

"The space must be a kind of showcase, a stage, on which the pictures make their appearance as actors in a drama (or comedy). It should not imitate a living space."

SYNOPSIS

Russian avant-garde artist El Lissitzky, made a career of utilizing art for social and political change. Although often highly abstract and theoretical, Lissitzky's work was able speak to the prevailing political discourse of his native Russia, and then the nascent Soviet Union. Following Kazimir Malevich in the Suprematist idiom, Lissitzky used color and basic shapes to make strong political statements. Lissitzky also challenged conventions concerning art, and his *Proun* series of two-dimensional Suprematist paintings sought to combine architecture and three-dimensional space with traditional, albeit abstract, two-dimensional imagery. A teacher for much of his career and ever an innovator, Lissitzky's work spanned the media of graphic design,

typography, photography, photomontage, book design, and architectural design. The work of this cerebral artist was a force of change, deeply influencing movements and related figures such as De Stijl and the Bauhaus.

KEY IDEAS

- Lissitzky believed that art and life could mesh and that the former could deeply affect the latter. He identified the graphic arts, particularly posters and books, and architecture as effective conduits for reaching the public. Consequently, his designs, whether for graphic productions or buildings, were often unfiltered political messages. Despite being comprised of rudimentary shapes and colors, a poster by Lissitzky could make a strong statement for political change and a building could evoke ideas of communality and egalitarianism.
- He declared that the Suprematist *Proun* series existed at "the station where one changes from painting to architecture." The paintings, which combined basic forms grouped together and featuring shifting axes, attempted to provide multiple perspectives of spatial amalgams despite their two-dimensional nature. Lissitzky reasoned that the future of the arts lay in their potential to be integrated. The fusion of drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, for instance, could be realized with his Prouns. In a sense, Lissitzky's Prouns may also be considered precursors on the one hand to modern abstract imagery and, on the other hand, acutely industrial modern architecture.
- Lissitzky's influence in the world of graphic design cannot be overstated. He utilized a pared-down palette of primary colors, black and white, text, and basic forms - shapes both real as well as invented geometric constructions - to tell stories, including traditional Jewish tales, and to make very powerful political statements.
- Architecture was Lissitzky's most favored form of artistic expression, yet he had little success realizing his designs, which

often bordered on the utopian and impossible. Dreaming of a non-hierarchical architecture unlike that of the emergent skyscraper culture of the capitalist West, Lissitzky's designs for "horizontal skyscrapers" remained forever in the realm of the imagined yet unrealized. For Lissitzky, the egalitarian ideal of Communism demanded such structures. They could serve as material evidence of the realization of such ideals.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Childhood

El Lissitzky was born Eleazar Markovich Lisitskii, in the town of Pochinok, a small, heavily Jewish-populated community in the western region of the former Russian Empire. Lissitzky spent much of his childhood in the town of Vitebsk (also **Marc Chagall's** hometown), followed by a ten-year stay with his grandparents in Smolensk, near the present-day Belarusian border, where he spent his secondary school years. A prodigious draughtsman even at age thirteen, Lissitzky was noticed by the local Jewish artist **Yehuda Pen**, who took the boy under his wing. Pen had founded School of Drawing and Painting in Vitebsk and taught many celebrated artists, including **Chagall**.

By the age of fifteen, Lissitzky had already begun his teaching career, instructing other aspiring young Jewish artists. In 1909 he was rejected admission to the St. Petersburg Art Academy, due to anti-Semitic laws in place under the Tsarist regime of Nicholas II, which did not necessarily exclude Jewish students from admission into state schools but did heavily regulate admission quotas. Following his rejection, Lissitzky traveled to Germany and enrolled in the Technische Hochschule (University of Technology) in the city of Darmstadt, where he studied architectural engineering.

