

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Malevich and the Soviet State

Charlotte Douglas of New York University spoke to students and faculty of the Harriman Institute April 11 about the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich and the controversies surrounding his work. Malevich, an influential artist of the early twentieth century, has lately been receiving a great deal of attention both in the Soviet Union and in the West.

A large retrospective of Malevich's work is currently on display at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, having been shown earlier in the Soviet Union. This exhibit gives many Westerners their first look at the artist's later paintings, which come from the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the Russian Museum in Leningrad. Douglas described these works as "surprising and to some extent problematic."

### The Artist's Life

Malevich was a prolific artist in the late Imperial years, painting in an increasingly abstract vein. He was politically active during the revolution (though not before) as head of the Arts Section of the Soldiers' Soviet in Moscow, and assumed responsibility for defending the treasures of the Kremlin art collections during street fighting. "He was considered very pro-Bolshevik," Douglas noted.

The artist went to teach at the Vitebsk Art School in 1919, virtually abandoning painting in favor of promoting Suprematism, the abstract art movement he had founded. Some of the school's work was practical, such as producing ration cards, but much of it was "visionary and utopian." During this period, Malevich grandly developed a universal system of architecture for the planet — "large residential buildings that floated above the earth, and that sort of thing."

Malevich also wrote three major books expressing a philosophy that art was "essentially symbolist in nature. He considered Suprematism the art of an ultimate state of being, beyond objects, and hence beyond all questions either of a material or a religious world." Malevich believed that a person's perception was highly subjective, that "we have no access to the ultimate reality." For him, Suprematism was a bridge to this deeper reality. "Suprematism is the mirror that reflects this higher world,

rather than the changing objects in the human kaleidoscope," he wrote.

### Trouble at Home

Malevich's adherence to Suprematism did not endear him to realist painters, who were gaining prominence during the early 1920s. These artists took offense at his statements that Suprematism was "beyond ideas of culture and class struggle" and at the way he encouraged students to adopt a "pure," abstract style.

In the summer of 1922, famine in Vitebsk forced Malevich and his students to move to Petrograd. There he "was increasingly vulnerable to attack, as right-wing artistic opinion gained ground," represented mainly by the popular social realists. These were artists who both artistically and politically "went for the jugular." The Association of Artists of the Russian Revolution (AKhRR), the organization of realist artists, had "gained their support in the socially aggressive and artistically conservative labor and military organizations." They considered Malevich too idealistic, maintaining that theirs was "the genuine proletarian art."

After the June 1926 show of the State Institute of Artistic Culture, Malevich was denounced by a militant critic in *Leningradskaya Pravda*, who condemned "objectless art" for its "lack of utility." The crude and polemical attack was headlined "A Government-Supported Monastery." It concluded by saying that "now, when gigantic tasks are towering before proletarian art, and when hundreds of really talented artists are going hungry, it is criminal to maintain a huge magnificent mansion so that crazy monks can, at government expense, carry on artistic debauchery or counterrevolutionary propaganda that is not needed by anybody." Shortly after, local authorities came down against Malevich, and his school was closed.

### The Late Paintings

Facing a hostile situation at home, Malevich traveled outside Russia for the only time in his life. He exhibited in



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early 1927 in Berlin and Warsaw, where he also lectured. He visited the Bauhaus School, met with other artists, and "was surprised to encounter so many painting styles in Europe." Western friends were not so interested in his theorizing as they were in getting him to paint again. He returned to Russia in June 1927, leaving behind the works he had exhibited.

Because of his friends' encouragement, and because he could no longer teach or publish, he did renew painting. But rather than move his art forward, he apparently sought to perpetrate a bizarre fraud: "Instead of painting entirely new works, Malevich attempted to reproduce old ones, falsely dating them twenty years earlier. For the next several years, Malevich painted impressionist portraits and landscapes and primitivist peasant scenes, and back-dated them to the years 1903-1910. Many of the resulting pictures are a testament to the fact that the return to painting after such a long hiatus was difficult. Much of the work is tentative and awkward. Some of it is embarrassingly bad."

AKhRR continued its vendetta against Malevich, leading him to state, "they want to destroy me." He was arrested after a new exhibit in 1929-30, charged with being a German spy, and incarcerated for three months. (He described to a friend the sort of questions posed by his interrogators: "What kind of Cezanne-ism do you talk about? What kind of cubism do you preach?") In the early 1930s Malevich continued to paint, experimenting in new styles. He died in 1935, after a long illness.

## Critical Debate

Malevich had left behind many of his early works (painted before 1920) in Berlin and Warsaw, and they were "diffused throughout the West," gaining respect here as part of modern art history. Many Western art lovers familiar with these works will therefore be surprised to come across the misdated Malevich paintings from Russian collections in the current Amsterdam exhibit.

Most of these works are owned by the Russian Museum, which is reluctant to accept that the works were done in the late twenties. Indeed, the signed dates had been generally accepted until Douglas published an essay — based on research at the Russian Museum in 1975 — that created controversy in the art world. The debate about dating will probably grow as *glasnost*' leads the Soviets to focus attention on Malevich as well as on other long-neglected artists.

*Reported by Paul Lerner*

Note: There was an error in the last issue of *At The Harriman Institute* (on Soviet documentary filmmakers). The *Glasnost*' Film Festival was originated and organized by William Starr, Executive Director of the American Federation of Film Societies.

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