

Suprematism



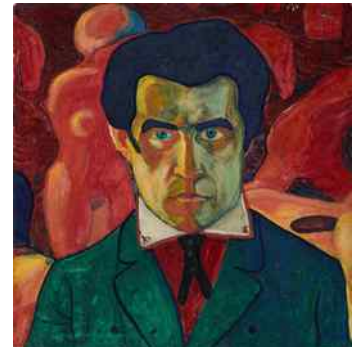
Suprematism focused on the fundamentals of geometry (circles, squares, rectangles), painted in a limited range of colours. The term refers to a non-figurative art based upon "the supremacy of pure artistic feeling" rather than on visual depiction of objects.

The movement itself was announced in Malevich's 1915 Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0' 10, in St. Petersburg, where he, and several others in his group, exhibited 36 works in a similar style. Its high point lasted until about 1919, but its influence has been profound on the development of abstraction in painting and sculpture, and resonating throughout the world on principles of architectural, graphic and product design in the twentieth century.

Founded by Kazimir Malevich in 1913, **Supremus** conceived of the artist as liberated from everything that pre-determined the ideal structure of life and art.

Kazimir Malevich ((1875–1945) projected his vision onto Cubism, which he admired for its ability to deconstruct art, and in the process change its artistic reference points. He led a group of Russian avant-garde artists—including Alexandra Exter, Lubov Popova, Olga Rozanova, Ivan Kliun, Ivan Pun, Nina Genke-Meller, and others—in what's been described as the first attempt to independently found a Russian avant-garde movement, seceding from the trajectory of prior Russian art history.

To support the movement, Malevich established the journal *Supremus* (initially titled *Nul* or *Nothing*). The publication, however, never took off and its first issue was never distributed due to the Russian Revolution.



Self-Portrait (c.1908-10)

In "Suprematism" (Part II of his book *The Non-Objective World*, which was published 1927 in Munich as Bauhaus Book No. 11), Malevich clearly stated the core concept of Suprematism: "Under Suprematism I understand the primacy of pure feeling in creative art. 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."

The suprematist "grammar" was based on fundamental geometric forms; in particular, the square and the circle; and conceptualises the artist as one who has freed himself from everything that pre-decided the ideal structure of life and art. The first appearance of a black square, placed against the sun, was as a part of a design for a stage curtain for the Futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*, in 1913.



The first version of **The Black Square** was completed in 1915, and was described by the artist as his breakthrough work and the inception for the launch of the Suprematist movement. It is regarded as the foundation of modern, abstract art, defining the aesthetic he was to follow for the remainder of his career; In his manifesto Malevich said the works were intended as "desperate struggle to free art from the ballast of the objective world" by focusing only on pure form. He sought to paint works that could be understood by all, but at the same time would have an emotional impact comparable to religious works.

The *Black Square* was the centrepiece of the *0.10 Exhibition* in 1915, in which Malevich exhibited his early experiments in suprematist painting. It was hung in what is called the *red/beautiful corner* in Russian Orthodox tradition—the place of the main icon in a house. It was a radically new mode of abstract (non-figurative) painting that abandoned all reference to the outside world in favour of coloured geometric shapes floating against white backgrounds.





Black Square is “one of the emblematic works of modern culture,” a rare truly revolutionary work “that overturned established notions of art.”

The slightly asymmetrical square of *Red Square* (1915), otherwise known as *Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*, with the top right corner pushing up towards the frame, introduces a slight and disconcerting sense of imbalance and incipient movement.

This and another, smaller, version of *Black Square* were displayed together as a diptych, forming the centrepiece of a 1935 exhibition. The diptych form has associations with religious altar-pieces; further strengthening Malevich's desire to connect his work to a 'spiritual' direction.

According to an observation by radiologist and art historian Milda Vturina, one of the features of Kazimir Malevich's painting technique was the layering of paints one on another to get a special kind of colour spots. For example, Malevich used two layers of colour for a red spot—the lower black and the upper red. The light ray going through these colour layers is perceived by the viewer not as red, but with a touch of darkness. This technique of superimposing the two colours allowed experts to identify fakes of Malevich's work, which generally lacked it.