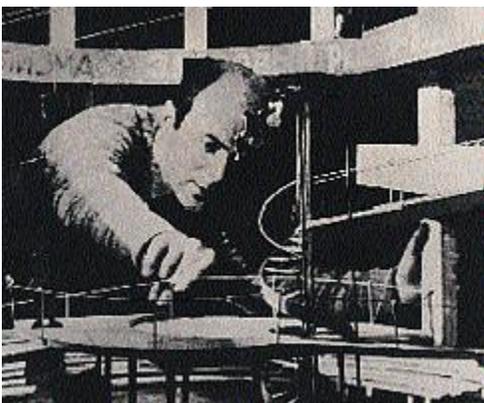
Early training

At the University, Lissitzky's program of study included free drawing; during these sessions the artist would draft from memory full-color illustrations of buildings and landscapes in Vitebsk and Smolensk as well as of cities he had visited while hiking through northern Italy in the summer of 1912. These early drawings, characterized by heavy outlines, rounded edges and a soft, almost watercolor-like palette, had

more in common stylistically to the work of the *Jugendstil* artists than with Lissitzky's later, mature, and characteristically spare architectural studies. Likewise, the artist's illustrative work for Yiddish children's books, which he began producing in the latter part of the decade, bear distinctive visual elements of the Art Nouveau style as well as the folk symbolism of Marc Chagall.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Lissitzky was forced to return to Russia, as were Chagall, Wassily Kandinsky and other Russian artists living abroad. In the years to follow, Lissitzky focused his efforts on studying Jewish culture and producing Jewish national art, something that had been largely absent in pre-Revolutionary Russia. By 1919, Chagall had been appointed Commissar of Arts in Vitebsk and started an art academy, where he hired Lissitzky to be an instructor of architecture and graphics. While at the academy, Lissitzky encountered Kazimir Malevich, another instructor, who had been developing a wholly abstract artistic style called "Suprematism." Suprematist works of art were comprised exclusively of squares, triangles and other flat geometric shapes. Malevich dubbed this new visual lexicon of art a "world of non-objectivity." Lissitzky's encounter with Malevich's new style proved to be the biggest turning point in the artist's own development.

Mature Period



By 1920 Lissitzky had begun devoting himself exclusively to Suprematism. While Lissitzky and Malevich had grown close and had even co-founded the Suprematist group UNOVIS (Exponents of the

New Art), Lissitzky's art was arguably less purely Suprematist due to its frequent use of political symbolism. Lissitzky's propaganda poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919), for instance (perhaps his most famous early work), was a direct response to the Russian civil war. His art also typically featured distinct architectural elements, in contrast to that of his mentor.

In an effort to achieve his own distinct style and emphasize that his art was truly original, Lissitzky created his own variations of the Suprematist style, which were abstract and overtly geometric compositions. He produced a series of paintings in this style, which he called "*Prounen*" or "*Proun*", the true meaning of which Lissitzky never revealed to anyone. One theory is that the word "*Proun*" translates to the Latin "pro" unovis, or an abbreviation for "proekt utverzhdenya novogo," meaning "design for the confirmation of the new." Meanwhile, Lissitzky's love for and knowledge of architecture played a significant role in his *Proun* paintings and lithographs, wherein he experimented with traditional architectonic forms, such as bridges and tall buildings, and placed them in a futuristic, weightless environment.

One of Lissitzky's greatest goals was to apply Suprematism to actual architecture in his native Russia, which he regarded as having relied too heavily on the classical European style. By that time - into the 1920s - the Suprematist movement had begun to fracture into two different camps: one that embraced the movement's utopian ideals and one that wanted it to achieve more utilitarian goals and be put to use for industrialization. Lissitzky's mentor, **Malevich**, was aligned with the first camp. One artist in the latter contingent was **Vladimir Tatlin**, who Lissitzky befriended when both men taught at Moscow's Higher State Art and Technical Workshops. While of a similar philosophy with members of the utilitarian group, Lissitzky generally remained independent in this divide.

As Suprematism dissolved, Lissitzky returned to Germany after nearly eight years away, arriving this time as an official cultural representative of Russia. While in Germany, he worked as a graphic designer, providing covers for various magazines and journals. At that point he was also producing some of his most notable designs for Soviet propaganda posters. Lissitzky's vision for a new architecture would also

realize new heights during this period in his artistic career.

