



QUICK VIEW:

Synopsis

Kazimir Malevich was a Russian artist of Ukrainian birth, whose career coincided with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and its social and cultural aftermath. Malevich was the founder of the artistic and philosophical school of Suprematism, and his ideas about forms and meaning in art would eventually form the theoretical underpinnings of non-objective, or abstract, art making. Malevich worked in a variety of styles, but his most important and famous works concentrated on the exploration of pure geometric forms (squares, triangles, and circles) and their relationships to each other and within the pictorial space. Because of his contacts in the West, Malevich was able to transmit his ideas about painting to his fellow artists in Europe and the U.S., thus profoundly influencing the evolution of non-representational art in both the Eastern and Western traditions.

Key Ideas

- Malevich worked in a variety of styles, from Impressionism to Cubo-Futurism, arriving eventually at Suprematism - his own unique philosophy of painting and art perception.
- Malevich was a prolific writer. His treatises on philosophy of art address a broad spectrum of theoretical problems and laid the conceptual basis for non-objective art both in Europe and the United States.
- Malevich conceived of an independent comprehensive abstract art practice before its definitive emergence in the United States. His stress on the independence of geometric form influenced many generations of abstract artists in the West, especially Ad Reinhardt.

DETAILED VIEW:

Childhood

Malevich was born in Ukraine to parents of Polish origin, who moved continuously within the Russian Empire in search of work. His father took jobs in a sugar factory and in railway construction, where young Kazimir was also employed in his early teenage years. Without any particular encouragement from his family, Malevich started to draw around the age of twelve. With his mind set firmly on an artistic career, Malevich attended a number of art schools in his youth, starting at the Kiev School of Art in 1895.

Early Training

In 1904 Malevich moved to Moscow to attend the Stroganov School of Art. He also took private classes from Ivan Rerberg, an eminent art instructor. Malevich continued his training in the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, where such artists as Leonid Pasternak and Konstantin Korovin taught him Impressionist and Post-Impressionist techniques of painting. Malevich's early work was largely executed in a Post-Impressionist mode, however the influence of Symbolism and Art Nouveau on his early development was just as significant.



A shift toward decidedly more avant-garde aesthetics occurred in Malevich's work around 1907, when he became acquainted with such artists as Wassily Kandinsky, David Burlyuk, and Mikhail Larionov. In 1910, Larionov invited Malevich to join his exhibition collective named the Jack of Diamonds. Malevich also held memberships in the artistic groups Donkey's Tail and Target, which focused their attention on Primitivist, Cubist, and Futurist philosophies of art. After quarreling with Larionov, Malevich took on a leading role in the association of the Futurist artists based in Saint-Petersburg, known as the Youth Union (*Soyuz Molodezhi*).

Most of the Malevich's works from this period concentrated on scenes of provincial peasant life. Although influenced by Cézanne and the Fauves, these works were Malevich's independent interpretations: the figures in the artworks were constructed from conical and cylindrical forms in strong primary colors, a compositional system Malevich adopted and evolved from the tradition of Byzantine and Russian icon painting. From

1912 to 1913, Malevich mostly worked in a Cubo-Futurist style, combining the essential elements of Synthetic Cubism and Italian Futurism, resulting in a dynamic geometric deconstruction of figures in space.

By 1915 Malevich abandoned figurative elements in his painting altogether and turned to pure abstraction through the depiction of elementary geometric forms on a canvas free from all iconographic reference. He called his new art Suprematist, literally the supreme approach that rose above the tradition of signification and rational understanding of pictorial forms. For Malevich, Suprematism was concerned purely with feeling, and not logical understanding. He laid out the core concepts of his theory in the pamphlet *Ot Kubizma i Futurizma k Suprematizmu* ("From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism"), which was published on the occasion of the 0.10 avant-garde exhibition in Saint-Petersburg where the now iconic *Black Square* was first shown.