Malevich's student Anna Leporskaya observed that Malevich “neither knew nor understood what the black square contained. He thought it so important an event in his creation that for a whole week he was unable to eat, drink or sleep”

GEOMETRY AS ART

It has been said that the oldest form of abstract art, and possibly the oldest form of art, is ceramics—pottery made originally for pure utilitarian functions, but nevertheless having a pure geometric form, which is often appreciated for its beauty of refinement, its fitness for function and its proportions, relating to the human proportion. And the studio pottery of today being regarded as elevated above that of a mere practical object to that of an art object for display, rather than use.

Geometrical forms, usually thought to have a spiritual significance, have been around for millennia. The Chinese **Bi discs**, found in grave sites are made from jade, the hardest and most enduring of stone. Their function is unknown, although they are thought to represent heaven.



The earliest Jade **Cong vessels** date from the Shang and Zhou dynasties; 3400–2250 BC. They consist of a circular bore embedded in a square block with convex sides. They are thought to be ritual artefacts, with the circle representing heaven and the block representing earth.

Likewise the geometric form of the **pyramid**, which occurs as ancient burial chambers, is thought to have 'mystical' powers. It is said that a razor blade, located at its central point will self sharpen.



Pyramids, Giza, Egypt
Pyramid of Cestius, Rome
Louvre Courtyard,
Slovak Radio Building, Bratislava



The **Kaaba** is a cube, a stone building at the centre of Islam's most important mosque and holiest site in Mecca. It is considered by muslims to be *Baytullah*, the 'House of God'. According to Islam, the Kaaba was rebuilt several times throughout history, The current structure was built after the original building was damaged by a fire during the siege of Mecca in 683 CE. Pilgrims circle the Kaaba seven times in an anti-clockwise direction to complete the Hajj.

The Endless Column is a work by Rumanian sculptor **Constantin Brâncuși**. Along with the *Table of Silence* and the *Gate of the Kiss* it is part of the monumental assemblage commissioned by the *National League of Gorj Women* to honour those soldiers who had defended Târgu Jiu, where it is situated, in 1916. The column, which is set on a circular domed base, symbolizes the concept of the infinite sacrifice of the Romanian soldiers. The *Infinity Column* stacks 15 rhomboidal modules, with a half-unit at the top and bottom, making a total of 16. The incomplete top unit is thought to be the element that expresses the concept of proceeding on to the infinite.



The Weather Project was an installation in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in 2023 by the Icelandic-Danish artist **Olafur Eliasson**. Olafur used humidifiers to create a fine mist in the air via a mixture of sugar and water, as well as a semicircular disc (reflected by the ceiling mirror to appear circular) made up of hundreds of monochromatic lamps which radiated yellow light. The ceiling of the hall was covered with a huge mirror, in which visitors could see themselves as tiny black shadows against a mass of orange light symbolizing the sun.

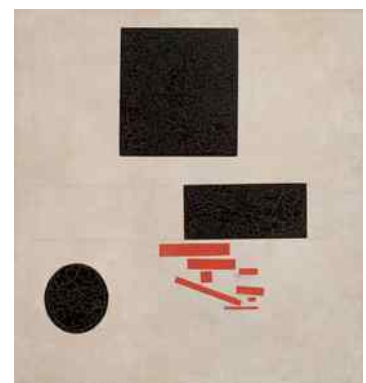
The **Moon** is the largest geometrical shape that we can see. Humans have observed the moon, used it to measure time and the seasons since prehistoric times, and have characterised it and associated it in many different ways, from having a spirit or being a deity to having astrological and cosmological significance. It has been the inspiration for artists, poets and musicians from its earliest depictions dating from 40,000 BP (before the present.) The crescent moon, representing the lunar phases has been a recurring symbol in a range of cultures for at least 5,000 years.



Malevich's ideas and theories behind Suprematism were grounded in a belief in the spiritual and transformative power of art.

He saw Suprematism as a way to access a higher, more pure realm of artistic expression and to tap into the spiritual. In a leaflet distributed at the 0.10 exhibition Malevich wrote: "I transformed myself in the zero of form, I destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things, from the horizon-ring that confines the artist and forms of nature."

