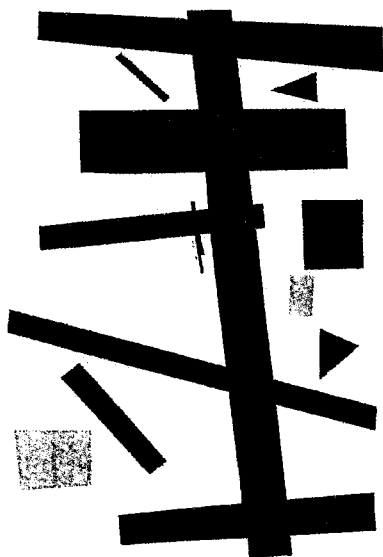


# The Economist

The Economist October 26th 2013



The birth of abstraction

## Supreme

A new show analyses the work of Kazimir Malevich and his circle

**"I** HAVE fished myself out of the rubbishy slough of academic art," Kazimir Malevich, a Russian artist, announced in 1915. After a decade of making derivative work, he made a radical break with what had come before. He became perhaps the first entirely abstract artist.

A new exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam—one of several Malevich shows to open in Europe over the next year—charts his artistic trajectory. On view are some 500 works by Malevich and his contemporaries, including oils, drawings, architectural models, costume designs, photographs and film clips. In a dozen large, high-ceilinged rooms, this story unfolds broadly chronologically, starting with his move from Kiev to Moscow to study art in 1905. Malevich experimented with Impressionism, Neo-Primitivism, Cubism and Futurism. Then in 1915 a big transformation takes place when he becomes a self-anointed "Suprematist".

The term, which Malevich invented, expressed his belief that spiritual and aesthetic purity can be achieved only by rejecting representational art. One of his first paintings in this vein is "Black Square", which features a stark black square against a white background. Its debut in 1915 was controversial, not least because it was displayed high in the corner of a gallery, the spot in Russian homes traditionally reserved for religious icons. Hung in the

same position in the Stedelijk show, it has a similarly electrifying effect.

Malevich's Suprematist works are lyrical arrangements of squares, rectangles, circles and diagonals, such as "Supremus nr. 50" from 1915 (pictured). He created striking architectural models of imaginary structures, and austere geometric paintings of white planes against white backgrounds. Each work reflected Malevich's ground-breaking belief that art need not represent the "things" of the world; rather, it could "exist, in and for itself". Russia's new Soviet rulers at first embraced this aesthetic, until Stalin demanded a patriotic brand of realism instead. Malevich's abstract work was reviled at home for decades. But his ideas eventually went on to influence many artists, including Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin, Donald Judd and Zaha Hadid.

The Stedelijk's decision to include art by Malevich's contemporaries helps to clarify his strengths and weaknesses. His early paintings were not very good. His pretty pink-and-green "Woman with a Newspaper on her Lap" (1904) looks weak when compared with Wassily Kandinsky's brooding landscape "Kochel—the Bridge" (1902). He improves as a figurative painter over the next few years, but his canvasses are still less inventive than those by Mikhail Larionov and Marc Chagall.

So it is all the more exciting to see the costumes he designed for "Victory over the Sun", an opera of 1913. These lively, somewhat ungainly outfits manage to evoke both robots and spacemen. Their freshness and originality offer a glimpse of the vision that would later make Malevich internationally famous. The many Suprematist paintings that follow, some jolting, others meditative, are the clear high-point of this comprehensive show.

The exhibition combines for the first time the holdings of Malevich's earliest Russian collectors, who bravely protected these works. One was Nikolai Khardzhiev, a critic, scholar and friend, who smuggled his collection to Amsterdam when he moved there in 1993 (it is now on long-term loan to the Stedelijk). The other is George Costakis, the Russian-born son of a prosperous Greek merchant, who started buying only after the second world war but still managed to amass a larger and wider collection, which he took with him to Greece in 1977.

Malevich's reputation continues to grow. A 1916 Suprematist work by him sold for \$60m at Sotheby's in 2008. Next year a retrospective will open at what will be Europe's biggest museum, the Mystetskyi Arsenal, in Kiev. Meanwhile, the Stedelijk show will travel in a slightly different form to Bonn and London. Don't miss it. ■

"Kazimir Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde" is at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam until February 2nd