The Black Square (1915) was followed by *The Black Circle* (1915) and *The Black Cross* (c.1920-23). Malevich himself described these paintings as "new icons," holy images for the new aesthetics of abstract art. The *Black* series was followed by the *White on White* paintings, which further explored the relationship of pure forms to unobstructed space, this time without the stark contrasts of black and white.

Late Period and Death

The October Revolution of 1917 opened a new chapter for Malevich. In 1918 he joined the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment as an employee of its Fine Arts Department, known as IZO. The new agency was to administer museums and to oversee art education in the new Soviet Republic. Malevich also taught at the Free Art Studios (SVOMAS) in Moscow, instructing his students to abandon the bourgeois aesthetics of representation and to venture instead into the world of radical abstraction. That same year, Malevich designed the decorations for a performance of Vladimir Mayakovsky's *Misteriya-Buffa*, which marked the first anniversary celebration of the Communist Revolution.

In 1919 Malevich completed the manuscript of his new book *O Novykh Sistemakh v Iskusstve* (*On New Systems in Art*) in which he attempted to apply the theoretical principles of Suprematism to the new state order, encouraging the deployment of avant-garde art in service to the state and its people. Later that year, however, Malevich left the capital for the town of Vitebsk, where he was invited to join the faculty of the local art school directed by Marc Chagall. When Chagall left Vitebsk for Paris, Malevich remained as the influential leader of the Vitebsk school. There he organized students into a group under the name of UNOVIS, an abbreviation, which could be translated as Affirmers of New Art. No longer focused on painting proper, the UNOVIS group, especially after its move to Petrograd in 1922, designed propagandistic posters, textile patterns, china, signposts and street decorations, reminiscent of the activities undertaken at the Bauhaus school in the German Weimar Republic.

Malevich continued to develop his Suprematist ideas in a series of architectural models of Utopian towns called *Architectona*. These maquettes were composed of rectangular and cubic shapes arranged to enhance their formal qualities and aesthetic potential. Malevich

was allowed to take these models to exhibitions in Poland and Germany, where they sparked critical interest from local artists and intellectuals. Malevich left several *Architectona* models, as well as theoretical texts, paintings, and drawings in Germany after his hasty departure for Russia. Thus his ideas were effectively exported to the West, where the avant-garde discourse would incorporate Malevich's theoretical perspectives on abstraction. In the Soviet Russia, however, a different cultural paradigm was set in motion. The artistic flourish of the 1920s was curtailed by the advent of state-sponsored Social Realist art, which eventually came to suppress all other artistic styles.



Malevich and his work were doomed to descend into obscurity in such belligerently conservative socio-cultural circumstances. In 1932, a major state-endorsed exhibition commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution was held in Moscow and Leningrad (former Petrograd, and Saint-Petersburg before that). Malevich was included, only now his paintings were accompanied by pejorative slogans, labeled as essentially "degenerate" and anti-Soviet. Barred from state schools and exhibition venues, in his late years the artist returned to old motifs of peasant and genre scenes, while also executing a number of portraits of friends and family. He died of cancer in Leningrad in 1935 and was buried in a coffin of his own design, with the image of the Black Square placed appropriately on its lid.

Legacy

Kazimir Malevich was one of the first artists who completely abandoned representational art in favor of entirely abstract compositions. Besides producing abstract images, Malevich developed a comprehensive theory of non-objective painting that remained influential long after his death. Malevich's main input into the evolution of modern art consisted of establishing basic geometric forms, abstract by definition, as independent and meaningfully valid constituents of the pictorial composition. The conceptual backing of this position found in Malevich's text also tied the emerging artistic movement to classic philosophy, citing the works of Plato and Immanuel Kant.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Below are Kazimir Malevich's major influences, and the people and ideas that he influenced in turn.