In **Suprematist Composition** (1915) black and red shapes float freely in a white space. The stability of the black square and rectangle is disrupted by the red elongated rectangles which descend into a diagonal sloping line. Although the colour red has a tendency to 'advance' towards the picture plane (unless held back by an overlapping line or form, which is absent here) due to the contrast of scale the red shapes appear to recede into the far distance. The severe angularity of the composition is relieved by the single black circle.





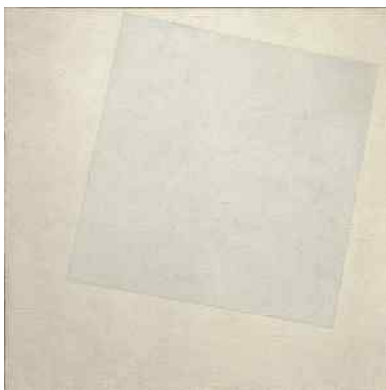
Malevich rejected the illusionism of conventional 'realism', regarding Suprematism as "new painterly realism". Its subject was to be the basic components of painting's language, such as colour, line, and brushwork. The basic units of this visual vocabulary were planes: stretched, rotated, and overlapping. For Malevich, the white backgrounds against which they were set mapped the boundless space of the ideal.

In **Suprematist Painting—Eight Red Rectangles** (1915) the forms seem to float and oscillate in a white, almost tangible atmosphere. They appear to form a 'family' group: to attract and also repel one-another, to avoid touching. One, larger form just nudges up against the frame, the only point of contact outside of the sensation of each shape's self-containment, and forming a contact with the world beyond the frame.

In addition to his paintings, Malevich laid down his theories in writing, such as *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism* (1915) and *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism* (1926).

Suprematist Composition; Airplane Flying (1915) appears in the photograph of the 0.10 exhibition. There is a sensation of movement, as the dominant yellow rectangle; 'soars' above the red bar and the black 'fields' receding towards the ground—and maybe the wobbling movement's of the wings of a light aircraft as it turns in the air.

Malevich was fascinated by the idea of flight and space and interested in aerial photography of landscape, which may have been a source of inspiration for his abstractions. He said: "Can a man who always goes about in a cabriolet, really understand the experiences and impressions of one who travels in an express or flies through the air?"



White on White (1918) presents a barely differentiated off-white square superimposed on an off-white ground, taking his ideal of pure abstraction to its logical conclusion.

Although stripped of almost all detail, down to one basic shape and colour, the brushwork is still evident. This facture makes evident the human hand in the fabrication of the work, which is another element in the 'new-realism' that Malevich wished to introduce into the art of the twentieth century: the materials and materiality of the production.

Malevich painted it so that the slight tilt of the square suggests movement, as if rising from the canvas; evoking a feeling of floating, with the colour white symbolising the spirituality of the void and infinity.

A frequent characteristic of Malevich's Suprematist paintings is a thin black or coloured line running contrapuntally through the diagonal floating rectangles.



Supremus 55 (1916)



Suprematist Composition, Blue rectangle over the red beam (1916)



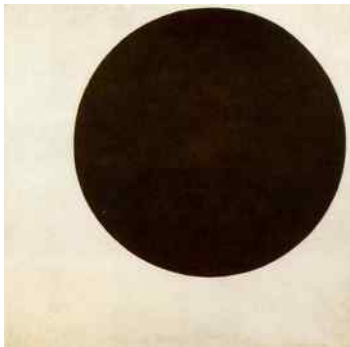
Supremus No 56 (1916)

In the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution in 1917, and the tumult of the following decades, vanguard movements such as Suprematism and Constructivism were encouraged by Trotskyite factions in the government.

From 1928 to 1930, Malevitch taught at the Kiev Art Institute, with Alexander Bogomazov, Victor Palmov and Vladimir Tatlin; and published his articles in a Kharkiv magazine *New Generation*. But the start of repression in Ukraine against the intelligentsia forced his return to Leningrad (Saint Petersburg). From the beginning of the 1930s, modern art was falling out of favour with the new government of Joseph Stalin. Malevich soon lost his teaching position, and banned from making art. Artworks and manuscripts were confiscated.



