Orthodox Iconography and Russian Avant-Garde Painting

There are similar techniques used in the Russian iconographic tradition and in Russian avant-garde. This may seem to be a surprising statement given the radical and unorthodox nature of the avant-garde proclaimed in such manifestos as *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*. For instance however, the neo-primitivist movement and the art of artists such as Malevich, Goncharova, Larionov, Filonov, and Tatlin show remarkably iconographic tendencies. The iconographic style possesses many of the things that avant-garde artists were looking for, such as multi-dimensionality, multiple non-direct perspectives, meaning in colors, symbolism and a non-naturalistic vision. These techniques were rediscovered by the avant-garde artists in their effort to break out from the dominating representational art forms of the past. I would like to look at some of the intersections of these two art forms, and through a comparison of iconographic goals to identify some of the goals that brought the avant-garde artists to their methods. Several aspects of iconography should be considered: perspective, the use of light and color, geometry, subject and purpose.

Perspective is one of the most unusual technical aspects of iconography. Most so called realistic art uses linear perspective, sometimes called 'modern central perspective'. This perspective developed in the 15th century to represent the world in the most mathematically accurate way. The vanishing point, in which 2 parallel lines appear to converge to a point on the horizon, is the basis of this perspective. A more complicated use of it occurred in late renaissance painting, but for our purposes that explanation will suffice. Iconography however uses what is

called the inverted perspective. The vanishing point is in front of the canvas rather than behind it. It is not adequate to say that the vanishing point is the viewer. Instead it could be said to be behind the viewer. Additionally, icons do not have one unified convergence point but rather each object might have its own perspective. The lines of the perspective move out from the surface toward the viewer; enveloping him in its space. This perspective is the opposite of the linear perspective. It is not a window through which ones sees the space represented. It is rather the space projecting *through* the window, creating a place of encounter. An advanced study of the iconographic perspective shows it is far from this simple however. Another way of describing the inverted perspective is: "dynamic space"[1]. Taking two linear perspective images of the same object, one from the front-left side and one for the front-right side, and then moving them to converge in the middle produces an interesting result. The resulting image of the object shows both sides of the object with the front of the object compressed and the back expanded. This looks similar to inverted perspective but can have variations of multiple positions and angles merged together.

Objects on the edges of icons typically fall under a modified kind of linear perspective with the vanishing point below the horizon. This makes these objects push out to the sides, straightens their lines, and sometimes even fragments the object in half with mirroring. Very technical treatises have been written on this subject and much is still being studied; however the brief glimpse I have given should be enough for comparative purposes here.

Certain colors may possess connotations within a cultural context and byzantine iconography inherited these meanings. While there was not a written prescribed cannon of color sym-

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[1] Zhegine, L. F., *Iazyk zhivopis'novo proizvedenia (The Language of Pictoral Work).* Moscow: Iskuvstvo. 1970

bology a symbolical color consistency can be interpreted from tradition and from practicum manuals. In many cases an object's color intended to communicate its meaning or essence rather than its natural appearance. Iconography did not highly regard naturalism in any aspect. "Color cannot be understood as simply a decorative element; it was part of an artistic language and attempted to make the transcendent world visible."[2]

An icon's internal light is often spoken of. There is no reflected light, but rather everything is permeated with, and radiates out, God's uncreated light.. No attempt at naturalistic light is even attempted: no shadows, no particular light direction. Fr. Pavel Florensky, a 20th century Russian mathematician and theologian, says this of iconographic light:

> *Iconpainting considers light not as something external to objects; neither does it consider light as belonging to some primordial substance: for iconic light establishes and builds things, become the objective cause of their existence; and, precisely because it cannot be conceived as external, iconic light is the transcendental origin of things, a creative origin that manifests itself through things but does not terminate in them.*[3]

And finally geometry plays an important part in iconography. Not only is an icon's perspective geometrically involved, but the composition is often consciously geometric. At the center of this geometric system are the shapes of the cross, circles, and triangles. Particularly the interaction of halos, faces and hand and body lines in the Mother and Child compositions are geometrically arranged.