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 Paul Cézanne	 Wassily Kandinsky	 Cubism
 Pablo Picasso	 Mikhail Larionov	 Expressionism
 Henri Matisse		 Byzantine Art
 El Lissitzky		 Futurism

INFLUENCES
ON ARTIST



Kazimir (Severinovich) Malevich

Years Worked: 1890 – 1935

INFLUENCED
BY ARTIST

ARTISTS	CRITICS/FRIENDS	MOVEMENTS
 El Lissitzky  Wassily Kandinsky  Marcel Duchamp  Paul Klee  Ad Reinhardt	 Mikhail Larionov	 Constructivism  Abstract Expressionism  Minimalism  Pop Art  Conceptual Art

Quotes

"To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth."

"Academic naturalism, the naturalism of the Impressionists, Cézanneism, Cubism, etc., all these, in a way, are nothing more than dialectic methods which, as such, in no sense determine the true value of an art work."

"Feeling is the determining factor ... and thus art arrives at non-objective representation through Suprematism."

"No more 'likenesses of reality,' no idealistic images, nothing but a desert!"

"Suprematism is the rediscovery of pure art which, in the course of time, had become obscured by the accumulation of "things"."

"The black square on the white field was the first form in which nonobjective feeling came to be expressed. The square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling."



Content written by:

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Major Works:



The Reaper, Kazimir (Severinovich) Malevich, 1912-1913, The Fine Arts Museum, Nizhnij Novgorod, Russia.