Black Cross (c.1920-23)



Black Circle (1924)

While Malevich's ideas and theories behind Suprematism were grounded in a belief in the spiritual and transformative power of art, he saw Suprematism as a way to access a higher, more pure realm of artistic expression and to tap into the spiritual through abstraction. Thus, the overarching philosophy of Malevich's Suprematism expressed in various manifestos would be that he "transformed himself in the zero of form and dragged himself out of the rubbish-heap of illusion and the pit of naturalism. He destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of objects, moving from the horizon-ring to the circle of spirit".

Following the October Revolution Malevich took up several official positions, and from 1919 to 1922 taught at the Vitebsk Practical Art School in Belarus alongside Marc Chagall, the Leningrad Academy of Arts (1922–1927), the Kiev Art Institute (1928–1930), and the House of the Arts in Leningrad (1930). His book, *The World as Non-Objectivity*, in which he outlines his Suprematist theories, was published in Munich in 1926 and translated into English in 1959.

Malevich's assumption that a shifting in the attitudes of the Soviet authorities toward the modernist art movement would take place after the death of Lenin and Trotsky's fall from power was proven correct. Within a few years the government of Joseph Stalin turned against forms of abstraction, considering them a type of "bourgeois" art, incapable of expressing the social realities of soviet life. As a consequence, many of his works were confiscated and he was banned from creating and exhibiting similar art.

In autumn 1930, he was arrested and interrogated by the OGPU (the state Intelligence and security service and the secret police) in Leningrad, accused of Polish espionage—due to his Polish heritage and recent visit to Warsaw—and threatened with execution. He was released from imprisonment in early December. Critics derided Malevich's art as a negation of everything good and pure: love of life and love of nature. Malevich responded that art can advance and develop for art's sake alone, saying that "art does not need us, and it never did".



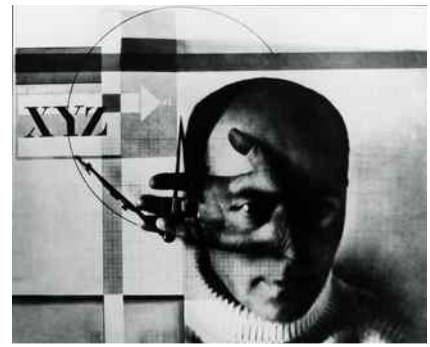
Suprematism (1921-27)



When Malevich died in 1934, he was buried in a coffin decorated by suprematist artist Nikola Suetin with a black square at the head and a black circle at the foot.

It didn't fulfil his stated wish to have the grave topped with an "**architekton**"—one of his architectural style maquettes of abstract forms, equipped with a telescope through which visitors were to gaze at Jupiter.

Lazar Markovich Lissitzky (1890–1941), better known as **El Lissitzky** was an artist, designer, photographer, typo-grapher, polemicist and architect. He was an important figure of the Russian avant-garde, helping in the development of Suprematism along with his mentor, Kazimir Malevich, and designing numerous exhibition displays and propaganda works for the Soviet Union. His work greatly influenced the Bauhaus and constructivist movements, and he experimented with production techniques and stylistic devices that would go on to dominate 20th-century graphic design.



The Constructor, Self-Portrait (1924)

El Lissitzky's entire career was laced with the belief that the artist could be an agent for change, which he summarized as "goal-oriented creation".



Preliminary sketch for a poster (1920)

Over the years, he taught in a variety of positions, schools, and artistic media, spreading and exchanging ideas. He took this ethic with him when he worked with Malevich in Vitebsk, having accepted an invitation from Marc Chagall to teach graphic arts, printing, and head the architectural department at the newly formed People's Art School – which Chagall created after being appointed Commissioner of Artistic Affairs for Vitebsk in 1918. There jointly with Malevich he was instrumental in creating the suprematist UNOVIS (Exponents of the New Art) group in 1919. He developed a variant suprematist series of his own, Proun, and in 1921 took up a job as the Russian cultural ambassador to Weimar, Germany, working with and influencing important figures of the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements.

