be rediscovered in 2010.¹

Our knowledge of the artistic scene in Vitebsk - where Nadia was born around 1904 - has been immeasurably expanded since the exhibition *Futur antérieur* in 2009.² What a contrast between intense spiritual and intellectual life and the intense poverty into which Nadia was born into a family of nine children..³ In the post-Revolutionary ferment, where distinguished artists fronting reformed Beaux-Arts institutions promoted the ideals of a new society, Nadia enrolled at the academy of Belov, leaving for Smolensk in 1920, when she heard that Streminski, a disciple of Malevich was teaching there. *Jeune Fille aux nattes*, 1921 shows her fragile yet already tenacious, grasping her plait in her right hand, with a soldi command of expression and drapery. A debate between a delight in the skills of portrayal versus revolutionary abstraction was obviously intense in this post-revolutionary moment – for it was here that she met Malevich - possibly studying with him in a 'workshop' situation - and discovered the journal *L'Esprit Nouveau* in the Smolensk library. The art world was already global: after futurism, Dada had arrived in Saint Petersburg, and now Purism, and the modernist aesthetics of Ozenfant, Le Corbusier and Fernand Léger were the 'next new thing'.

Nadia's determination – within three years enrolling at the Académie moderne Fernand Léger-Amédée Ozenfant, at 86, rue Notre Dame des Champs – astonishes me – in that it involved her passage to Poland in October 1922, elopement, marriage with Stanislas

¹ Marcelle Cahn, 'Mes souvenirs sur "Nadia Léger"', *Nadia Leger, évolution première, 1920-1926*, Paris, Galerie Centre d'Art International, March 1971, (np); see also *Marcelle Cahn, l'artiste engagée*, Mouans-Sartoux, Espace de l'Art Concret, 24 January-30 mai, 2010.

² *Futur antérieur, L'avant-garde et le livre yiddish, 1914-1939*, Paris, Musée d'art et d'histoire du judaïsme, 2009, dir, Nathalie Hazan-Brunet.

³ All identity papers were lost in a conflagration; the eldest child gave the rest approximate ages.

Grabowski, who came from a wealthy family, and the couple's voyage to Paris.⁴ A kindred spirit was discovered in Amédée Ozenfant's Russian wife – while Marcelle Cahn's mother was kind to the young Wanda Grabowska. Cahn's statement | '*Elle était douloureusement marquée par le propos de Malevich : "La peinture abstraite c'est fini" Elle se mit à douter et elle doute encore...*' is understandable.⁵ Already in Paris there was the *conflit de tendances*: late cubism versus Picasso's own *rappel à l'ordre* and the more realist paintings of the post-revolutionary Russian artist émigrés such as Soutine - or indeed those of the classic Ecole de Paris as a whole, such as Amadeo Modigliani – who, countered Purism with still lifes, portraits or nudes for a flourishing market.

Success came in 1925: the Comtesse de Noailles had bought a strongly composed cubist work with its contrasting, stippled surfaces. Wanda was included in 1926 in group shows at the Galerie de l'Art contemporain and in 1927 at the Galerie Aubier and the Galerie Sacre du Printemps - the year she she separated from her husband after the birth of her daughter - also named Wanda.⁶

The Museum of Modern Art, New York opened its doors in 1929: Wanda's active role in the foundation of the Museum in Lodz – today so active, so important for a new generation of artists again needs greater international recognition. Together with the poet Jan Brzekowski, in 1929, Wanda Khodossievitch-Grabowska, became a member of the revolutionary group 'a.r.' and founded franco-Polish review *Art contemporain/ sztuka wspolczesna*. The message of illustrated art reviews at the time – easily postable – passed from hand to hand, across generations as well as countries cannot be over-emphasised. Thus Paris was intimately in contact with Lodz – and with Poland as a whole. At the time – and after the unimaginable ravages of the first world war – there was for a short time, the exhilarating sense of a greater Europe– the larger Europe artists are rediscovering today (just as they are discovering the importance of contemporary Polish artists). This was the 'Internationale de l'esprit', transcending national boundaries, - whose finest moment was the constitution of the Lodz contemporary museum: a spectacular collection of 111 pieces sent from Paris to be its founding core – including Nadia's own biomorphic abstractions which seem closer to Arp in

⁴ André Parinaud, 'Le Suprématisme', *Nadia Léger, évolution première*, 1971.