To further celebrate what he perceived as the supremacy of the new Soviet state, Lissitzky developed plans for **Constructivism**, an international art movement designed to usher in a series of new city skylines. These new constructions Lissitzky envisioned were conceived in keeping with the theory behind his early Suprematist compositions: architecture was not bound by gravity. While his ultimate vision for building upward into the heavens was not based in pragmatism, as reflected in his two-dimensional architectonic drawings and paintings, his designs for Constructivist structures actually were meant to be realized: Lissitzky resolved to construct "horizontal skyscrapers," buildings that adhered to the horizontal plain. This resolve directly contradicted the growing American custom of the skyscraper.

Late Period

After nearly a year of traveling and working in Switzerland as well as visiting various architects and artists in Vienna in the company of his new wife Sophie Kuppers, Lissitzky returned to Moscow for good in 1928. He spent the remainder of his life teaching, writing, working, and designing. The late 1920s and early 1930s were some of Lissitzky's most progressive years as he experimented with new media such as typography, photography, and photomontage while he continued to produce innovative architectural designs. One such design was his 1931 draft for a new Pravda building, in which five separate units would be interlocked by a series of foot bridges, yet another evolutionary step in Lissitzky's vision for the horizontal skyscraper.



Having been diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1923, the pace of Lissitzky's work gradually slowed. The illness prevented him from taking on multiple projects as had been his custom for much of his life. By 1932, Lissitzky was devoting himself almost exclusively to producing Soviet propaganda art, continuing to promote a political system that, under Stalin, heavily restricted the arts, persecuted, and even killed Lissitzky's colleagues, and was overtly hostile towards Jews. It is not clear whether or not Lissitzky felt conflicted in this regard, but given his declining health coupled with his longtime devotion to the Soviet cause, it is likely that near the end of his life he simply wished to continue producing art without engaging in controversy.

Lissitzky's final work of art was a propaganda photomontage produced at the onset of the Soviet Union's entry into World War II. It appealed to the Soviet government to produce more war supplies. A few years later, on December 21, 1941, Lissitzky succumbed to his disease and passed away at his home in Schodnia, outside Moscow.

LEGACY

Lissitzky strived to transform **Suprematism** from its primarily two-dimensional, practical, and ideological orientation to three-dimensional considerations of space, particularly with regard to architecture. Although only one of his designs was ever constructed, later developments in 20th-century architectural design owe a debt of gratitude to Lissitzky. This thoroughly forward-thinking artist established a successful means by which to establish a kind of fully

abstract, modern visual vocabulary that could be utilized either in the direction of architecture or that of the visual arts from graphics to painting. Artists and architects who followed, particularly those of the early Bauhaus such as Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Wassily Kandinsky as well as the Cubists, explored and expanded this vocabulary whose basic elements were form, line, and color.

Original content written by Justin Wolf

ARTIST QUOTES

"The artist constructs a new symbol with his brush. This symbol is not a recognizable form of anything which is already finished, already made, already existing in the world - it is a symbol of a new world, which is being built upon and which exists by way of people."

"In the space allotted to me I have not conceived the four walls as retaining or protective walls, but as optic backcloths for the works of art. That is why I decided to dissolve the wall surfaces as such."

"The sun as the expression of old world energy is torn down from the heavens by modern man, who by virtue of his technological superiority creates his own energy source."

"The image is not a painting, but a structure around which we must circle, looking at it from all sides, peering down from above, investigating from below."

Major Works:



Had Gadya, El Lissitzky, 1919, Private collection
Lithograph

"Had Gadya" is a song that is sung by Jewish families on the first evening of Passover. It tells the tale of a billy goat (representing the Jewish people) who is attacked by a cat, which is in turn attacked by a dog. These animals represent the oppressors of Jews throughout history. Lissitzky originally created gouache paintings of the ten animals, *Had Gadya* is a painting in a fluid manner, reminiscent of the style of Marc Chagall. This 1919 version, created for a children's book, features quaint, naturalistic animals contained within curvilinear compartments that overlap. These geometric elements - harbingers in a sense - speak not to the overt simplicity of