Under the leadership of Malevich the group worked on a "suprematist ballet", and on the remake of the 1913 futurist opera *Victory Over the Sun*. Lissitzky and the entire group chose to share credit and responsibility for the works produced within the group, signing most pieces with a black square. This was partly a homage to Malevich's *Black Square*, and a symbolic embrace of the Communist ideal. This would become the de facto seal of UNOVIS that took the place of individual names or initials. Black squares worn by members as chest badges and cufflinks also resembled the ritual tefillin (the small black, leather box, containing verses from the torah, worn on the head or arm by jews during prayers) and thus were no strange symbol in Vitebsk shtetl.

The group, which disbanded in 1922, would be pivotal in the dissemination of suprematist ideology in Russia and abroad and launch Lissitzky's status as one of the leading figures in the avant garde.

A dispute over the teaching methods at the school arose with Malevich replacing the classic based teaching programme favoured by Chagall with his own, and disseminating his suprematist theories and techniques school-wide. Lissitzky, still loyal to Chagall, became torn between two opposing artistic paths, but ultimately favoured Malevich's suprematism and broke away from traditional Jewish art. Chagall left the school shortly thereafter.

At the school Lissitzky was engaged in designing and printing propaganda posters; later, he preferred to keep quiet about this period, probably because one of main subjects of these posters was the exile Leon Trotsky. The quantity of these posters is sufficient to regard them as a separate genre in the artist's output.

Beat the Whites With the Red Wedge (1920) is a propaganda poster made during Russia's civil war, which was mainly fought between the "Reds"—communists, socialists and revolutionaries—and the "Whites"—monarchists, conservatives, liberals and other socialists who opposed the Bolshevik Revolution. It is one of Lissitzky's most famous and influential works. It communicates a powerful message that leaves no doubt in the viewer's mind of its intention, and has been the inspiration for war



memorial design, used to promote musical events and on record covers; and In September 2021, a modified version of this painting was used in Novosibirsk to promote vaccination against the COVID-19.

The piece is often seen as alluding to the similar shapes used on military maps and, along with its political symbolism, was one of Lissitzky's first major steps away from Malevich's non-objective suprematism into a style his own; and with a more utilitarian direction—forming a bridge to the aims of constructivism. He stated: "The artist constructs a new symbol with his brush. This symbol is not a recognizable form of anything that is already finished, already made, or already existent in the world – it is a symbol of a new world, which is being built upon and which exists by the way of the people."



Proun 12E (1923)

Suprematism was beginning to fracture into two ideologically adverse halves, one favouring Utopian, spiritual art and the other a more utilitarian art that served society. Lissitzky was fully aligned with neither and left Vitebsk in 1921.

The exact meaning of "Proun" has never fully been explained; with some suggesting that it is a contraction of *proekt unovisa* (designed by UNOVIS) or *proekt utverzhdeniya novogo* (Design for the confirmation of the new). Later, Lissitzky defined Proun ambiguously as "the station where one changes from painting to architecture."

Proun was essentially Lissitzky's exploration of the visual language of suprematism with spatial elements, utilizing shifting axes and multiple perspectives; both uncommon ideas in suprematism. Suprematism at the time was conducted almost exclusively in flat, 2D forms and shapes, and Lissitzky, with a taste for architecture and other 3D concepts, tried to expand suprematism beyond this.

His Proun works spanned over a half a decade and evolved from straightforward paintings and lithographs into fully three-dimensional installations. They would also lay the foundation for his later experiments in architecture and exhibition design. While the paintings were artistic in their own right, their use as a staging ground for his early architectonic ideas was significant. In these works, the basic elements of architecture—volume, mass, colour, space and rhythm—were subjected to a fresh formulation in relation to the new suprematist ideals. Through his Prouns, utopian models for a new and better world were developed. This approach, in which the artist creates art with socially defined purpose, could aptly be summarized with his edict "*das zielbewußte Schaffen*" – "task oriented creation."