⁵ Marcelle Cahn, 'Mes souvenirs sur "Nadia Léger"', *Nadia Léger, évolution première*, 1971.

⁶ For Stanislas Grobowski, (b.1901 Estonia, d. 1957, Chartres) who exhibited at the Galerie Zak in Paris in 1929, see www.culture.pl, 2002.

their curves than to Léger.⁷ *Ar* ran for three issues (1929-30) and included a panoply of Parisian avant-garde abstract and surrealist art juxtaposed with Henryk Stazewski, Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Kataryzna Kobro together with writers such as Robert Desnos, Waldemar George, Max Jacob, Michel Seuphor, Tristan Tzara, Przybos, Piper, Jalu Kurek, Brzekowski and Julian Przybos.

For some time, paradoxically, the call from Moscow for a proletarian art with more realist leanings had reached the Parisian intelligentsia.⁸ Even Léger reverted from abstraction to a simplified realism, its origin partly in the French Romanesque, in works with a proletarian inspiration such as *Les Trois Musiciens*, 1930. Léger had become close to the revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky on his trips to Paris in 1924, 1925, 1927, 1928 and 1929 - and he corresponded with Sergei Eisenstein in the 1930s. His image of post-revolutionary Russia was vivid. However, (unlike so many Parisian artists) he grasped early on that New York was the great city of the twentieth century. '*New York...Moscou, Moscou... New York, Paris en observateur*' Léger wrote presciently in 1931.⁹¹⁰ During his three prewar visits to the United States, his upward social mobility on the New York scene was remarkable. Each time he left, the atelier was entrusted to Nadia. After the Académie Moderne closed in 1931, Académie de l'Art Contemporain reopened at 23, rue du Moulin Vert in 1933-4, with Nadia moving from the position of pupil to teaching assistant. Like Léger's her work began to respond to the call for realism.

The most striking example of the paradoxes at stake is the comparison between Léger's portrait of Mrs Maud Chester-Dale, 1935, commissioned by her rich husband, the collector and promoter of the School of Paris during his second trip in 1935, and Nadia's Self portrait of 1936.¹¹ Maud Chester Dale wears a green evening dress: her ruffled lace neckline corresponds, in terms of Léger's handling and colouring, to the curls of her perm

⁷ See Gladys Fabre, 'Paris, les arts et l'internationale de l'esprit', *Paris Capitale des Arts, 1900-1968*, (Royal Academy of Arts, London), Paris, Hazan, 2002, pp 50-51, figs.41,43, and *Grupa a.r.*, Museum Sztuki, Lodz, 1971.

⁸ See Bela Uitz, 'Vers un art proletarien' *Clarté*, 75, June 1925, and subsequent developments discussed by Gladys Fabre above.

¹⁰ "La seulement on ose l'expérience dangereuse dont les autres profiteront..." 'New York vu par Fernand Léger', *Cahiers d'Art*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 437-439.

¹¹ Léger's commission for Nelson A Rockefeller's Fifth Avenue apartment would follow, hence his third trip to the US in 1938-9. See Simon Willmoth, 'Léger and America', *Fernand Léger The Later Years*, 1987, pp. 43-54.

