

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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(updated information)

## MALEVICH EXHIBITION TO OPEN AT NATIONAL GALLERY

Washington, D.C., August 3, 1990 -- The largest and most comprehensive retrospective ever held in America of the work of Russian artist Kazimir Malevich will begin a United States tour at the National Gallery of Art on September 16 through November 4, 1990. The exhibition Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935 will present approximately 170 paintings, works on paper, and architectural models from museums in the U.S.S.R., the U.S.A., the Netherlands, and France. Best known for his abstract "Suprematist" works, Malevich also worked in styles as diverse as impressionism, symbolism, neo-primitivism, and cubo-futurism. All phases of his artistic career, including his late return to figurative painting, will be featured in the exhibition.

The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art, the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, following an initiative by Dr. Armand Hammer.

The exhibition at the National Gallery is made possible by Philip Morris Companies Inc.

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"We are pleased to be opening this historic tour of works by one of the twentieth century's most extraordinary and influential artists," said J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery. "Like Kandinsky and Mondrian, Malevich created a new abstract language. His signature work Black Square of 1915 was at the time the most uncompromisingly nonobjective painting ever produced."

"The cooperative spirit that led to this exhibition demonstrates the shared understandings made possible through art," said Hamish Maxwell, chairman and chief executive officer of Philip Morris Companies Inc. "Malevich's achievements bear out our company's faith in creativity and innovation. We feel privileged to sponsor this major retrospective in our nation's capital."

Recognized as one of the seminal figures of modern art, Malevich has been better known to the public through publications rather than firsthand. In 1988-1989 an internationally heralded exhibition held in Leningrad, Moscow, and Amsterdam assembled the widest range of Malevich's work ever shown. Drawn from the holdings of the State Russian Museum in Leningrad, the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, it marked the first occasion in nearly six decades that an exhibition of Malevich's work had been seen in his own land. In addition to generous loans from these three collections, the National Gallery exhibition will offer a significantly altered selection, including several major works from American museums and important additions from Soviet sources.

Like the art of other members of the Russian avant-garde, Malevich's abstract idiom was increasingly regarded as ideologically alien in the political climate of the 1920s and early 1930s. After his death in 1935, his work was relegated to storage in Soviet museums. The inaccessibility of much of this work, combined with Malevich's own problematic dating of his paintings, has concerned scholars seeking to establish the chronology of his career. Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935 will reflect new thinking on this issue.

Born in Ukraine in 1878, Malevich received his early art training at the Kiev Academy. At the age of 29 he moved to Moscow where he made contact with the progressive group led by Natalya Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. Their neo-primitive style, rooted in Russian folk art, profoundly influenced his 1910-1911 paintings of peasant themes. Connections between the Moscow avant-garde and developments in western Europe were strong. Sergei Shchukin's and Ivan Morosov's growing collections of works by Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse were studied by young Russian artists, and the works of fauve, expressionist, cubist, and futurist artists were included in several Moscow exhibitions and publications. By 1912, Goncharova, Malevich, and others had begun to organize exhibitions that made a significant break with these European links, asserting a distinctively Russian direction to their art.

Malevich soon broke with this group and the pace of his independent growth toward a new aesthetic intensified. Several of Malevich's highly original "cubo-futurist" works of 1913-1914 were shown at an exhibition in early 1915, and within only a few months, he had produced 35 totally abstract paintings based upon what he called his "Suprematist" system. These early suprematist compositions, consisting of roughly geometrical elements unified on white surfaces, were presented to the public for the first time in December 1915.

Suprematism was among the most active movements initially supporting the 1917 Revolution. But by the early 1920s conflicts intensified between the Suprematists and the reactionary artistic forces who favored "Socialist Realist" art. In a climate of increasing intimidation, Malevich produced few paintings between 1920 and 1927.

However, Malevich continued to have a following abroad, and in 1927 he was invited to bring a large exhibition of his work to Warsaw and Berlin. Upon his return to Leningrad, he left this group of paintings, drawings, architectural models and a substantial collection of his writings in Germany. Later acquired by several western museums, primarily the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, these paintings have provided virtually the sole basis for the West's exposure to Malevich's art.

Back in Russia Malevich embarked upon a final phase of intense activity, producing a new group of figurative works. Examined within the context of his development, these late works express a new aesthetic, informed by the spirit of suprematism.

Angelica Zander Rudenstine, the consulting curator for Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935, developed the modified concept for the American exhibition and the revised chronological installation at the National Gallery. Marla Prather, National Gallery assistant curator of twentieth-century art, is coordinating the exhibition at the National Gallery.

Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935 will be the inaugural exhibition at the Armand Hammer Museum and Cultural Center, Los Angeles, November 25, 1990 through January 13, 1991; then it travels to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, February 7 through March 24, 1991. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Philip Morris Companies Inc. began its support of the arts in 1958. Since then, the company has developed one of the most comprehensive corporate cultural programs. Through its broad spectrum of sponsorship, Philip Morris promotes contemporary and minority visual and performing arts, as well as major international exhibitions and tours. Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935 is the third exhibition to be supported by Philip Morris at the National Gallery; the first was The Age of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent in 1987; the second, Treasures from the Fitzwilliam Museum in 1989.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION about the exhibition, please contact either Katie Ziglar or Hamlet Paoletti, National Gallery of Art, (202) 842-6353. For information about Philip Morris Companies Inc. and its support of the exhibition, please contact Alan Cohen, Rogers & Cowan, Inc., (212) 490-8200.