Proun 47 (1923)



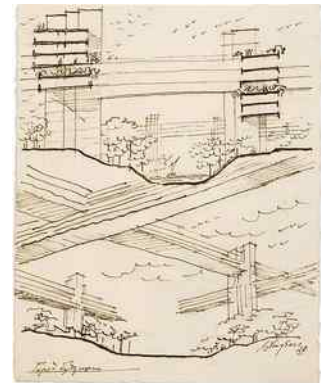
In 1923–1925, Lissitzky proposed and developed the idea of horizontal skyscrapers ("cloud-hangers", "sky-hangers" or "sky-hooks"). A series of eight such structures was intended to mark the major intersections of the Boulevard Ring In Moscow. Each building was a flat three-story, 180-meter-wide L-shaped slab raised 50 meters above street level, resting on three pylons placed on three different street corners, with one providing a staircase into a proposed subway station; and the two others ground-level tram stations.

Lissitzky argued that as long as humans cannot fly, moving horizontally is natural and moving vertically is not. Therefore, where there is not sufficient land for construction, a new plane created in the air at medium altitude should be preferred to an American-style tower. These buildings, he said, also provided superior insulation and ventilation for their inhabitants.

Only one building was ever constructed to Lissitzky's design. A print shop, now abandoned and preserved as a listed building, but partially damaged in 2008 by a fire.

Lazar Khidekel (1904-86) was an artist, designer, architect and theoretician, who is noted for realizing the abstract, avant-garde Suprematist movement through architecture.

When in 1919–1920 Lissitzky was a head of Architectural department at the People's Art School he was working with his students, primarily Lazar Khidekel, on the transition from plane to volumetric suprematism.



Khidekel, City Future Poles



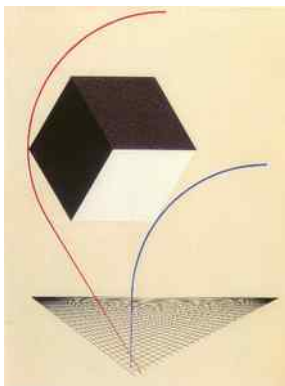
El Lissitzky, Proposal for a PROUN street celebration (1923)



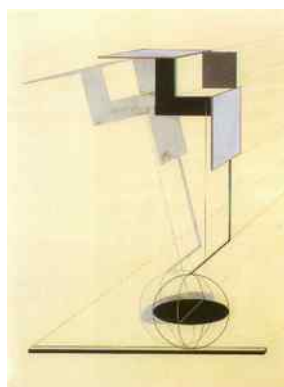
El Lissitzky, Proun 1st Kestner portfolio (1923)



El Lissitzky Proun 12E (1923)



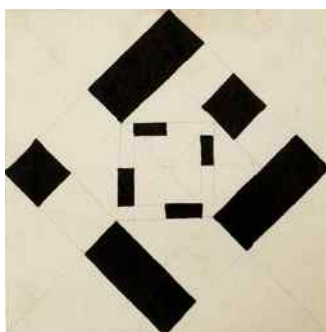
El Lissitzky, Proun



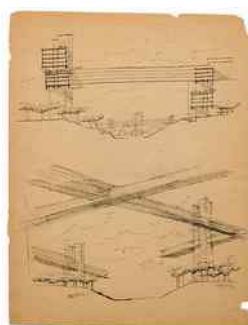
El Lissitzky, Proun 46



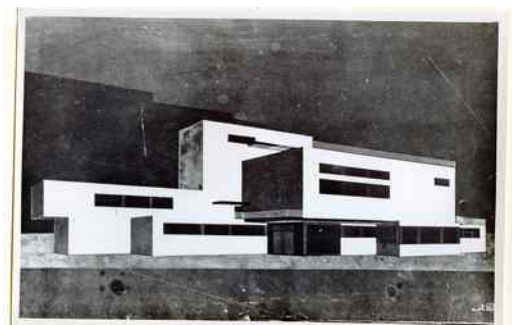
Basic Calculus (1928)



Khidekel, Black Suprematism; Circular Movement (1920)



Khidekel, Sketch Futuristic City (1928)



Khidekel, Suprematist Architecture Workers Club (1926)

An artist who creates rather than imitates expresses himself; his works are not reflections of nature but, instead, new realities, which are no less significant than the realities of nature itself.
Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*