[*traductrice*: = 'permanent wave' coiffure frisee], with the delicate implication of a hint of grey; she has mature, regal poise. A strong red curtain – velvet one presumes – cuts the painting in two. In contrast, Nadia's self portrait – curiously a bust which fills the whole frame - is flanked to the right by the twists round a flagpole of a red communist flag at this time of Popular Front triumph: her hair and simple dress are black; the steps and trellis behind her hit at outside – the street – the complementary green background to the flag is surely turf. The same facture – the same palette – the same 'Léger'-style – two utterly different women, and two utterly different lives. Nadia's life was to be far more exciting, far more creative than the American lady of the New York scene – whose portrait is now in the National Gallery of Art.. Washington DC.

Both Léger and Nadia shared a caniness and pragmatism that went with their essentially simple origins. Léger was of course a curiosity in New York Salons: and the *nouveau réalisme* he promoted, the modern worlds of cinema and radio, the city with its blaze of sophisticated publicity – owed even more to New York than to Paris.¹² In the context of the Popular Front and Louis Aragon's Soviet-inspired lecture series (*Pour un réalisme socialiste* 1935) Aragon's taunt: '*Esclave, vous peignez vos chaînes... le produit sublimé de cet ordre social, la marchandise...*'¹³ - all too true in a Depression context - had little impact on the artist whose investment in modernism and his own professional future in the 1930s was in striking contrast to the general collapse of the School of Paris. Foreign artists in particular suffered lamentably in an increasingly nationalist, racist climate as the decade progressed.

Nadia of course frequented the militant Maison de la Culture, exhibiting works such as a female figure in 1936, inscribed in Russian with the words: '*A bas l'impressionisme dans la peinture prolétarienne*'¹⁴ Around this period that she reverted from the Polish 'Wanda' to Nadia - a diminutive of her Russian name Nadiezhda. Léger, too, was actively engaged in debates at the Maison de la Culture; he gave talks to various worker groups, and invited

¹². See Fernand Léger: 'Le nouveau réalisme continue', *La Querelle du Réalisme*, Paris, Editions Sociales Internationales, 1936, pp. 73-79.

¹³. Louis Aragon: 'Le réalisme à l'ordre du jour' in *Commune*, 37, September 1936.

¹⁴. See Gladys Fabre, 'L'atelier de Fernand Léger, période 1937-1955 in *Paris-Paris, Créations en France, 1937-1957*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1981, pp. 190-195. The painting by 'Kodassievitch' was exhibited at the third exhibition at the Maison de la Culture for 'adhérents/invités' (*Commune* for May, 1936, p. 1145).

workers to join special classes in his atelier.¹⁵ Nadia joined Léger and their best students, working together as a team for the great Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques de la Vie Moderne in 1937. Léger's striking photomontages, for Le Corbusier's the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux, show both artists – working in perfect harmony as usual – at their most theoretically 'bolchevist'. Léger's work - which reflects the impact of artist's such as Rodchenko and Gustav Klucis – was exhibited with slogans and exhortations ; the idea was that Le Corbusier's tent-like erection was demountable and could travel – like an agit-prop train. This 'revolutionary' art exercise was completely at odds with the menacing cult of Stalin works on display in Boris Iofan's iconic Soviet Pavilion topped with the gigantic sculpture of another fantastic Russian woman artist trained in Montparnasse : Vera Ignatievna Moukhina's *Ouvrier et kolkhoziennne* .

Léger left France in October 1940. He returned in December 1945... We know little of Nadia's existence or her and work with Russian prisoners of war during these years; though the resistance spirit in Montrouge, where her friend the artist André Fougeron would become the most active organiser of the Front National des Arts, was intense. In a climate of racist propaganda exhibitions she would surely have visited 'Exposition Internationale: Le Bolchévisme Contre l'Europe' over the summer of 1942 (following Hitler's invasion of Russia) and seen the depressing *tableaux vivants* labelled 'Un coin de la salle du paradis soviétique'... 'Camp de Concentration pour femmes en U.R.S.S' or 'Persécution religieuse en U.R.S.S.'¹⁶ What is story behind the hanged woman in a Léger-like décor of roses and roots dated 1942? And that behind the maternity, where a woman in a Suprematist-inspired dress holds a young boy, against a background inscription in Russian- dated 1943.¹⁷ To what extent could Nadia possibly have known the later work of Malevich in the 1930s, where 'realist' works contain covert references to his Suprematist past, a small black square serves as signature, simple clear colours and lines convey a message of formal power acting 'against' any conformist notions? While Nadia's work is always, arguably 'secondary', these formal juxtapositions are not only stimulating demonstrations of response and dialogue, they

