

**CHAGALL TO
MALEVICH**

THE RUSSIAN AVANTGARDES

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Chagall to Malevich The Russian Avant-Gardes

26 February to 26 June 2016

The art of the Russian avant-garde numbers among the most diverse and radical chapters of modernism. At no other point in the history of art did artistic schools and artists' associations emerge at such a breathtaking pace than between 1910 and 1920. Every group was its own programme, every programme its own call to battle – against the past as well as against competing iterations of the present.

The Albertina is devoting a major presentation to the diverse range of art from that era: 130 masterpieces by Mikhail Larionov, Natalia Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, and Marc Chagall illustrate fundamentally different styles and their dynamic development from primitivism to cubo-futurism and on to suprematism, as well the chronological parallels between figurative expressionism and pure abstraction. In eleven chapters, *Chagall to Malevich* traces the brief epoch of the Russian avant-garde as a climactic drama stemming from the diversity of avant-garde movements that were diametrically opposed to one another. Enabling the public to see and experience the visual tensions inherent in this heroic phase of Russian art is the stated goal of this exhibition.

The Russian avant-garde went hand in hand with a phenomenon of comprehensive artistic renewal. Artists drew on differing and occasionally contradictory thematic material and impulses: on the one hand, the Western European avant-garde served as a point of orientation that brought forth such revolutionary expressive forms as fauvism and cubism, after the example of Paris-based artists such as Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, and Braque. But on the other hand, the Russian artists were equally keen on making reference to the folkloric pictorial tradition of their homeland.

With their demands for pure painting and abstraction as advanced by suprematism (Kazimir Malevich, Ivan Kliun, Olga Rozanova) and constructivism (El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko) alongside the seemingly more traditional forms preferred by figural artists (Marc Chagall, Boris Grigoriev, Pavel Filonov), what they all had in common was an intent to break with the past – representatives of the one side via that past's radical negation, those of the other by making reference to it. This era's artists were also united by the desire to arrive at a synthesis between Western Europe's modernism and the folkloric idioms of Eastern Europe. This desire gave rise to a number of independent, dynamically developing artistic movements – neo-primitivism, rayonism, cubo-futurism, suprematism and constructivism – that were ultimately smothered by the Stalinist regime or forced into an ideologically charged socialist realism.

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The artists felt confirmed in their understanding as avant-gardists when Lenin overthrew the bourgeois government in October 1917 and declared the Communist Party the “avant-garde of the working class.” The Bolsheviks’ political program was not only received with enthusiasm by the underprivileged and discontented, but also by the artists, who saw themselves as innovators, as “Futurists”: Larionov and Goncharova, Malevich, Popova, and Exter, Chagall and Kandinsky, Lissitzky and Rodchenko.

The downfall of the Russian avant-gardes had in fact been ushered in with Stalin’s seizure of power in 1924. It had been preceded by Chagall’s emigration to Paris and Kandinsky’s call to the Weimar Bauhaus in the early 1920s.

By 1932 the partnership between the Revolution of the new Soviet state and the artistic avant-garde had finally come to an end: groups and organizations not in line with Socialist Realism were decreed to disband. Malevich’s Suprematism was condemned as formalist degeneration; exhibitions were closed; artists were arrested and persecuted. The utopia of a new society that had been euphorically welcomed and the much-desired implementation of the avant-garde’s artistic spirit in everyday life collapsed.

Chagall to Malevich illustrates the striking diversity of disparate but contemporaneous stylistic trends, formal languages, and theories, making use of the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” conceived by German philosopher Ernst Bloch. Radical breaks can be ascertained both within that generation and its nascent artistic groups as well as within the oeuvres of individual artists. The visual juxtaposition of contrasting principles and the highlighting of stylistic leaps between successive or competing “-isms” is an important aspect of this exhibition.

Also a theme are the exciting and controversial teaching activities of two central figures of the Russian avant-garde – Chagall and Malevich – at the art school in Vitebsk. The fronts of the various avant-gardes lay far apart or were locked in battle, with some of the most important artists’ eventual emigration to the West, such as of Wassily Kandinsky and Marc Chagall, owed above all to having been displaced by other, hostile avant-gardes: Kandinsky had to give way to the constructivism of Rodchenko, and Chagall had to make way for Lissitzky and Malevich – both of whom he had appointed to teach at the art school he’d led only a brief while before. Malevich’s radical abstraction leaves no space for Chagall’s poetic variant of the avant-garde. And even so, none of these artists equalled Chagall in his uniting of the complex diversity of an artist’s existence within his own self: an existence between Western European modernism and the Russian *shtetl*, between the Christian world, naïve folk art, and Judaism.

