

SYNOPSIS:

Suprematism, the invention of Russian artist **Kazimir Malevich**, was one of the earliest and most radical developments in abstract art. Its name derived from Malevich's belief that Suprematist art would be superior to all the art of the past, and that it would lead to the "supremacy of pure feeling or perception in the pictorial arts." Heavily influenced by avant-garde poets, and an emerging movement in literary criticism, Malevich derived his interest in flouting the rules of language, in defying reason. He believed that there were only delicate links between words or signs and the objects they denote, and from this he saw the possibilities for a totally abstract art. And just as the poets and literary critics were interested in what constituted literature, Malevich came to be intrigued by the search for art's barest essentials. It was a radical and experimental project which at times came close to a strange mysticism. Although the Communist authorities later attacked the movement, its influence was pervasive in Russia in the early 1920s, and it was important in shaping **Constructivism**, just as it has been in inspiring abstract art to this day.

Key Ideas / Information

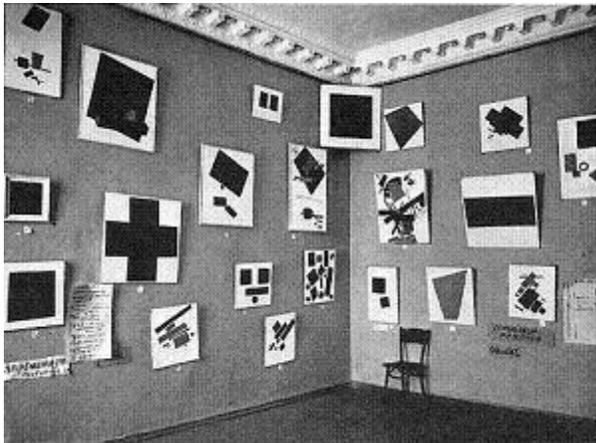
- The Suprematists' interest in abstraction was fired by a search for the 'zero degree' of painting, the point beyond which the medium could not go without ceasing to be art. This encouraged the use of very simple motifs, since they best articulated the shape and flat surface of the canvases on which they were painted. (Ultimately, the square, circle, and cross became the group's favorite motifs.) It also encouraged many Suprematists to emphasize the surface texture of the paint on canvas, this texture being another essential quality of the medium of painting.
- Though much Suprematist art can seem highly austere and serious, there was a strong tone of absurdism running through the movement. One of Malevich's initial inspirations for the movement was *zaum*, or transrational poetry, of some of his

- contemporaries, something which led him to the idea of '*zaum* painting'.
- The Russian Formalists, an important and highly influential group of literary critics, who were Malevich's contemporaries, were opposed to the idea that language is a simple, transparent vehicle for communication. They pointed out that words weren't so easily linked to the objects they denoted. This fostered the idea that art could serve to make the world fresh and strange, art could make us look at the world in new ways. Suprematist abstract painting was aimed at doing much the same, by removing the real world entirely and leaving the viewer to contemplate what kind of picture of the world is offered by, for instance, a black square.

BEGINNINGS

Suprematism was an art movement founded in Russia during the First World War. The first hints of it emerged in background and costume sketches that **Kazimir Malevich** designed in 1913 for *Victory Over the Sun*, a **Futurist** opera performed in St. Petersburg. While the drawings still have a clear relationship to Cubo-Futurism (a Russian art movement in which Malevich was prominently involved), the simple shapes that provide a visual foundation for Suprematism appear repeatedly. Rich color is also discarded in favor of black and white, which Malevich later used as a metaphor for creation in his writings. Of particular importance is the black square, which became the centerpiece of his new movement.

In 1915, Kseniya Boguslavskaya, Ivan Klyun, Mikhail Menkov, Ivan Puni and Olga Rozanova joined with Kazimir Malevich to form a Suprematist group. Together, they unveiled their new work to the public at *0.10, The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings*. Their work feature an array of geometric shapes suspended above a white or light-colored background. The variety of shapes, sizes and angles creates a sense of depth in these compositions, making the squares, circles and rectangles appear to be moving in space.