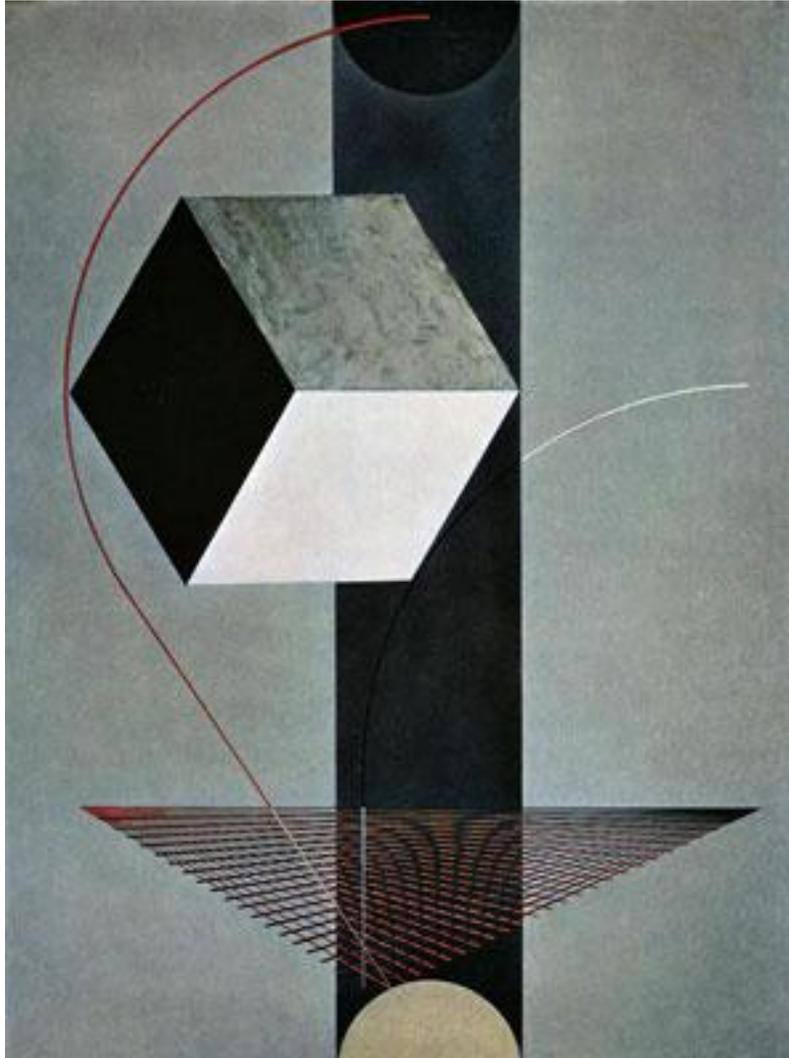
Lissitzky's later style, but they also create a sense of movement within the composition.



Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge, El Lissitzky, 1919, Municipal Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands Lithograph

Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge is one of Lissitzky's earliest attempts at propagandistic art. He produced this politically charged work in support of the Red Army shortly after the Bolsheviks had waged their revolution in 1917. The red wedge symbolized the revolutionaries, who were penetrating the anti-Communist White Army. Here Lissitzky uses his signature coded color combination of red, white and black, which reinforces the message indicated by the work's title. Colors and shapes take on directly symbolic significance. For example, the smooth, curvilinear walls of the white circle are pierced by the sharp point of the red triangle: the Red Army has pierced the defenses of the White Army. Dramatic color