The exhibition is a cooperation of the Albertina, Vienna and the State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg.

Wall texts

NEO-PRIMITIVISM: The Avant-Garde's Beginnings

The Russian avant-garde was introduced in 1907 with Neo-Primitivism, a Russian variation of Expressionism conceived by Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova. Wishing to break free from academic painting traditions, they drew their inspirations from folk art – from popular Russian prints (*lubki*) and woodcuts, painted street and shop signs, and Russian icons. Displaying stylized, coarsely outlined, and absolutely flat forms, deformed bodies, and loud colors while, at the same time, ignoring the rules of perspective, the artists preferably treated themes from the everyday life of craftsmen and peasants. The idealization of Russian and non-European folk art – the search for genuine and authentic artistic expression – was a general phenomenon of the avant-garde that had its parallels in German Expressionism and French Fauvism.

In 1910, several Russian artists rallying around Mikhail Larionov and his companion, Natalia Goncharova, formed the group Jack of Diamonds. Propagating the new style, they organized exhibitions in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. In 1912, the movement's two protagonists left the group because of its increasing orientation toward Western art, which they rejected. Together with Malevich, Chagall, and Tatlin, they founded the Donkey's Tail, an independent association advocating the purification of Russian art from Western influences. In 1913 this group disbanded, too: Malevich, distancing himself from its program, developed Cubo-Futurism, while Larionov embraced Rayonism. For a period of approximately five years, Neo-Primitivism had been considered avant-garde, having laid the essential foundation for the subsequent movements of Cubo-Futurism, Rayonism, Suprematism, and Constructivism.

RAYONISM: Currents and Rays in the Russian Avant-Garde

Parallel to Primitivism, Mikhail Larionov developed a specifically Russian variety of Italian Futurism: Rayonism (from the French *rayon* for *ray*). The first paintings in the Rayonist style – a dynamic idiom composed of overlapping bundles of colored rays that were inspired by electricity and meant to suggest rays of light – date from 1908. At the same time, French Cubism became widely known in Moscow, while the Russian artists also enthusiastically welcomed Italian Futurism, which had been spreading throughout Europe since 1910.

Larionov self-confidently regarded Rayonism as an autonomous variant of avant-gardist experimentation with the fragmentation of form practiced by various Western European movements in the early twentieth century. Indeed his abstract Rayonist compositions built from splintered color fields are based on the amalgamation of Orphist, Cubist, and Futurist elements of style with the Expressionist visual language of Neo-Primitivism. Representatives of both of the avant-garde's early seminal movements, i.e., Primitivism and Rayonism,

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Larionov and Natalia Goncharova played a leading role next to Malevich and Tatlin. In 1913, Larionov and his companion published a *Rayonist Manifesto* that propagated painting's autonomy vis-à-vis the laws of nature. Soon afterwards, this was to provide the basis for abstract art, so that Rayonism can be seen to have been the precursor of Suprematism and Constructivism and their declared goal of absolute non-objectivity. In 1915, Larionov and Goncharova left for Paris and ceded their leading position to Malevich.

CUBO-FUTURISM: Fragmented Forms Bathed in a Metallic Glow

Led by Kazimir Malevich, another – quintessentially Russian – variant of Italian Futurism developed from Rayonism: Cubo-Futurism. Combining Futurist and Cubist elements, it thrives on shining, anti-naturalistic colors while exhibiting movement, fragmented forms, and a combination of geometric segments. Its representations, such as Malevich's *Portrait of Ivan Klyun*, are frequently bathed in a metallic glow resembling industrial cast iron. Like Rayonism, Cubo-Futurism was a further step taken in preparation for the absolute non-objectivity of Suprematism. In addition to Malevich, the exponents of Cubo-Futurism included Alexandra Exter, Aristarkh Lentulov, Lyubov Popova, Ivan Klyun, and Olga Rozanova.