CONCEPTS AND STYLES

Suprematist painting abandoned realism, which Malevich considered a distraction from the transcendental experience that the art was meant to evoke. Suprematism can be seen as the logical conclusion of **Futurism's** interest in movement and **Cubism's** reduced forms and multiple perspectives. The square, which Malevich called "the face of a new art,"

represented the birth of his new movement, becoming a figurehead to which critics and others artists rallied in support of the new style. But many others accused it of nihilism: the artist and critic Alexandre Benois attacked it as a "sermon of nothingness and destruction."

Malevich published a manifesto to coincide with the 1915 exhibition, called *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism in Art*. He claimed to have passed beyond the boundaries of reality into a new awareness. With this, the motifs in his paintings narrowed to include only the circle, square and rectangle. Critics have sometimes interpreted these motifs as references to mystical ideas, and some of Malevich's more florid pronouncements seem to offer support for this: of his use of the circle, he said, "I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things"; and he talked of the black square as "a living, royal infant." But, in fact, Malevich scorned symbolism: for him, the motifs were only building blocks, the most fundamental elements in painting, or, as he put it, "the zero of form."

Malevich divided the progression of Suprematism into three stages: "black", "colored", and "white". The black phase marked the beginnings of the movement, and the 'zero degree' of painting, as exemplified by *Black Square*. The colored stage, sometimes referred to as Dynamic Suprematism, focused on the use of color and shape to create the sensation of movement in space. This was pursued in depth by **Ilya Chasnik**, **Gustav Klutssis**, **El Lissitzky** and **Alexander Rodchenko**; El Lissitsky was particularly influenced by Malevich and developed his own personal style of Suprematism, which he called Proun. The culmination of Suprematism can be seen in the white stage, exhibited by Malevich during the *Tenth State Exhibition: Non-objective Creation and Suprematism in 1919*. His masterpiece, *White on White*, dispensed with form entirely, representing only "the idea." This work provoked responses from other artists that led to new ventures, such as Alexander Rodchenko's **Constructivist** exploration of the roles of specific materials in his *Black on Black* series.

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

As time went on, the movement's spiritual undertones increasingly defined it, and although these put it in jeopardy following the Russian Revolution of 1917, the tolerant attitude of the early Communists ensured that its influence continued. By the late 1920s, however, attitudes had changed, and the movement lost much of its popularity at home, especially after being condemned by the Stalinists. Between 1919 and 1927, Malevich stopped painting altogether to devote himself to his theoretical writings, and following a long hiatus, he even returned to representational painting.

Although Malevich's esoteric concepts prevented the movement itself from gaining widespread appeal, their implications have been far-reaching in the realm of abstract art. Indeed, his desire to create a transcendental art, one that can help viewers reach a higher understanding, is an aspiration one can trace in much later abstract art. It is present in the ideas **Wassily Kandinsky** outlines in his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, as well as the Theosophy-inspired geometric abstraction of **Piet Mondrian**.

The introduction of Suprematism to the West during a 1927 Berlin exhibition was well-received, sparking interest throughout Europe and the United States. Alfred Barr later brought several of Malevich's Suprematist works to the **Museum of Modern Art** in New York, where they were included in *Cubism and Abstract Art*, a groundbreaking exhibition that greatly influenced American modernism. Lissitzky played a key role in the promotion of Suprematism outside of Russia, having previously exhibited 'Proun' works that left a deep impression on **Laszlo Moholy-Nagy**, and possibly even Kandinsky. El Lissitzky later used Suprematist forms and concepts to great effect in graphic design and architecture, which helped to shape the Constructionist movement. Today, these echoes are still seen in contemporary architecture, most famously in the recent "Suprematist" work of **Zaha Hadid**.

Quotes

"Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, madonnas and shameless Venuses, shall we witness a work of pure, living art."
-Kazimir Malevich on Suprematism

"Suprematism has advanced the ultimate tip of the visual pyramid of perspective into infinity.... We see that Suprematism has swept away from the plane the illusions of two-dimensional planimetric space, the illusions of three-dimensional perspective space, and has created the ultimate illusion of irrational space, with its infinite extensibility into the background and foreground."