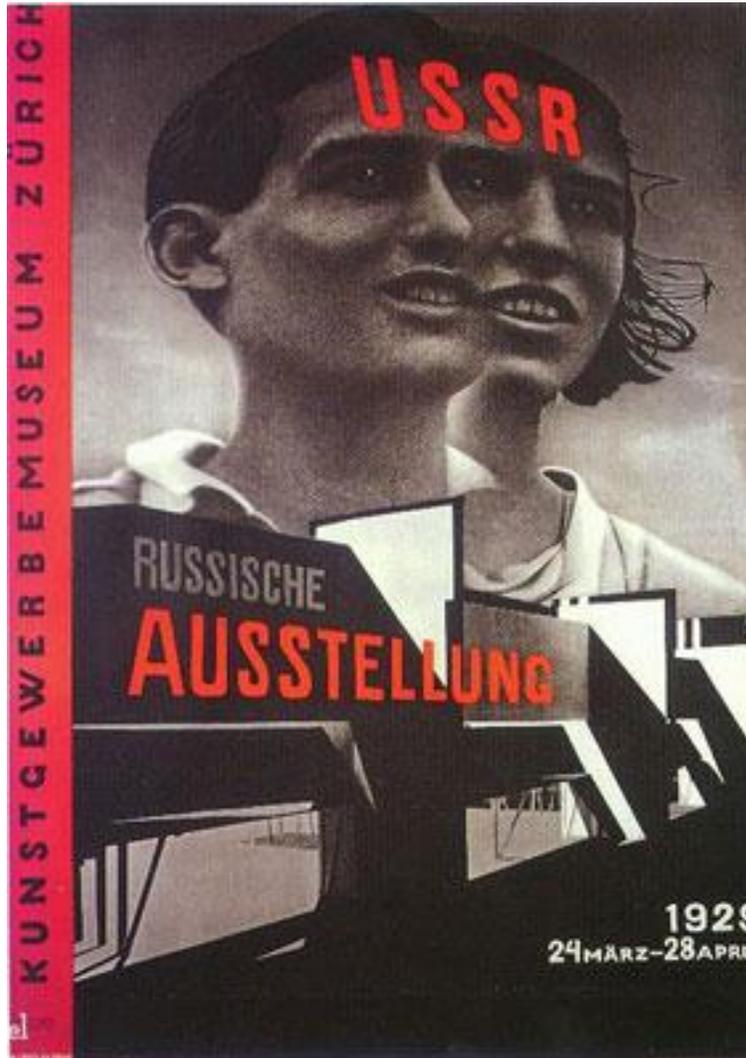
contrasts also create confusion regarding space-which area is positive? Which is negative? Meanwhile, small geometric forms in the limited color scheme float like tiny projectiles through the space along with text. Here, basic forms combine with actual text: painting and typography are fused. This work is an important precursor to Lissitzky's *Prouns*, when Suprematist art moved onto a three-dimensional visual plain.



Proun 99, El Lissitzky, 1925, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT Watercolor and metallic paint on wood

Lissitzky's *Prounen* or *Proun* work, which spanned a variety of media from painting and illustration to physical installation, was the artist's effort to create three-dimensional environments in which two-dimensional shapes could exist in direct contrast to the space they inhabited. The end result for

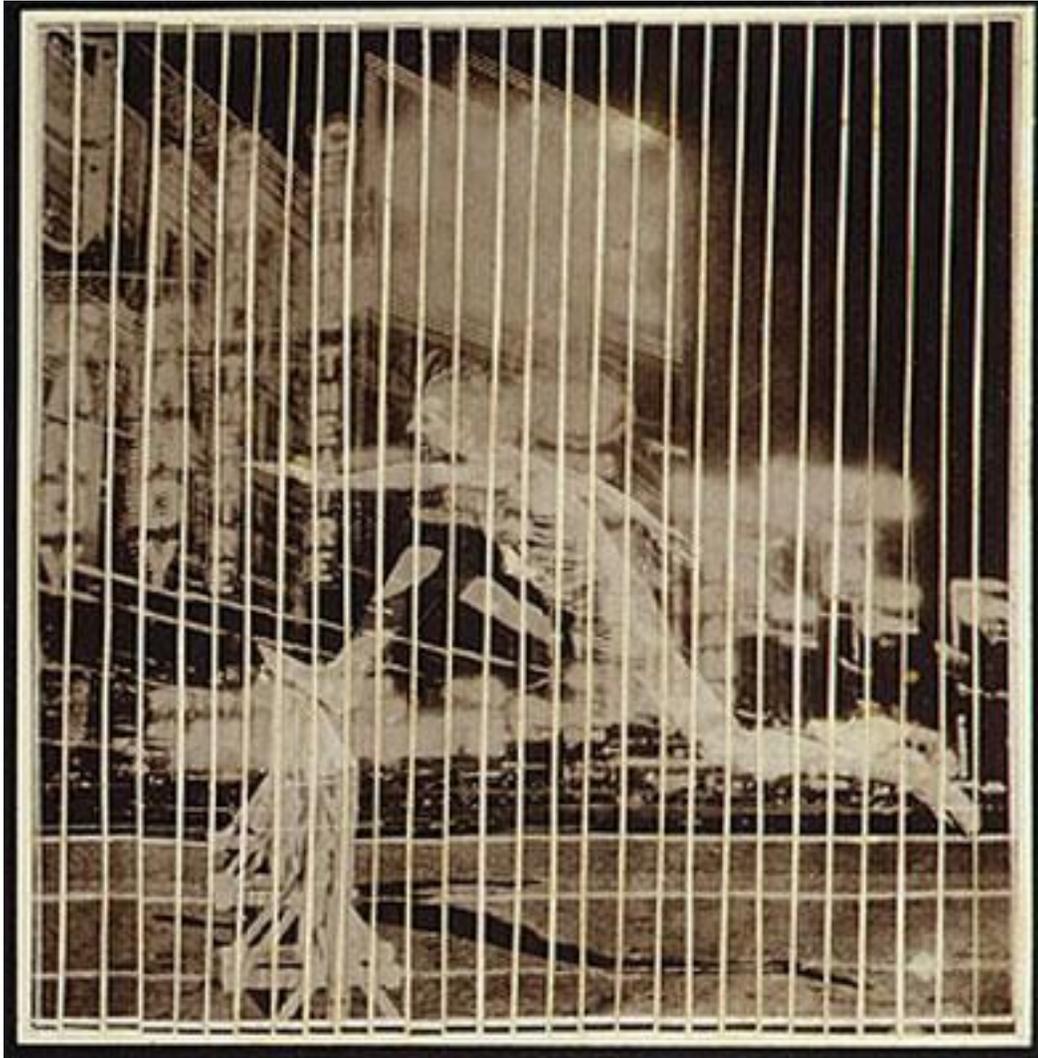
Lissitzky was ideally to create an ongoing tension between open, negative, three-dimensional space and flat, purely abstract, geometric forms. Painting and drawing, which had formerly existed independently of the three-dimensional media of sculpture and architecture, could now be fused to them to create new, integrated forms - ideally, the futuristic, Suprematist-style buildings Lissitzky envisioned.