Russia did not embrace the European avant-garde without criticism. The quest for renewal went hand in hand with national concerns and an interest in the reformation of society. Artists sought to wake up their audience and not only modify peoples' ideas of art, but also their view of the world. One of the characteristics of Russian Cubo-Futurism is its close tie between art and life; lending itself to a multimedia approach, it spread from the visual arts to poetry, literature, theater, and music. In 1915, as many as two Futurist exhibitions took place in Petrograd: the *First Futurist Exhibition "Tramway V"* in March was soon to be followed by the *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings "0,10"* in December, in which Malevich proclaimed the principle of absolute non-objectivity. When the Bolsheviks rose to power, Futurism became a general synonym for avant-gardist art and was declared the "official art" of a new, left-wing Russia. Yet this "leftist art" was soon to fall victim to the state: exploiting it, the government would feel threatened by it after a short period of time.

Representationalism

Parallel to the stylistic movements of Primitivism, Rayonism, and Cubo-Futurism, which rapidly succeeded each other and from which would eventually emerge the abstract tendencies of Suprematism and Constructivism, such artists as Pavel Filonov, Boris Grigoriev, and Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin continued to stick to a figural approach, drawing their inspiration from and making reference to nature as a model and object of analysis.

With his concept of *analytic art*, Filonov deliberately turned against Cubism and Futurism and their Russian amalgamation of Cubo-Futurism. His painting relies on nature and presents – in a splintered formal language similar to that of Cubism – the process of an object's

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transfiguration and fragmentation. His objects and figures undergo a constant and vibrant transformation of color and form. Filonov's mystical and cosmic experiences of life result in what he called "analytic visions."

Boris Grigoriev's approach to reality is different. Devoting himself to the subject of Russian rural life, he addresses such themes as poverty and the inner strength of Russian peasants and their land. Grigoriev is considered a Neo-Realist who seeks to convey a vigorous expression with his figures. He created a vision of man deeply rooted in Russian country life and symbolizing a general state of mind and existence.

Among these artists, Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin was the one who felt least drawn to the avant-garde; his themes were marked by his origins in Symbolism. In his search for a new pictorial approach – the reorganization of a picture's space and planes – he arrived at his theory of *planetary vision* and his concept of *spherical perspective*. His sceneries unfold like world landscapes, animated by poetically mysterious figures and details.

Yet with their compositions, all of these artists working in figural and representational modes did fight the ideas of gravity and of a clear distribution of vertical and horizontal forces. Instead, their figures seem to float weightlessly and abysmally in an analytically fragmented (Filonov) or collapsing (Petrov-Vodkin) space, or in a space the clear delineation and definition of which is rejected by the composition (Grigoriev).

CHAGALL: Conflicting Sentiments and the Poetry of Remembrance

In 1911, Marc Chagall, at the age of twenty-three, left his hometown Vitebsk for Paris, where his art took shape in an interplay between his Russian ties and Yiddish roots on the one hand and the stylistic innovations of the Western European avant-garde on the other. The artist immersed himself in the art of Cubism and Fauvism and the vibrant colors of Van Gogh's painting. The realistically primitive approach of his early years in Russia was now followed by an expressive and surreally fantastic imagery springing from the poetic principle of remembrance. When he visited Vitebsk in 1914, the outbreak of the First World War forced him to stay in Russia.

For Chagall, a new era dawned; soon he was also considered a leading avant-gardist in his homeland. Initially, he enthusiastically welcomed the Revolution, which brought about the liberation from tsarism and held the promise of equal rights for all citizens. He believed that a new regime would also need new forms of art. During the years between 1917 and 1922, Vitebsk enjoyed an artistic heyday. In 1918, Chagall was appointed Commissar of Art and Culture for the region of Vitebsk. That same year he was put in charge of a public art college for which he subsequently enlisted Lissitzky and Malevich as teachers. But their different understanding of art soon gave rise to disputes and struggles for power. Malevich's uncompromising ideals of abstraction left no room for Chagall's poetic variant of a proto-Surrealist avant-garde. In 1920, all of Chagall's students changed sides and joined Malevich's class. Chagall's representational style was rejected as outdated, and the artist was forced to

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resign from his office. Disillusioned, he gave up the school to the Suprematists and went to Moscow, where he gradually sank into poverty for lack of an art market. Finding his work increasingly subjected to the control and censorship of the state, he left Russia for good and headed for the West: Berlin, Paris, Southern France, and New York would be the stops in his life, which lasted almost 100 years.

Chagall, like no other painter, united within himself the complex multiplicity of an artist's existence: a life oscillating between Western European Modernism and the naïve folk art of his native country, between the Christian world and the Jewish tradition.