¹⁵. Roland Brice, Léger's future ceramics assistant, had been a student at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Orléans and worked at the 'Bureau d'Etudes' at the Renault car factory in Boulogne-Billancourt. He frequented Léger's atelier .

¹⁶. Photographic records of the exhibition held from March 1st - June 15th 1942 (370,323 visitors) Salle Wagram are held in the Musée de la Résistance Nationale, Champigny-sur-Marne.

¹⁷ Photographs of these two paintings were give by Nadia Léger to Gladys Fabre, c 1979-81 during her research on Léger's atelier.

leave open tracts of undiscovered territory for future research: her hallmark in later years was to be just such an evocation of the Suprematist past in the present.

Nadia's managerial skills as *doyenne* of Léger atelier were increasingly important after he returned from New York in 1945, and – following Picasso – joined the French Communist Party.

He now reinvented himself as a 'Communist modernist': readopting his 'Norman peasant' image, cloth cap, and cigarette stub for the world of postwar Paris which we know so well from the black and white photographs of a Robert Doisneau or Willy Ronis – and the people's poetry of a Jacques Prévert. Nonetheless, he would be chauffeur-driven to his atelier from his house at Gif-Sur-Yvette. Does Nadia's superb frontal self-portrait with *decolletée* of 1947 on yellow ground, surrounded by grey, biomorphic shapes – imply a hint of New Look luxury – a silver stole thrown over an invisible new black silhouette?

Her 'discipleship' continued: I have even argued that her own style – at times deliberately engaging with a peasant culture and simplified shapes affected that of her master, and that the doves in Léger's Marat-inspired *Les Loisirs, Hommage à David*, 1948-9 (shown at his major retrospective coinciding with David's bicentenary) take a cue from Nadia. See 'Nadia Petrova's' *La Paix* – three Soviet peasant women with doves and peace slogans in French and Russian, shown at the 1951 Salon d'Automne (where Georges Bauquier's *Les Dockers* was taken down by the police).¹⁸

Nadia was part of the movement of 'Femmes peintres de la Paix' at this time. Her fellow-artist Geneviève Zondervan recalls meetings organised by Marie-Anne Lansiaux, the socialist-realist painter wife of photographer Willy Ronis; the group was always biggest, however, when meetings were held in Nadia's atelier near the Porte d'Orléans.¹⁹ Nadia's individual energies at this time and cooption of the atelier for the feminist cause is important: a similar dove reappears at the center of the fresco for the 'Exposition Internationale de la Femme': a huge 10 x 4 metre panel completed between May and June 1948: a team exercise directed by Nadia and the students... The easily-copied dove in profile, however, never triumphed over Picasso's dove – symbol of the international Peace Movement. With the Communists evicted from government in 1947, Cold War by this time were intense. Extensive writing about the international Peace Movement, however, seems to fall prey to

¹⁸. See *Les Lettres Françaises*, Edition Speciale du Salon d'Automne, 387, 7 November, 1951 (Nadia is incorrectly called 'Nina Petrova' here), Geneviève Zondervan archives.

¹⁹ Conversation with Geneviève Zondervan, Paris, June 5th, 2004. Nadia had directed teams involved in creating mural panels for the 'Rassemblement des femmes pour la Paix' in 1939

the same magic of the dove: there is seldom a reference to the Soviet atomic bomb, and the shock in the West, when 'First Lightening' – as it was known in Russian – was exploded in Khazakstan – August 29th 1949 - with the same force as the bomb that hit Hiroshima.