Most art tries to engage the viewer on intellectual, visual, or emotional levels. Icons however do not have this purpose. The purpose of the icon is manifesting the presence of the person in the icon; manifestation of the unity of the two natures of Christ: the human and the di-

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[2] Egon Sendler. "The Icon." California: Oakwood Publications, 1995. 150

[3] Pavel Florensky. (Translation: Donald Sheehan, Olga Andrejev.) "Iconostatis." New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996. 150

vine. It presents this place of contact as it were for the viewer to enter into. In Christ's incarnation, God became visible. Icons continue this manifestation. "The Church considers the language of images to be just as valuable as that of word in revealing the reality of God. ... An icon is a statement of faith ... icons are a language by which the Word of God expresses Himself."[4]

Having covered the iconographic aspects let us now look at some examples of avant-garde art that have iconic aspects. In 1901 and then in 1913, there were two large iconographic exhibitions in Moscow. For the first time Russian icons were shown in a museological context. This was spurned by and in turn influenced more interest in icons outside of their religious context. Part of the novelty of these exhibits was the restoration of a great many early icons (15th and 16th centuries) which had never before been seen. These icons (including Rublev's *Trinity*) were relatively unknown for a period of time because of the heavy darkening of the *olifa* (a linseed oil varnish) from both age and soot. Larionov, the originator of the Rayonist movement organized an exhibitition entitled, "Exhibition of Icons and Lubki" also in 1913. He exhibited 129 icons from his own collection.

Most artists at the time were raised Orthodox, and some even studied as iconographers. Certainly the aesthetic of the icon was familiar to them. However, as artists they were not so much interested in the religious purpose of the icon as they were attracted to the novelty of the technical aspects.

One of the first Russian avant-garde artists to look toward icons for inspiration was Natalia Goncharova. In a manifesto from 1913 she writes: "I shake the dust from my feet and leave the West . . . my path is toward the source of all arts, the East. The art of my country is incompara-

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[4] Fr. Andrew Tregubov. "The Light of Christ, Iconography of Gregory Kroug." Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990. 12

ble more profound and important than anything that I know in the West."[5] The neo-primitivist movement was blossoming throughout the art world, however, "In the West, the primitive was somewhere else. In Russia, it was within. It did not take you away from the fatherland, it rooted you in it. It did not flee 'traditions,' it rediscovered or reinvented them."[6] In part Russia's own interest in its past was influenced by the opinions of foreigners. Matisse when visiting Moscow in 1911 commented: "The Russian icon is a very interesting type of primitive painting. Nowhere have I ever seen such a wealth of color, such purity, such immediacy of expression. This is the best thing Moscow has to offer."[7]

Goncharova painted stylized simplified icons that were closer to Ethiopian primitivism than Moscow iconography. Her religious paintings had few of the traditional iconographic aspects I mentioned earlier. They were almost a primativization of the iconographic traditions. Her use of light is interesting, however, in that, although it isn't quite iconic light, her rayonist style is quite a bit like the *probela* technique used for highlights in iconography. It would seem that rayonism, a movement invented by Larionov and Goncharova together, is very much influenced by iconic light. In Larionov's rayonism all objects are composed of and emit light rays. Portraying only the intersecting light rays frees the artist from representation and shows the inner nature of the objects rather than the objects themselves. In his words:

> *"Perception, not of the object itself, but of the sum of rays from it, is, by its very nature, much closer to the symbolic surface of the picture than is the object itself. (...) Rayonism erases the barriers that exist between the picture's surface and nature."*[8]

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[5] Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova. "Rayonists and Futurists: A Manifesto, 1913."

[6] Alain Besancon. "The Forbidden Image." University of Chicago Press, May 7, 2001. 330

[7] F. Marinetti: "Una sensibilita italiana nata in Egitto" in G. Gerrara, intr.: "F.T. Marinetti. La grande Milano tradizionale e futurista." Milan: Mondadori, 1969, 317

[8] Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova. "Rayonists and Futurists: A Manifesto, 1913."

Goncharova's rayonist style paintings were never as abstract as Larionov's. The intersection here of the importance of light for both iconographers and rayonists is striking. The rays of rayonism resemble the pure iconic light — God's uncreated light which creates and shapes.