SUPREMATISM: Malevich's Uncompromising Way toward Abstraction

On the occasion of the *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings "0,10"* in Saint Petersburg in 1915, Malevich proclaimed the abandonment of Futurism and the transition to absolute non-objectivity, i.e., to Suprematism. That same year Malevich painted various versions of the *Black* and *Red Squares*: icons of Suprematist art. In his *Suprematist Manifesto* he formulated the theoretical principles of this "supreme form of art" (from Latin *supremus*). The complete liberation from objectivity and the weightlessly floating fields of color were meant to produce absolute and pure sensations. Since the spiritual never really corresponds with the visible world, the latter's imitation in art cannot be regarded as a truly creative act. The nature of reality only manifests itself in radically abstract thought, which goes beyond immediate sensory perception. For Malevich, the artist's task was to expose the essence of the universe via a spiritual process.

The birth of Suprematism was accompanied by vehement rejection both from art critics and the artist's own avant-gardist circles. But Malevich unflinchingly elaborated on his system. Together with Olga Rozanova, Ivan Klyun, Lyubov Popova, and Alexandra Exter, former comrades-in-arms from the era of Cubo-Futurism, he founded an association of artists.

In 1920 he established the *Suprematist Party*, the UNOVIS group ("Advocates of New Art"), which was a reform movement devoting itself to the instruction and dissemination of Suprematist art. Malevich's radical rejection of concrete art eventually led to a fundamental discord between Chagall and Malevich, both of whom worked as teachers in Vitebsk. After all of Chagall's students had defected to Malevich's camp, Chagall finally gave up and resigned. He first moved to Moscow, where he sank into poverty, and in 1922 went to Paris.

KANDINSKY: The Spiritual Avant-Garde

Even Kandinsky, who had been the first to take the path toward abstraction, was not able to follow Malevich to the ultimate consequences in the latter's radical detachment from reality. Kandinsky's compositions are gradual abstractions of reality – of landscapes and depictions of Saint George – so that in the end he was forced to make way for Rodchenko's radical Constructivist position.

And yet Vasily Kandinsky was the pioneer proper of abstractionism. In 1910 he painted his first purely abstract watercolor: the first abstract work of all. Kandinsky was a cosmopolitan, living in Russia, Germany, France, and Switzerland. He headed art schools and was the initiator of artist groups. As early as 1896 he moved to Munich to study painting. By 1914 he had developed the theoretical and practical principles of his art. With his work and his writings he revolutionized European Modernism. In 1912 he edited the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* together with Franz Marc and published the seminal treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* in Munich. Nevertheless justice can only be done to this painter if one also regards him as an integral part of Russian art history.

Upon the outbreak of the First World War, Kandinsky returned to tsarist Moscow. Although he committed himself to the cultural renewal of the young Soviet Union, his bourgeois origins and transcendent and spiritual ideas of art made it difficult for him to find acceptance in avant-gardist circles. When he lost his fortune during the October Revolution and his program for the Russian Academy of Artistic Science, which had been co-founded by him, was rejected, he switched over to the Bauhaus as a teacher and remained in Germany until the institution was closed down by the National Socialists in 1933.

As do the Suprematists' floating pictorial ciphers, Kandinsky's compositions, too, defy gravity, which represented tsarism's old political system of coercion, earthbound realism, and institutionalized art academies. However, the mystical weightlessness of his pictures differs from the completely anchorless distribution of weights of color in vacant space in Malevich's compositions.

CONSTRUCTIVISM: Technical and Geometric Perfection

Around 1913, Constructivism appeared on the scene as one of several movements. At the time, Russian art was dominated by Rayonism and Cubo-Futurism, with Suprematism already announcing itself. In its absolute rejection of an imitational reproduction of reality, Constructivism was, besides Suprematism, the most consistent form of abstract geometric art. Constructivist compositions are characterized by a high degree of technical and geometric perfection. Their essential formal features are basic geometric shapes distributed across a picture's surface in a well-balanced arrangement. In addition to spatial constructions and effects of light and movement, color and "color concentration" played a crucial role.

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In contrast to the spiritual and cosmic aspects of Malevich's Suprematism, the Constructivist avant-garde pursued a social goal. Considered universal arts, architecture, painting, and sculpture should exist for the benefit of society. It was not by coincidence that many Constructivists also worked as architects and designers and conceived propaganda materials. Constructivism laid the foundation for painting's extension into the third dimension and for material assemblages. Alexander Rodchenko and El Lissitzky were the chief exponents of Constructivist painting.