The Académie Montmartre, Boulevard de Clichy, was run by 'M. et Mme Bauquier' throughout the 1940s - Nadia's dominating role and presence in the atelier were crucial: Léger's presence minimal.²⁰ And without her organisation and collaboration, Léger's *travail de parti*, a guarantor of his political good faith, would also have been impossible to organise and achieve on the monumental scale that gave him such national - and international - prominence at the time. This involved major projects such as his mosaic facade for the Eglise d'Assy, stained glass for the churches of Audincourt and Courfavre (his commissions under the Communist *main tendue* policy of rapprochement with the Catholic Church) or, alternatively, large scale backdrops for political rallies - for example the Comité National des Ecrivains congress in 1953, once more at the Vélodrome d'Hiver. Four immense panels each 4 x 3m were painted by Léger and his students at Gif-sur-Yvette - beginning on a Tuesday for display the following Saturday. Léger enlarged his portrait head of Eluard, 1947, with variations of expression, the placing and the stylisation of the words: 'Liberté, j'écris ton nom'²¹ Monumental or temporary, Catholic or communist (and Léger's FBI minders were understandably confused) - these dimensions of Léger's heritage would quite simply have not existed.²²

After the death of Léger's wife Jeanne in 1950, Nadia's married Fernand Léger in 1952? Over one hundred of Nadia Léger's paintings and sketches of this period were shown at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in November 1953 – the very gallery which had shown – under some duress? – André Fougeron's classically socialist-realist paintings of the 'Pays des Mines' in 1951!²³ The heritage of Nadia's painting and her archives show several representations of Stalin, from careful drawing to mosaic: this exhibition – surely Nadia's

²⁰ See Fabre, 1981: 'Quotidiennement, Léger ne venait que de courts moments, et après la guerre, il se contenta d'être présent pour les corrections deux jours par semaine (mardi-vendredi) puis un jour, (le vendredi)'.

²¹. *Les Lettres Françaises*, 487, 24-30 October 1953: '...Dans un immense atelier, à Gif-sur-Yvette, Fernand Léger et ses élèves se sont mis, depuis mardi, à peindre les quatre panneaux qui décoreront samedi la vente du Comité National des Ecrivains au Vélodrome d'Hiver.'

²² See Léger's Federal Bureau of Investigation file no 105-20291.

²³ André Fougeron, Jean Fréville, *Le Pays des Mines, contribution à un nouveau réalisme français*, Editions Cercle d'Arts, 1951.

apotheosis in her late forties – in the wake of Stalin’s death and Aragon’s rejection of hardline socialist realism at the Salon d’Automne must have been another crucial moment of the ‘softening’ of militant positions – though Nadia was never accorded an exhibition at the prestigious Maison de la Pensée Française – the P.C.F.’s sumptuous venue on the Rue d’Elysée – where in 1954, Léger showed *La Grande Parade*, *Le Campeur* and *La Partie de Campagne* exhibited as a vast triptych.

Major projects continued – extending from the national to the international, from the stained-glass projects for the Eglise de Courfaivre (Switzerland) to the Université de Caracas (Venezuela) and the mosaic of the Gaz de France building in Alfortville, continuing with the latter project and the Saint-Lô hospital after the artist’s death in August 1955. If Nadia Léger had lived in our era her essential input would have been recognised – not ‘Fernand Léger’ and the *entirely* invisible wife who does not feature in his 1998 retrospective catalogue of the Musée National d’Art Moderne. As with Christo and Jeanne-Claude – as with Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen – we would be acknowledging ‘Fernand and Nadia Léger’.