Iconographic clothing with its crystalline transparent mineral like folds and coloring seems particularly to be an influence on Rayonism. The garments, specifically in Russian iconography of the 15th century, were almost as if composed of light rays. The golden yellow background of icons is pure golden divine light in which everything exists. Rayonism according to Larionov is the reflected light of objects, not the divine light within objects. Yet there are similarities at least of technique and of the importance placed on light.

Goncharova was fascinated with the East. Byzantine iconography with its eastern influences was of great interest to her as an art form that melded east and west. She believed that the past's religious paintings were the "most majestic, perfect manifestation of man's creative activity."[9] The icon for her was not as much a technical innovation but rather a spiritual symbol. Many of her paintings had spiritual Orthodox subjects; for instance *Evangelists* (1911), considered by some of her contemporaries to be her best work. Some that weren't explicitly religious shared compositional and color aspects with icons. *Evangelists* caused some outrage, and following a particular unfavorable review all works on religious subjects at her 1914 show in St. Petersburg were seized by the Moscow censors. The censors claimed content incompatibility with the irreverent exhibition title of "Donkey's Tail."

Partially influenced by Larionov's and Goncharova's neo-primitivism the young Malevich also painted icons. In 1908, he exhibited *Studies for a Fresco Painting*. Although the works ex-

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[9] Quoted from "Origins of the Russian Avant-Garde." For commentary, see T. Durfee, "Natalia Goncharova" in *Experiment* (Los Angeles, 1995), no. 1, 159-64.

hibited had few consistent iconographic aspects, they did have religious subjects and unmistakable religious symbolism and subjects. Like most artists of the time he was exposed to icons and neo-primitivism. Initially he experimented with various "-ism" movements. Referring to his first and second Peasant cycles he says, "I did not proceed further along the line of antiquity, of the Renaissance or of the *peredvizhniki*. I remained on the side of peasant art and began painting pictures in the primitive spirit. At first, during the initial period, I imitated icon painting. The second period was purely 'laborious,' i.e., I painted peasants at work, harvesting, and threshing."[10]

One of the movements he experimented with, cubo-Futurism, was a uniquely Russian art movement: a reinterpretation of Italian futurist interest in motion combined with the French cubist fragmentation of forms and Russian neo-primitivism. Malevich's *The Knife Grinder* (1912) is a great example of this. Particularly interesting is the multi-dimensional perspective used. In this painting the viewer is surrounded by the room. Steps appear beside and behind the viewer and a railing appears on the other side. The knife grinder himself is portrayed at several time slices, and from different angles. These techniques are quite similar to both inverted perspective and the unfettered time of the byzantine icon. Here is what Malevich says about perspective: "when art felt the need to expand the growth of its body, it was necessary to destroy the catacomb of wedge-shaped perspective. We began to see the world differently and discovered its many-side movement and were thus face with the problem of how to convey it fully."

Malevich's family was religious and even at one point wanted him to become a priest. Instead he took up painting and, when he could, moved to Moscow. Instead of taking inspiration

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[10] G. G. Pospelov, *Bubnovyi valet. Primitiv i gorodskoi fol'klor v moskovskoi zhivopisi 1910-kh godov.* Moscow, 1990. 105

from the techniques or subjects of icons he tried to create a new iconography. He took upon himself the priesthood of preaching the "new Gospels in art." His "suprematism" was meant to change the world, and in many ways it did. His purely non-objective geometricity is influencing art even today.

Malevich's most important piece was *The Black Square* (1915). The banner of his new art, it held the central place as the icon of Malevich's new iconography. In his exhibit *0.10. The Last Futurist Exhibition* he hung this painting in the so called *red corner (красный угол)*, which is where, traditionally in religious Russian homes, there would be placed an icon, the place of honor typically surrounded by other icons to form an icon corner. This would be the place toward which everybody would turn and pray before every meal. "Hence I see the justification and true significance of the Orthodox corner in which (..) the holy image stands (...), the holiest occupies the center of the corner. (...) The corner symbolizes that there is no other path to perfection except the path into the corner. This is the final point of movement."[11]

He also writes about the meanings of the colors black and white, or rather non-colors. He places great importance in white. In fact his white is iconography's golden yellow. "The blue color of the sky has been defeated by the suprematist system, has been broken through and entered white as the true, real conception of infinity, and therefore liberated from the color background of the sky."[12] This is the purity and infinity of the divine light in icons. His black is the iconic black. It is the ultimate darkness and nothingness; the "zero of form." He uses this zero square on infinite background as the generator for his 'system' of art.