-El Lissitzky

I say to all: reject love, reject aestheticism, reject the trunks of wisdom, for in the new culture your wisdom is laughable and insignificant. I have untied the knot of wisdom and set free the consciousness of colour! Remove from yourselves quickly the hardened skin of centuries, so that you can catch up with us more easily. I have overcome the impossible and formed gulfs with my breathing. You are in the nets of the horizon, like fish! We, the Suprematists, throw open the way to you. Hurry! For tomorrow you will not recognize us.

-Kazimir Malevich



**Content written by:
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Key Artists:



Kazimir Malevich

Kazimir Malevich was a Russian modernist painter who founded Suprematism. His mature works feature simple squares, rectangles, and other geometric shapes on blank grounds.



Ilya Chashnik

Ilya Grigorevich Chashnik was a suprematist artist, a pupil of Kazimir Malevich and a founding member of the UNOVIS school.



El Lissitzky

El Lissitzky was a Russian avant-garde painter, photographer, architect and designer. Along with his mentor Kazimir Malevich, Lissitzky founded Suprematism. His art often employed the use of clean lines and simple geometric forms, and expressed a fascination with Jewish culture. Lissitzky was also a major influence on the Bauhaus school of artists and Constructivism.



Alexander Rodchenko

Alexander Rodchenko was a Russian artist, sculptor, photographer and graphic designer. He helped found constructivism and Russian design; he was married to the artist Varvara Stepanova.



Olga Rozanova

Olga Vladimirovna Rozanova was a Russian avant-garde artist in the styles of Suprematist, Neo-Primitivist, and Cubo-Futurist.



Nikolai Suetin

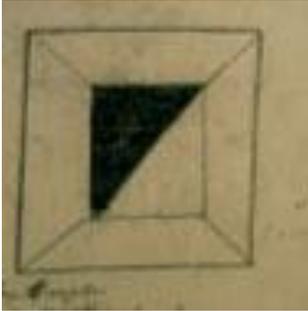
Nikolai Suetin was a Russian Suprematist artist. He worked as a graphic artist, a designer, and a ceramics painter.



Vera Yermolayeva

Vera Yermolayeva was a Russian painter, printmaker and illustrator. She and Kazimir Malevich created UNOVIS in Vitebsk in early 1920, with the aim of establishing new art as the purveyor of new life.

Major Works:



Title: Study for Decor of Victory Over the Sun

Artist: Kazimir Malevich

Description: Malevich collaborated with Alexei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Matiushin on the decor for the Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*. This sketch for the backdrop of Act 2, Scene 5, foreshadows the development of Suprematism in its use of a geometric motif, though it doesn't prefigure any particular Suprematist piece. Without the use of color or shading, the square moves beyond a sense of Cubist space with its confrontational flatness. The black and white in this composition, which can signify presence from absence (creation), hints again at the birth of Malevich's new movement. The opera was a particularly appropriate place for the debut of Malevich's ideas, since the Futurist movement that inspired it was also important in shaping Suprematism. Just as Futurism aimed at a total renewal of Russian culture, so Suprematism claimed to supersede all art movement that had gone before it. Malevich's designs for the opera marked a major break with theatrical convention, since they were neither decorative nor did they illustrate a scene such as a landscape or a room. Their strange darkness also chimed with Mikhail Matiushin's belief that the opera was about "Victory, over the old accepted concept of the beautiful sun."