This argument should extend as well to the question of a symbiosis – not fakery – of style. Nadia was the most outstanding – and most ‘typical’ of many of Fernand Léger’s students whose style was also inevitably close to that of their master – their *maître* in the classical sense. There is, indeed, the question I have discussed extensively of the *Portrait de Maïakovski and Lili Brik* by ‘Léger’, which appeared in Louis Aragon’s posthumous tribute in *Les Lettres Françaises* ...where Nadia’s style is supremely recognisable – and indeed many other possible instances where the younger woman guided the hand of the older man, one presumes.²⁴ But when Léger, *par excellence*, ran his *atelier* with students for the 1940s and 1950s according to the classic, production-oriented precepts of the studio of David – or of Rembrandt – issues of ‘authenticity’ may be seen from a more sophisticated and broader perspective. A postmodern sensibility has entirely rehabilitated the late works of a Giorgio de Chirico for example: *Giorgio de Chirico, la fabrique des rêves* (Paris, 2009) was more interested in de Chirico’s psyche as he aged, his intentions, his ‘copies’ that were ‘out of time’ – that could jump through time – than whether he had ‘betrayed’ the modernist origins whose magic realism preceded the whole of surrealist painting.²⁵ Was his attitude one of

²⁴ ‘Léger par Maïakovski’, *Les Lettres Françaises*, 582, August 25-31, 1955. For Nadia’s recollections of the Maïakovski connection see Viktor Lissakovitchs, ‘Paris, pourquoi Maïakovski’, Filmexport, 1993

²⁵ See *Giorgio de Chirico. La fabrique des rêves*, Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 13 February to 24 May, 2009.

bravado or derision – at a time when the *dérisoire* – among younger post-Dada artists was at a premium? Surely anxieties related simply to market values should be framed as such? The issue would have been of variable concern to this prominent Communist couple, in the era of Aragon and Elsa, Paul Eluard and Dominique, Edouard Pignon and Hélène Parmelin – or Picasso and Jacqueline: an *élite* of the left, studded with Russian *égerise russes*

Nadia's relationship with Moscow and Saint Petersburg after Léger's death is intriguing – and launched by the great retrospective in 1963: during the celebrated period of *détente* prior to the Manege scandal and Khrushchev's new repression of modern art. Works by Nadia Léger and Georges Bauquier, now her official consort, were shown in the company of their erstwhile *maître* at the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, with a preface by none other than Communist Party leader Maurice Thorez. Communism for Léger, declared Thorez, was the march of happiness.²⁶ One must think for the importance of this retrospective for the generation of Russian artists who were desperately looking towards the West for news and information – and of Nadia's proud links with her Suprematist past – and its continuation in the clandestine teachings of older generation artists in their ateliers. Greater knowledge in the West of the pre-*Paris-Moscou* subsistence underground of the revolutionary tradition now informs our knowledge of contemporary post-Soviet developments.

This perspective and an awareness of Nadia Léger's mobility – (prior, for example, to that of Maillol's model Dina Vierny, whose pioneering shows of early Kabakov and Bulatov were held in Paris in the early 1970s) should also inflect our analysis of her late 'Suprematist' work.

André Parinaud's account of her 'retroconversion' of 1959 is worth repeating for its poetic, mythmaking dimensions. Nadia in 1959 was 55 years old: bravo for this self-reinvention, and for dynamic – if decorative – work which has enjoyed little objective reassessment:

'Lorsque en 1959 Gagarine plonge dans le cosmos et traça les premiers signes d'une géométrie vivante des espaces cosmiques, Nadia ressortit de ses cartons les esquisses de son évolution première... cinquante ans après Malevitch, un cosmonaute illustre soudain un art qui avait illuminé la vie d'une jeune fille et qu'elle croyait à jamais enseveli dans le temps et les mémoires. C'était comme si les tableaux de Malévitch étaient projetés sur l'écran géant du ciel. Non, le suprématisme n'était pas mort, ni la géométrie de l'espace ! Un spoutnik le proclamait au monde entier. Alors Nadia, avec tendresse, avec passion, a revu chacun des tableaux qu'elle avait conçus au temps de Malevitch. Elle a retrouvé un cœur d'enfant et

