Mayakovsky Discovers New York City

BY RONALD MEYER

Portrait of Vladimir Mayakovsky by Diego Rivera (Moscow, 1956). Rivera’s inscription at the bottom of the drawing reads: “Mayakovsky as I remember him in Mexico.” All photographs in this essay appear courtesy of the Russian State Vladimir Mayakovsky Museum.

Two thousand eighteen marked the 125th anniversary of the birth of the Russian Futurist poet, playwright, and artist Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930). To celebrate the occasion, the Harriman Institute—in collaboration with the Russian State Vladimir Mayakovsky Museum (Moscow)—mounted an exhibition of photographs, drawings, and notebooks that told the story of the poet’s visit to New York City in 1925. On January 24, 2019, Alexei Lobov, director of the Mayakovsky Museum, gave a presentation at the Harriman about the exhibition, titled “Scenes from Mayakovsky’s Discovery of America.” The following is a synopsis of his remarks.

Born in a small Georgian village, Mayakovsky was a professed urbanist who dreamed of traveling around the world. As he writes in his
“Conversation with a Tax Inspector about Poetry” (1926), “All poetry is a journey to the unknown”; furthermore, he states that travel is the source of all his work. Fittingly, his listing of travel expenses begins with his journey of the previous year to see “the lights of Broadway.”

His first attempt to visit the U.S., in 1923, does not meet with success, and he gets no further than western Europe. Two years later, while in Paris for the International Exposition, he takes advantage of an opportunity to come to the U.S. via Mexico—and sails first-class on a luxury ocean liner, stopping at Havana on the way. While waiting for his U.S. visa, Mayakovsky makes the acquaintance of the artist Diego Rivera, and the two become fast friends. In fact, Rivera would participate in the Moscow celebrations of the 10th anniversary of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Eventually Mayakovsky makes his way to Laredo, a city on the Texas/Mexico border, to be interviewed for his visa. The poet speaks no English, so he endeavors to answer the agent’s questions in his incomprehensible French. In the end, they locate a furniture dealer who speaks Russian, with whose assistance the poet receives his visa after paying a $500 security bond.

Mayakovsky is struck by the contrast of speeding trains and segregated railway stations: “Stone stations, divided into two: half for us whites, and the other half for the blacks, ‘For Negroes,’ with its own wooden seats and its own ticket office.” He arrives in New York City at Grand Central Station, whose “appearance, situation in the physical landscape, and its intimations of urbanism, is one of the most sublime sights in all the world.”

On his first day in New York City Mayakovsky calls on his old friend David Burliuk, often referred to as the father of Russian Futurism, who had emigrated to America a few years earlier. The Mayakovsky Museum has particularly good holdings of Burliuk’s drawings, several of which appear in the exhibition, beginning with the drawing of Mayakovsky wearing his infamous striped jacket and cradling the Futurist Manifesto (spelled out in English letters on the cover), against the background of patriarchal Moscow with its golden cupolas. Burliuk had also published an illustrated

“Diego Rivera met me at the train station. So my first encounter in Mexico City was with its art.”
—My Discovery of America
collection of Mayakovsky’s poems, which he ironically titled *The Sun Visits Mayakovsky*, since only Alexander Pushkin held the status of “sun” among Russian poets, but in their manifesto the Russian Futurists had thrown him overboard from the ship of modernity.

Mayakovsky settles in one of Manhattan’s most expensive neighborhoods and calls 1 Fifth Avenue home. The building in which Mayakovsky lived has not survived, but we do have Burliuk’s sketch of it—with the Washington Square Arch in the foreground.

During his three-month stay in the United States, despite his busy schedule and public appearances in New York and five other major cities, Mayakovsky writes 22 poems, the most famous of which is undoubtedly “Brooklyn Bridge,” which records the poet’s awe before this great wonder of the modern world:

As a madman
enters a church
or retreats
to a monastery,
pure and austere,
so I,
in the haze
of evening
humbly approach
the Brooklyn Bridge.

The Woolworth Building, the tallest building in the world from 1913 to 1930, and located on Broadway, Mayakovsky’s favorite Manhattan street, provides the backdrop for the poem “The Young Lady and the Woolworth.” In the poem the narrator observes a 17-year-old woman sharpen a Gillette razor and simulate a demonstration on her pristine upper lip. The poet is horrified at this outrage committed by the capitalist system and proceeds to try to persuade her, in his heavily accented English, to abandon this work; she does not understand a word and mistakes the sounds he emits and his gestures for a declaration of love.