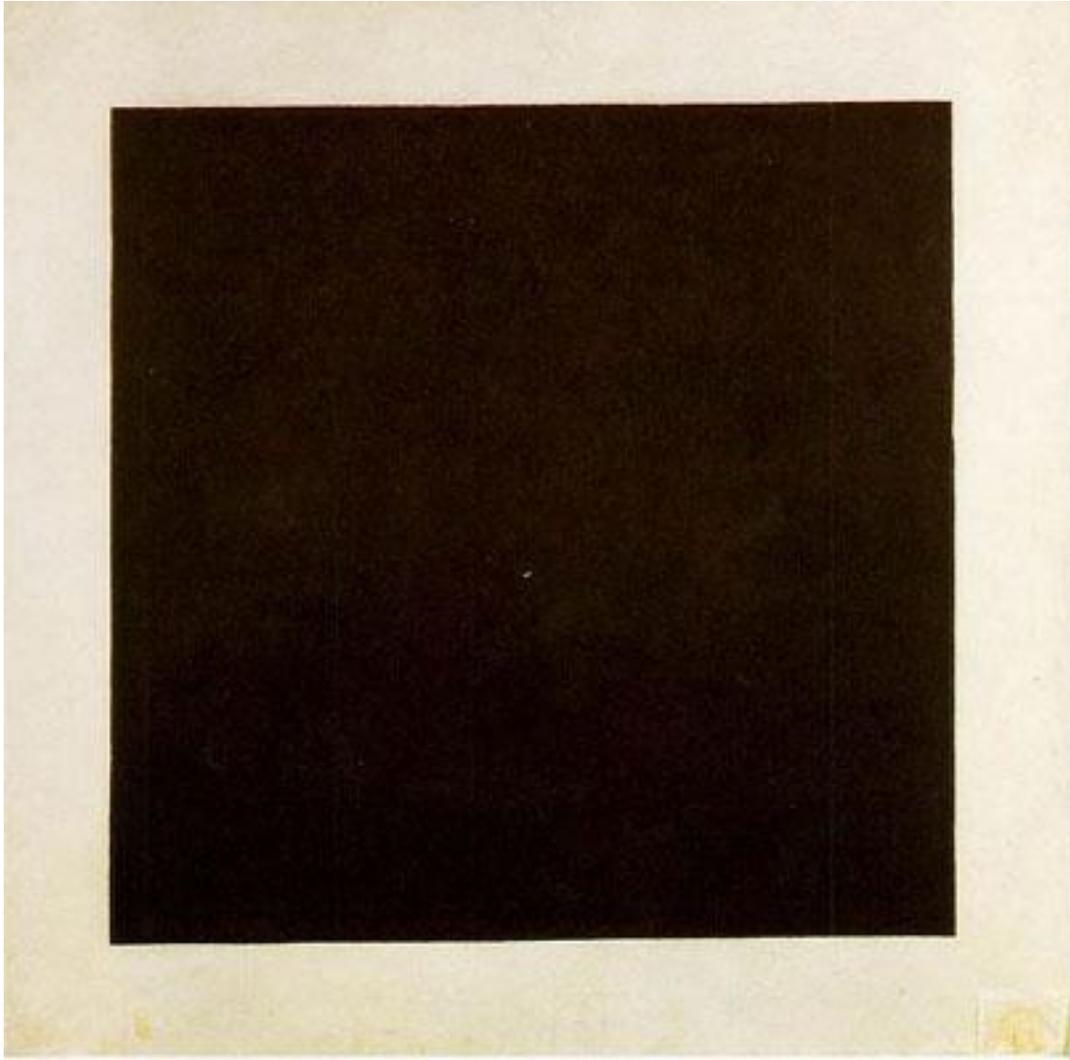
Oil on canvas

In *The Reaper* Malevich explored the human figure through a pictorial vocabulary reminiscent of Fernand Léger. The body and the dress of the peasant are rendered in conical and cylindrical forms adopted by Malevich from the Cubist school. The vibrant palette of the painting is unabashedly Futuristic, indicating Malevich's exposure to the dominating artistic styles of his time. The peasant theme is reinterpreted from the traditional folk motif, known as Lubok, which was in vogue with the Russian avant-garde milieu. While still clearly figurative, this composition anticipates the move toward abstraction by the employment of abbreviated and stylized forms.



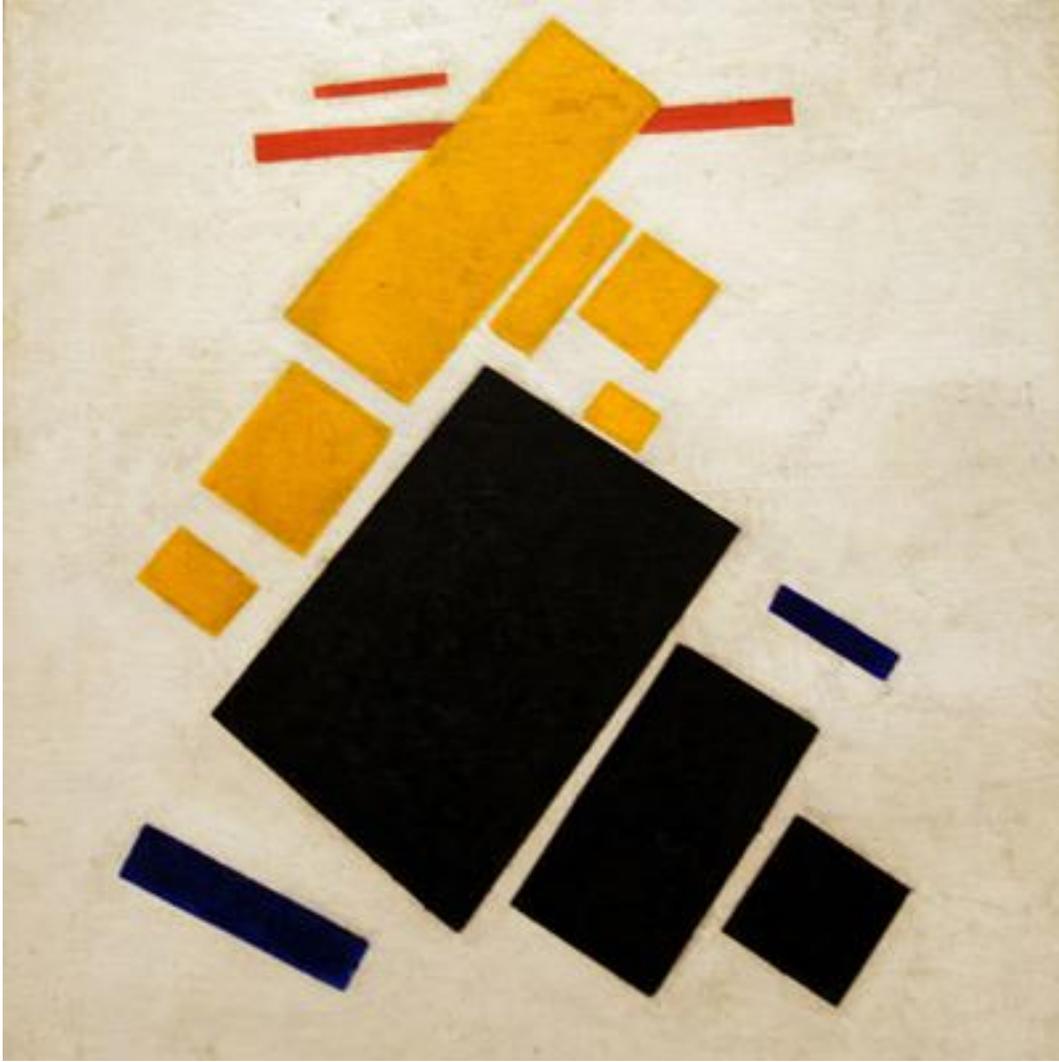
Woman With Pails: Dynamic Arrangement, Kazimir (Severinovich) Malevich, 1912-1913, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
Oil on canvas

