

## Malevich In Moscow

*Malevich 1878-1935*, although not the only exhibition of the artist's work in the Soviet Union since his death, is by far the most important.<sup>1</sup> A large and popular show, it runs at the New Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow until the 2nd of February. It is remarkable for the range and number of works displayed, drawn from Soviet collections and from the Stedelijk Museum, which cover all stages of Malevich's career. There is a great deal of supplementary material on display in the form of manifestos, books, teaching aids from Unovis and photographs. Pieces of the artist's writings are displayed next to the pictures. There appears to be no politically motivated selection of the work and the emphasis falls, if anywhere, on the cubo-futurist and suprematist work. Politically inconvenient works such as Malevich's propaganda luboks of the First World War, which the Soviet historian Zhadova describes as done in 'a short initial period of patriotic fervour'<sup>2</sup> are on display. Examples of his stage, costume and textile designs, as well as posters and architectural pieces are represented. This work reminds us to what degree Malevich, particularly in his involvement with UNOVIS, was committed to the transformation of the environment and how inadequate it is to view his suprematist paintings in isolation from this aim. An example of the use of suprematist painting is an architectural drawing for the decoration of a classical building using superimposed coloured geometrical shapes on the plain surfaces of the walls. This *Project for the Anniversary Decoration of the Workshop Building of the Committee for the Fight Against Unemployment* (1918, pencil, gouache and watercolour, 21x90 cms.) may give us some clue what Vitebsk looked like in 1920 on the third anniversary of the Revolution when Malevich and his Unovis students covered the town in suprematist designs.

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<sup>1</sup>There was a Malevich and Tatlin show at the Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow in 1962, and Malevich was represented at the Agit-art exhibition at the Tretyakov in 1967.

<sup>2</sup>Larissa A. Zhadova: *Malevich. Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, (London 1982) 30.



Malevich, *Portrait of V.A. Pavlov*, 1933

Seeing such a large grouping of the artist's work here reinforces the impression that Malevich's development rose and then fell almost in a mirror image of itself. He moved from conventional early work through his own personal stages of post-impressionism, cubism and cubo-futurism, finally arriving at non-objective art and, after a time of developing this, took the opposite path back through these styles, ending up at a highly traditional form again. So the last work in the show is the conventional and accomplished *Portrait of V.A. Pavlov* (1933, oil on canvas, 46.5x36.5cms.) which is actually more traditional than his earliest work. The organisers of the show highlight this curious development by juxtaposing a post impressionist piece from 1908 with the works of the thirties. The frontality of the figures in his post-impressionist city scenes of 1903-10, where typically a large central figure is seen against a complex background, is repeated in the more geometrical depictions of peasants from the thirties. In general the show is hung chronologically but the circular open plan of the gallery layout makes moving from one period to another very easy and again this complements the course of the artist's development.

There are two series of gouaches on display: one small and with a fairy tale like subject matter reminiscent of early pieces by Kandinsky. These include the *Shroud of Christ*, formerly in the Costakis collection, now in the Tretyakov (1908, gouache on cardboard, 23.3x37.4). The others from the Stedelijk, are larger and roughly handled in a naive manner that is no doubt meant to reflect their peasant subject matter. Preparatory sketches for the cubist works, such as the pencil sketch of 1911 for the *Portrait of the Artist Ivan Kliun*, are very detailed and complete suggesting that there was little working out of the composition on the canvas. There is little evidence of analytic work in these sketches although Malevich probably started with a subject in mind. They seem rather to suggest a synthetic process in which lines and shapes are developed independently of subject matter.

The show also allows us to follow a development in suprematism towards a smoother paint surface. As Zhadova points out, while constructivism moved towards more three dimensional form suprematism emphasised the relief of the painting surface less and less. Early suprematist works display a very scratchy paint surface with brush strokes leading in different directions: thin lines of underpainting can be seen at the junctions of the areas of colour. These factors tie them to the flatness of the canvas and make it difficult to see them as anything other than paintings. The fact that the shapes, such as *Red Square* (1915 oil on canvas, 53x53 cms.), are skewed and irregular makes it impossible to read them as representations of ideal Platonic shapes. Their presence is of a forceful particularity. This is less true of later suprematist paintings which appear smoother and less substantial. The draining of colour to the eventual conclusion of white on white was part of this process. This development may have been due to the movement of suprematism away from pure easel painting into the fields of design and decoration where what became significant was the formal ideas themselves.

While there is a surface similarity between the geometrical abstraction of Mondrian and Malevich, early suprematist work is a polar opposite of De Stijl. Mondrian's paintings are idealist and gesture towards supposedly infinite spaces outside of the canvas. As we have seen, Malevich's works use contingencies of shape and surface to express their particular nature. However, later suprematism seemed to move closer to De Stijl aesthetics at least in its aim to transform the environment. Some of Malevich's later pieces seem to be illustrations of this role. For instance, there are figures

modeling suprematist costume such as *Girl with a Comb* of 1932. It has to be said that most of the work that leads away from suprematism is of a lesser quality than that which leads to it. There may have been a sense in which Malevich felt that it was history as well as his artistic development that was reversing itself and that this lead to a loss of direction. However the chance to view both the best of Mondrian and Malevich at the Stedelijk, whose independent developments came so close together at some points and were so divergent at others will be a remarkable opportunity.