Mayakovsky was impressed by all that New York had to offer in the way of a modern, urban center: jazz; skyscrapers; the lights of Broadway; the subway (Moscow would not open its first stations until 1933); and women driving automobiles. In fact, so impressed was he by the latter, that he saw to it that his muse, Lili Brik, would be one of the first women to drive an automobile in Moscow. But he was not uncritical of New York City—a number of passages in *My Discovery of America* are little more than anticapitalist screed.

Perhaps the best-known photo from Mayakovsky’s New York trip shows him posing with the Flatiron Building in the background. Other famous photographs of Russia’s fore-
most poet capture him standing on the platform of an elevated subway, which image appears on the cover of 50 Years of Mayakovsky, 1911–1961, and the shots taken at Rockaway Beach.

In his “Lectures on the Art and Culture of Soviet Russia” in New York and elsewhere Mayakovsky would appear before audiences of 2,000 and more. Even with his lack of English he was generally well received, since his audience could appreciate the energy of his dramatic readings. Not all reviews were positive, however. Chicago’s Russian Herald newspaper praised the reading of his own poetry, but deplored the event as little more than propaganda for Soviet development and the glories of Soviet life. In addition, Mayakovsky presided over a number of smaller events in upstate New York and in and around the city—a photograph survives from a meeting of the Russian literary group Hammer and Sickle.

Until fairly recently this summary would have taken care of the bare outlines of Mayakovsky’s American visit. Scholars have long known that the poet had a love affair in New York and that a child was born nine months later. The identity of Mayakovsky’s love led to a guessing game that continued for decades, until Patricia Thompson, a.k.a. Elena Vladimirovna Mayakovskaya, professor of philosophy and women’s studies at Lehman College, came forward and revealed that she was the daughter of Mayakovsky and Elly Jones, a young Russian émigré whom the poet met at a party.

Elly Jones (Elizabeth Petrovna Jones) had been born in Russian Bashkiria into a family of German Mennonites. Her father was a wealthy landowner, and the children had been well educated and brought up speaking both German and Russian. Seventeen-year-old Elly worked as a volunteer for the American Relief Administration (ARA), which was in Russia to help feed the hungry during the famine. An invitation from ARA and marriage in Moscow to a British citizen allowed Elly to leave the USSR. At the time of her meeting with Mayakovsky she was a married British citizen, working as a model in New York on a guest visa. Consequently, their affair, which ended with Mayakovsky’s departure for Russia, had to be kept secret.

One photograph, from September 6, 1925, captures Elly posing on Buriuk’s roof. The scene resulted in drawings by both Buriuk and Mayakovksy. Mayakovsky and Elly became inseparable from their very first meeting, and Thompson’s archive holds a number of photographs from

“Stormy mornings are the best in New York—not a single superfluous person. Just the workers of the great army of laborers in the city of 10 million inhabitants.”
—My Discovery of America

FROM TOP: The Elevated Subway; photograph by A. Alland. Meeting with the Russian literary group Hammer and Sickle at Dillo’s Restaurant; photograph by A. Slawkoff. Patricia Thompson, Mayakovsky’s daughter.
Mayakovsky sailed back to Russia from New York harbor on October 28, 1925. After seeing him off, Elly returned home to find her bed completely covered in forget-me-nots.

A few years later, in 1928, Elly and Patricia were vacationing in Nice, and Mayakovsky, who happened to be in Paris at the time, met his daughter for the first and only time. In his letter to the “two Ellies,” dated October 27, 1928, Mayakovsky writes from Paris that he hopes to visit them in Nice again, for at least a week, but the trip never materialized. A photograph of the two Ellies was found in Mayakovsky’s apartment on his death.

Thompson had promised to reveal her father’s identity only after her mother’s death and only after becoming established in her own career—so as not to be seen as riding on her famous father’s coattails. In 1993

Thompson published Mayakovsky in Manhattan: A Love Story, based on her mother’s unpublished memoirs, letters, and taped conversations. She subsequently began her collaboration with the Mayakovsky Museum in Moscow, to which she donated the bulk of her archive, allowing the museum to mount a new permanent exhibition called Daughter. In addition, the Mayakovsky museum issued a lavishly illustrated edition of Thompson’s Mayakovsky in Manhattan.

At the time of Thompson’s death in 2016, the museum was planning an exhibition to celebrate her 90th birthday.

—I miss you terribly. I dream of coming to visit you at least for a week. . . . I kiss all eight of your paws. Your Vl. 26.X.28”

Portrait of Elly Jones by David Burliuk. © Roger Thompson.