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[11] Linda S. Boersma. "The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting." Rotterdam: 010 Publishers. 1994. 69

[12] Malevich. "Suprematism." Malevich on Suprematism. Ed. Patricia Railing. University of Iowa, Museum of Art. 1999. 45

In 1914, Fr. Pavel Florensky published *The Pillar and Foundation of Truth*, an 800-page collection of essays on topics ranging from the meaning of icons to the mathematics of infinity to irrational number and also a discussion on squares. Florensky also happened to be a friend of Malevich's so it is not unlikely that Malevich was influenced by his thoughts and writings. A year later Malevich unveiled suprematism. The Florensky-Malevich connection is conjecture, yet there were many scientific and mathematical advances during those years that may have influenced Malevich's thinking as he prepared his *Suprematism.*

In 1915, Malevich and Tatlin opened an exhibit called *0,10* in which was exhibited Malevich's *The Black Square.* John Milner in his book *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* presents a compelling argument that *The Black Square* is the origin of a geometrical system. Malevich divided his canvases into *arshin* and *vershki*, which are old Russian units of measure. He could subdivide a canvas into 2,4,8, and 16 (there are 16 *vershki* in 1 *arshin*). This turns out to be something that has been overlooked in studying his art since in centimeters or inches all the measures appear arbitrary. What is fascinating is that in this exhibit the rhythmic relationships inside of the paintings could also be seen *between* the paintings as well. His paintings were on two walls and on the top corner connecting them hung *The Black Square*. John Milner writes, "Each canvas, partaking of the system, can be used to create further works without the relation of forms becoming arbitrary or incoherent. *The Black Square* is the simplest and therefore the primary 'generator'."[13] Looking at a photograph of this exhibit with this in mind it is striking how it all starts to fit together, each line being a reflection or projection or connection of a line or angle in another painting and all originating from *The Black Square*. It was an icon not only by

[13] John Milner. "Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry." New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1996. 127.

placement but also by purpose as "it opened a door to a world parallel to our own."[14] Malevich thought that, "a painted surface is a real living form."[15] Each painting transcended its canvas. The suprematist paintings are mathematically calculated geometrical forms interacting with each other and with the viewer. Some of them even cannot stand alone without others. In a way he was not only creating icons but a whole new religious system where the space of worship was filled with Suprematist paintings; a system that could generate a unifying harmony for society.

I would like to briefly mention a few more avant-gardists; in particular Filonov and Tatlin. Tatlin began his career as an iconographer. His friendship with Malevich seems to have ended at the *0,10* exhibition where they disagreed over Malevich's suprematism philosophy. He more than others treated the icon as a "tactile experience of materials in the interplay of the surface and volumes."[16] He not only analyzed them for form (as in the *Composition Analysis of an Icon of the Virgin Mary* (1913)) but, being familiar with the construction of the icon board, he incorporated the wooden icon board format into his counter-reliefs. As an example *Artist's Model*, reflects the use of highlights and geometric curves. Filonov studied icon-painting as well. His artwork often interpreted biblical iconographic scenes into his cubist language of transrational colors, such as *The Holy Family* (1914). He included not only themes and colors from icons, but sometimes even complete images, as can be seen in *Mother* (1916).

All the Russian avant-garde artists searched for new forms in purely painterly art. They also yearned for a new unity. They realized that art could be more than a passive experience of

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[14] ibid.