USSR, Russische Ausstellung, El Lissitzky, 1929,
Museum für Gestaltung Basel, Switzerland
Photogravure in red and black

This poster was created for a 1929 exhibition at the Kunstgewerbemuseum or Museum of Decorative Arts in Zurich. Lissitzky's Constructivist art and his political beliefs had become virtually interchangeable at this point in his career. In this work, the two colossal busts of a man and a woman loom

over the sprawling horizontal structure. These figures are fused to emphasize the equality of the sexes in the Communist idiom and they are the essence of the State. Lissitzky had long envisioned his countrymen rising to new heights, both physically and spiritually.



The Runner, El Lissitzky, 1930, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow Photomontage

Lissitzky once wrote of photography, "...photography possesses properties not available to painting. These properties lie in the photographic material itself and it is essential for us to develop them in order to make photography truly into art." With *The Runner*, Lissitzky converted his 1926 gelatin silver print *Runner in the City* into a stunning new visual reference to the modern celebration of speed and dynamism by splicing the photo

into equal, vertical sections. The segmented photo mimics the effect of perceiving objects in motion (the objects are moving and/or the viewer is also in motion): there is a sense of visual fragmentation as one glimpses the parts rather than the whole. Lissitzky's effort to make a form of media then considered trivial into high art was in fact another evolutionary step for the artist's own Constructivist style. The prevailing idea was to construct something grand and utterly new, and in this sense, the very notion of photography as a pure art form, or what the Soviets regarded as a "medium for enlightenment," was something truly avant-garde.



The print shop of Ogoniok, El Lissitzky, commissioned 1932, Moscow, Russia

For Lissitzky, architecture was an enduring passion. Ironically, in some regards his passion for architecture was also his greatest challenge to his own productivity. His utopian aspirations were often realized in Lissitzky's

sketches and blueprints for buildings that would have been impossible to construct. In these renderings, towering monoliths seem to float weightlessly in mid-air, defying gravity and denying very real considerations (such as budget constraints). Not without a sense of the practical, Lissitzky modified his architectural visions. The print shop for the magazine *Ogoniok* in Moscow stands as Lissitzky's sole extant work of architecture. Unfortunately the actual building is far from what he imagined, containing virtually none of the horizontal skyscraper elements that became Lissitzky's signature design.