In this composition Malevich moved decisively toward abstraction by dissecting the figure and picture plane into a variety of interlocking geometric shapes. The figure is still identifiable, as are the pails that she carries; Malevich has not yet abandoned representation entirely. The general palette is comprised of cool colors dominated by blues and grays, though the accents of red, yellow, and ochre add to the visual dynamic of the composition. The few identifiably figurative elements, such as the figure's hand, seem to be lost inside the whirlpool of completely abstracted forms that structure the canvas.



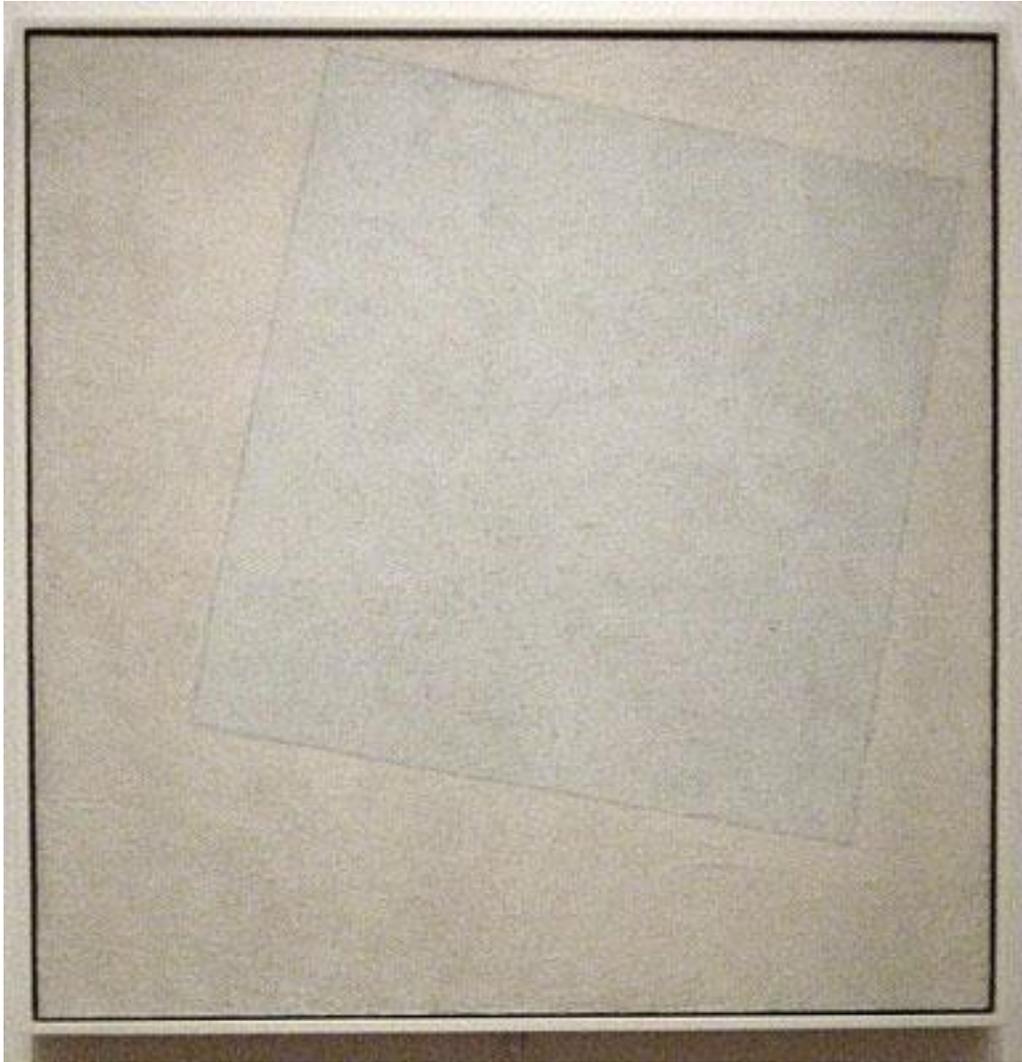
Black Square, Kazimir (Severinovich) Malevich, 1915, The Russian Museum, Saint-Petersburg, Russia.
Oil on canvas