Year: 1913

Materials: Pencil on paper

Collection: State Theatre Museum, St. Petersburg



Title: Black Square

Artist: Kazimir Malevich

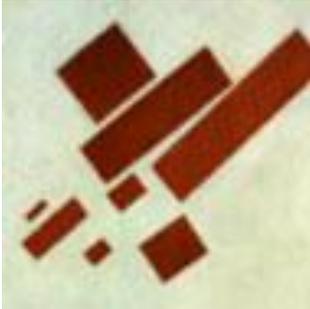
Description: Once described as Malevich's "living, royal infant," the *Black Square* has been seen as a major landmark in the history of abstract art, a point of both beginning and ending. Malevich would paint four versions of it between 1915 and the early 1930s, and it is said that the last version was carried behind his coffin during his funeral. Pared down from a design he painted for the *Victory Over the Sun*, this first version depicts a purely black square against a thin border of white, further obscuring any sense of normal space or perspective. At the *0.10* exhibition in 1915, Malevich emphasized its status by

hanging it across the corner of a room, emulating the Russian tradition for the placement of religious icons.

Year: c. 1915

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



Title: Suprematist Painting, Eight Red Rectangles

Artist: Kazimir Malevich

Description: The three levels of Suprematism were described by Malevich as black, colored and white. *Eight Red Rectangles* is an example of the second, more dynamic phase, in which primary colors began to be used. The composition is somewhat ambiguous, since while on the one hand the rectangles can be read as floating in space, as if they were suspended on the wall, they can also be read as objects seen from above. Malevich appears to have read them in the latter way, since at one time he was fascinated by aerial photography. Indeed he later criticized this more dynamic phase of his Suprematist movement as 'aerial Suprematism', since its compositions tended to echo pictures of the earth taken from the skies, and in this sense departed from his ambitions for a totally abstract, non-objective art. The uneven spacing and slight tilt of the juxtaposed shapes in *Eight Red Rectangles*, as well as the subtly different tones of red, infuse the composition with energy, allowing Malevich to experiment with his concept of "infinite" space.

Year: 1915

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York



Title: Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge

Artist: El Lissitzky

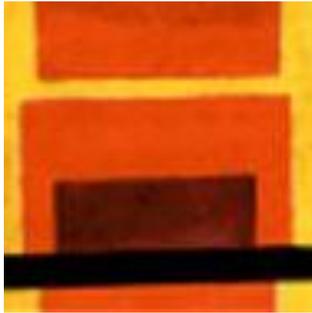
Description: This lithograph is one of El Lissitzky's most well-known works from his Suprematist period. It uses shape, positioning and color in keeping with the movement's principles, especially the "color" phase of the movement. The use of lettering and the pointillist shading, however, shows the evolution of his personal style. More interestingly, the poster reveals propagandistic intentions in its representation of the struggle between

the revolutionary "reds" and the conservative "whites" in Russia. El Lissitzky described his own brand of Suprematism as Prounism, a derivation of 'proekt Unovisa' ('project for Unovis'), Unovis being the group that Malevich formed in Vitebsk in 1919, and which drew Lissitzky into the fold of the Suprematists.

Year: 1919-20

Materials: Stedelijk Van Abbe-Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands

Collection: Stedelijk Van Abbe-Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands



Title: Color Painting (Non-Objective Composition)

Artist: Olga Rozanova

Description: Rozanova was one of the first to apply her own personal interpretation to Suprematism. Her interest in fabrics led her to concentrate on textural effects, occasionally straying from the primary palette to use softer, more feminine colors. A fine colorist, Rozanova's ability to employ delicate tonal contrasts was a prelude to the style of Mark Rothko, as shown in the composition of *Color Painting*.

Year: 1917

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



Title: White Square on White

Artist: Kazimir Malevich

Description: Malevich repeatedly referred to "the white" as a representation of the transcendent state reached through Suprematism. This painting can be seen as the final, complete stage of his "transformation in the zero of form," since form has almost literally been reduced to nothing. The pure white of the canvas has negated any sense of traditional perspective, leaving the viewer to contemplate its "infinite" space. The picture is thus bled of color, the pure white making it easier to recognize the signs of the artist's work in the rich paint texture of the white square, texture being one of the basic qualities of painting as the Suprematists saw it. Painted some time after the Russian Revolution of 1917, one might read the *White Square* as an expression of Malevich's hopes for the creation of a new world under Communism, a world that might lead to spiritual, as well as material, freedom.

Year: 1917-18

Materials: Oil on canvas

Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York