# National Gallery of Art

*Washington, D.C. 20565*

KAZIMIR MALEVICH'S LANDMARK DESIGNS FOR THE OPERA  
"VICTORY OVER THE SUN," TO BE SEEN IN UNITED STATES  
FOR FIRST TIME

In 1913, when "Victory Over the Sun" premiered at the Luna Park Theatre in St. Petersburg, the audience responded with laughter, whistles, shouts, and a barrage of rotten vegetables.

Sixty-seven years later, in 1980, when the cubo-futurist play-with-music or "opera" was reconstructed for the first time and performed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the audience roared again. This time, however, it was with excitement and appreciation for an event that had lured scholars from around the world.

Indeed, it was an event. The opera, suppressed for years in the Soviet Union, is considered today one of the seminal works in the development of "performance art." Furthermore, much of its music had been lost, and the set and costume designs by Kazimir Malevich--one of the pivotal figures in the creation of abstract art, and founder of the "Suprematist" movement in Russia just prior to the Revolution--had rarely been seen outside the Soviet Union.

Since the 1980 reconstruction, nearly all of the music has been found, but only now are the original set and costume designs coming to the United States. They are part of the exhibition Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935, on view at the National Gallery of Art from September 16 through November 4, 1990, and made possible by Philip Morris Companies Inc. In conjunction with the exhibition, a 1983 film of the reconstruction of "Victory Over the Sun" will be shown at the National Gallery.

"In 1913, 'Victory Over the Sun' excited audiences because it was visually unlike anything anyone had seen on a stage before," commented Robert Benedetti, director of the 1983 film as well as the staged reconstruction, which traveled from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., Berlin, Amsterdam, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York.

"The piece used a centralized lighting system, and it was the first attempted use of colored, movable spotlights. It also destroyed the usual narrative logic of most dramas, and frustrated the expectations of a bourgeois audience."

In fact, the opera was considered artistically revolutionary, with Malevich's cubist-style sets and costumes that challenged accepted visual logic and jumbled perspectives; a new, non-sense, abstract language called zaum ("beyond the mind") devised by the poet-theorist Alexei Kruchenykh; and music by the musician-painter Mikhail Matyushin designed to be performed on a broken-down, out-of-tune piano. Its authors declared it "The World's First Futurist Opera" and the dawn of a new age in art, lampooning the prevailing trends of symbolism and naturalism.

"Victory Over the Sun" played only two performances--on December 3 and 5, 1913, following two dress rehearsals. Because of a lack of funds, the show's posters were printed on cheap paper, and the actors were deliberately chosen from amateur ranks. The costumes--which Malevich made himself--were fashioned out of ordinary cardboard and wire, with the advanced lighting system helping to "melt" their cylindrical, conical, and cubist shapes into the geometry of the background.

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The opera consists of six scenes in two acts or "actions," with a prologue written by the poet-scientist Velimir Khlebnikov. Its basic theme, man against the sun, was meant to embody the futurist desire to transcend the present and visible.

The first action focuses on the capture and imprisonment of the sun by a band of Futurist Strongmen. The characters include Nero/Caligula, a representative of the old aesthetic; Time Traveler, a visionary; A Malevolent; and A Telephone Talker. The second action is set in the "tenth land" of the future, after the sun has been carried away, and marks a transition to the new age. Featured in this action are the New, the Cowardly, and the Fat Man. In the finale, the characters proclaim, "All's well that begins well and has no end/the world will perish but there is no end to us!"

"One of my personal favorites is the Fat Man," said Martha Ferrara, associate dean of theater and director of costume design at the California Institute of Arts, who recreated Malevich's costumes for the 1980 reconstruction. "His costume was a large, round shell with a huge neck and large arm openings. In the story, he is scared about the future, and the costume allows him to withdraw his head and arms like a turtle--it permits the performer to explore what the character is feeling."

Ms. Ferrara, who worked from snapshots of Malevich's original drawings, noted that they show only one side of the body. "You have to try to figure out what the other three sides look like," she said. "But for me, his work is so powerful that in drawing just that one profile side of the body, he told me



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what the other three sides looked like. He brought the interior human skeletal anatomy to the outside."

Alma Law, a specialist in twentieth-century Russian theater who produced the American and European tour after it left Los Angeles, said, "The most remarkable aspect of the costumes is the way in which Malevich's designs determined the movement of the characters. The Strongman can only flex his muscles; the Old Man can only walk with an elderly gait because his right leg is bound in cardboard; and the Fat Man cannot bend over."

Malevich's "Suprematist" art was not exhibited until 1915, but his backdrops for "Victory Over the Sun" and his use of geometric forms in the costumes point toward a rejection of the imitation of nature in favor of "the supremacy of pure feeling" and an attempt to change consciousness, to reach a higher, fourth plane of psychic life. In fact, it was the curtain design of the second act-- a square divided diagonally into black and white--that Malevich designated as representing the birth of "Suprematism."

"Malevich threw caution to the wind," said Ms. Ferrara. "That's how an expressive work of art happens. I honor him today by holding him up as an example of someone who got into social and political hot water because of his personal expression. He took risks."

The 1983 film "Victory Over the Sun" will be shown at the National Gallery, October 10-13 at 12:30 p.m., and October 14 at 1:00 p.m. in the East Building Auditorium.

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