²⁶Maurice Thorez in *Fernand Léger*, Pushkin Museum Moscow, January, 1963. see also Pierre Descargues, 'Léger en U.S.S.R.' *XX siècle*, December 1971, p.104

*cette étonnante lucidité qui conduit l'ame russe toujours aux extrêmes, pour retracer les signes, et fixer les couleurs d'un des plus grands moments de la peinture moderne...*²⁷

'Nadia Léger, evolution première' held in March, 1971, the Centre d'Art International, Boulevard Raspail, demonstrated Nadia's reemergence as an artist in her own right. Her work was also shown at the Galerie Pietra Milan and her tapestries and jewelry graced Paris's Espace Cardin the same year. Her early figurative and cubist works were exhibited, together with a suprematist-inspired *Protestation contre L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, 1923. She claimed that the large scale suprematist works were closely based on sketches from her period with Malevich in Smolensk. (Significantly these released her at last from a stylistic dependance on Fernand Léger). The cosmic element, so important for Malevich, was emphasised with titles such as *Explosion solaire* or *Direction vers le soleil...* and while this last canvas was carefully dated 1926-1968, Some early works rest undated - some bear her anachronistic 'Léger' signature with a variation of initials and scripts... *Vers la Terre* bears the proud signature 'N.KH. Léger 1922'.

Naivety? Confusion? Rather a commitment to making art – and decorative art in a stylish age – and a 1970s playfulness? Nadia could easily have lead a comfortable life with her husband Georges Bauquier, managing Léger's affairs and her supreme achievement: conceiving and building the Musée Fernand Léger at Biot with the architect André Svetchine (February 1957 to February 1960, inaugurated 1960, the State donation of Léger's work celebrated in 1967. From 1965-70 Léger's farm at Gisors in Normandy was transformed into the Ferme-Musée Fernand Léger and was extensively refurbished – another task that many a woman of her age would have found absorbing.

I enjoy Nadia Léger's personal engagement with the Malevich revival of the 1970s. This began, one could argue, at the Galerie Jean Chauvelin, Paris, which showed Malevich's manuscripts, Russian futurist books - and even projects for enamel suprematist brooches...²⁸ Nadia's own editions of suprematist sculptures and brooches in 18 carat gold or gilded copper - dated 1970 would appear in the opulent monograph that she conceived with Christophe Czwicklitzer in 1972: *Suprematisme de Nadia Khodossievitch-Léger*. And I enjoy the fact that she showed her monumental mosaic portraits of Karl Marx, Tolstoy, Lenin, Yuri Gagarin, Picasso or the ballerina Plissietzkaia in Malakoff and in the Soviet Union. Just as Léger moved from the world of the Rockefeller's to cloth cap communism

²⁷ André Parinaud, 'Le Suprématisme', *Nadia Léger, évolution première*, 1971.

²⁸ *Malevitch. Dessins*, Galerie Jean Chauvelin, Paris 1970.

with ease, so Nadia glided from the world of Pierre Cardin to that of the 'people' and their apparatchiks. Maurice Thorez and Jacques Duclos - have never looked so young or so attractive - so close to Che Guevara - as in Nadia's mosaics with their silk-screen 70s panache. The heroes of 'la France Stalinienne' of the 1970s are juxtaposed with a mosaic of 'La Republique Française; the realist Lenin is depicted with a suprematist décor. Nadia Léger collapsed time deliberately: she is surely allowed a sense of humour and satire. While these apparatchiks bear the heaviest moral responsibility for the promotion of a totalitarian ideology in a capitalist, increasingly Americanised France, Nadia Léger, as a Russian emigré, supported her man – and lived between two worlds – powerfully, creatively, efficiently.²⁹

NOTES

²⁹ See Christophe Czwicklitz, *Suprematisme de Nadia Khodossievitch-Léger*, Paris, April 1972; *Nadia Leger, Mosaïques Monumentales, portraits*, preface by André Verdet, (December 1971) Paris, Editions du Centre d'Art International, Paris, June 1972.