AGITPROP: Art as Propaganda

The October Revolution of 1917 caused a wave of euphoria among artists, who felt called to actively partake in the world's renewal and implementation of new social visions. Many avant-gardists were fascinated by the ideas of equality and justice and enthusiastically committed themselves and their art to these causes. Lissitzky advertised for the victory of the Red Army with his dynamic posters; Malevich carried Suprematism out into the streets, declaring it a proletarian art. Under Lenin and his Commissar of Education, Lunacharsky, all forms of artistic expression were recognized as equal under the motto of the freedom of art. The new communist ideology was in need of new symbols and new forms of art. For this purpose, a special Visual Arts Section was installed, which had tsarist monuments demolished and new ones erected, dedicated to outstanding revolutionaries, writers, musicians, scientists, and artists. Important elements of these monuments were communist and Leninist slogans and appeals that would soon also appear on posters, porcelain, and walls. The artificial term *agitprop* (*agitation* and *propaganda*) was coined as an expression for communist political advertising under Lenin.

For an efficient implementation of these measures targeted at the people, the State Institute of Decorative Art was established in 1918. It was responsible for the promotion of the Soviet cause in all different ways: the propagandistic decoration of cities, poster design, the production of furniture, textiles, porcelain, toys and daily utensils, as well as theater costumes and stage sets based on designs by Malevich, Suetin, and Kandinsky. Many artists now also held public offices and headed art institutes, schools, and museums.

SUPRONATURALISM: "Those of the Future"

As is the output of so many of his contemporaries, Malevich's oeuvre, too, is marked by radical changes. With Suprematism, inaugurated in 1915, he had overcome his Impressionist and Futurist beginnings. Between 1919 and 1926, he temporarily gave up painting and devoted himself exclusively to research and teaching in order to provide Suprematism with a fundamental theoretical scaffold. Toward the end of the 1920s, he began developing his late work. At first sight, the paintings of these years seem inconsistent. The artist had inscribed

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many of them with an earlier date, and they also harked back to his figurative compositions of the 1910s in terms of style.

When Stalin seized power in 1924, the end of the Russian avant-gardes announced itself. While many artists, bowing to the government's repressions, returned to academic figuration, Malevich chose a different path. Embracing Russian reality, he modified the stylistic principles of his art, referring to the new approach he used from 1927 onward as *Supronaturalism*. He did paint in a figurative style, but continued to reject naturalism as a copy of reality. Combining peasant motifs or depictions of real people, such as his wife or workers, with the system of Suprematism, he arrived at a symbolic image of man that was equally removed both from realism and pure abstraction. Whereas the compositional principles of Suprematism reverberate in the sharply delineated colors and abstract geometric shapes, Malevich's attitude toward non-objectivity was now less radical. He succeeded in reconciling the irreconcilable: weightless, immaterial elements on the one hand and real living matter on the other – Suprematism and naturalism.

Socialist Realism or “The Voice of Stalin”

From the mid-1920s on, the avant-garde's stylistic, formal, and theoretical achievements were dismissed as “formalisms.” The Party demanded from art to put itself in the service of the state and devote itself to the working-class people and the ideal image of Soviet man. The propagandistic transmission of the new values, ideology, and lifestyle of the progressive Soviet people became a crucial criterion.

The artists responded to this change of cultural policy in different ways. Many abandoned abstract art and returned to representational approach. Therefore, in the oeuvre of one and the same artist, one may come across works that are entirely incompatible in terms of both style and theme, although they are separated by hardly a decade. Rodchenko embraced photography and produced propaganda posters. Filonov sought to paint scenes from industrial life, but missed Socialist Realism's tone of an optimistic future. In Malevich's late paintings, the peasants, workers, and members of the intelligentsia did not comply with the requirements of Stalin's official art doctrine either. In 1932, growing repression against the various avant-garde movements culminated in a party resolution that prohibited all of the artist groups and art movements except one: Socialist Realism.

The former innovators of the twentieth century had been excluded from the official art scene overnight. Those who had not already left the country, like Kandinsky (in 1921) or Chagall (in 1922), were persecuted. For a long time, their works would be excluded from exhibitions and removed from museums' permanent exhibitions. The great diversity of movements and styles that had once constituted the unique phenomenon of the Russian avant-garde was finally destroyed.