The iconic *Black Square* was shown by Malevich in the 0.10 exhibition in Petrograd in 1915. This piece epitomized the theoretical principles of Suprematism developed by Malevich in *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*. The purely abstract shape of the square is the single pictorial element in the composition. According to Malevich, the perception of such forms should always be free of logic and reason, for the absolute truth can only be realized through pure feeling. *Black Square* was to become the new holy image for non-representational art. Even at the exhibition it was hung in the corner where an Orthodox icon would be traditionally placed.



Airplane Flying, Kazimir (Severinovich) Malevich, 1915, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Oil on canvas

In *Airplane Flying* Malevich further explored the pictorial potential of pure abstraction. The rectangular and cubic shapes are arranged in a solid, architectural composition. The yellow contrasts starkly with the black, while the red and blue lines add dynamic visual accents to the canvas. The whiteness of the background remains unobtrusive to the interplay of shapes. Malevich believed that emotional engagement is required from the viewer in order to appreciate the composition, which constituted one of the key principles of his theory of Suprematism.



White on White, Kazimir (Severinovich) Malevich, 1918, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
Oil on canvas

In the *White on White* series, Malevich took his experiments with abstraction to a previously unexplored level. By minimizing coloristic effects, the artist put additional emphasis on abstract geometric formation and compositional structure. The slight change in tonality, however, distinguishes the abstract shape from the background of the canvas, and encourages close viewing. Once again, the artist is striving to portray the absolute by eliminating any unnecessary details that may hinder true feeling.



Complex Presentiment: Half-Figure in a Yellow Shirt, Kazimir (Severinovich) Malevich, 1928-1932, The Russian Museum, Saint-Petersburg, Russia.

Oil on canvas

In the late years of his life Malevich returned to exploring motifs prominent in his early work. This late painting could be compared to *The Reaper* (c.1912). The earlier example was obviously based on borrowed pictorial techniques (Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso). In the later example, however, it is clear that Malevich has arrived at his own unique style. The primary colors are luminously juxtaposed and are reminiscent of Suprematist rectangles and cubes floating on the canvas surface. The figure is constructed from cylindrical shapes, abstracted and abbreviated, yet clearly indicating body parts. By returning to an old subject at a time of oppression from the Soviet state, Malevich seems to be nostalgic for an earlier time when his career