[15] T. Anderson *Malevich: Essays*, vol. 1. 19

[16] Nicolette Misler, John Bowlt. "The 'New Barbarians'." Origins of the Russian Avant-Garde. Ed. Yevgenia Petrova. State Russian Museum, Palace. 2003. 33

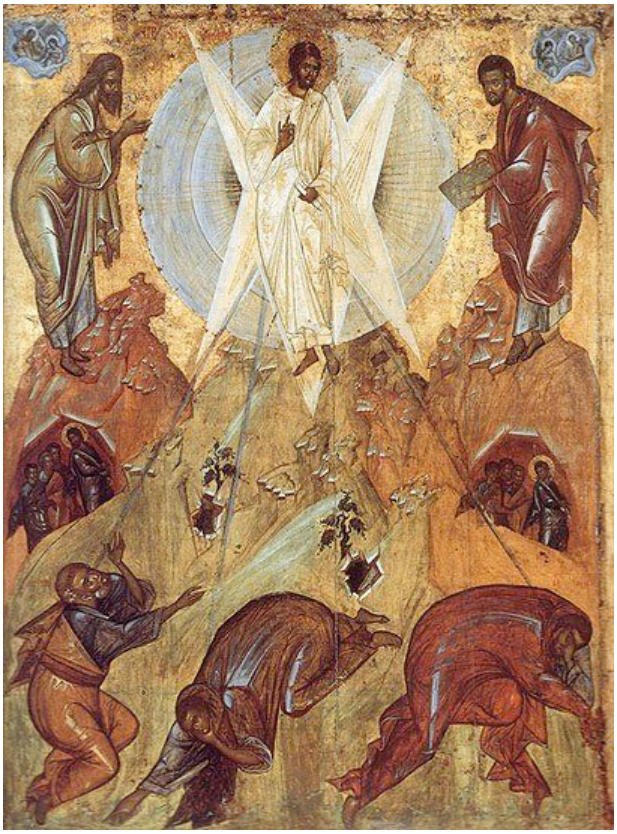
looking and being fed an experience. That like the stepping into the space of the icon, the comprehension of the geometry of *The Black Square* for instance, could be participatory. Icons had been doing something like this for ages, and in rediscovering them the artists found new ideas for furthering their own iconography. An artist no longer had to speak but could discuss. Applying the inverted perspective to themselves the artists inverted their souls and poured them out on canvas. Malevich in nothingness found everything. An artwork could effect the world outside of its boundaries. In creating a parallel world for the viewer to step into the future could be altered. "For them art was transcendental and transformative for it could change human consciousness, and hence reality."[17] To this day Russian artists are finding inspiration and depth in their iconographic tradition.

[17] John Bowlt. "Orthodoxy and the Avant-Garde." *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*. Ed. Brumfield and Velimirovic. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1991

Color Plates:

Andre Rublev, *Holy Trinity* (c1400)

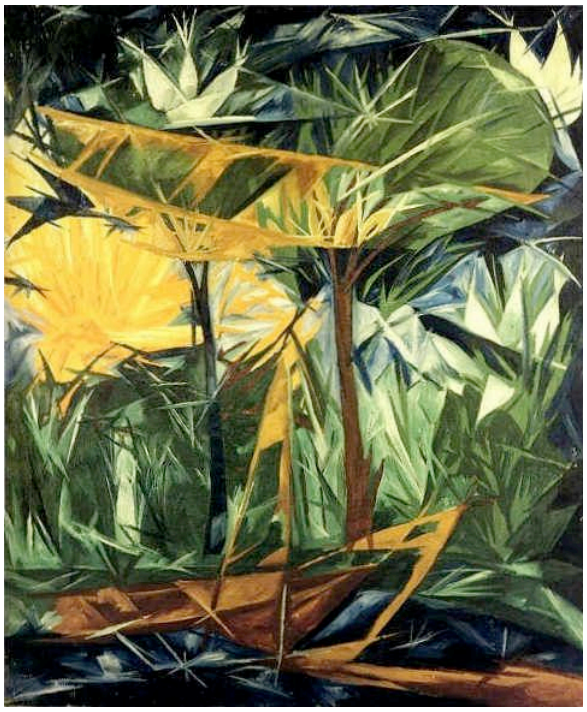
Fr. Andrew Tregubov, *Theotokos* (1995)



Andre Rublev, *Transfiguration* (c1400)

Goncharova.

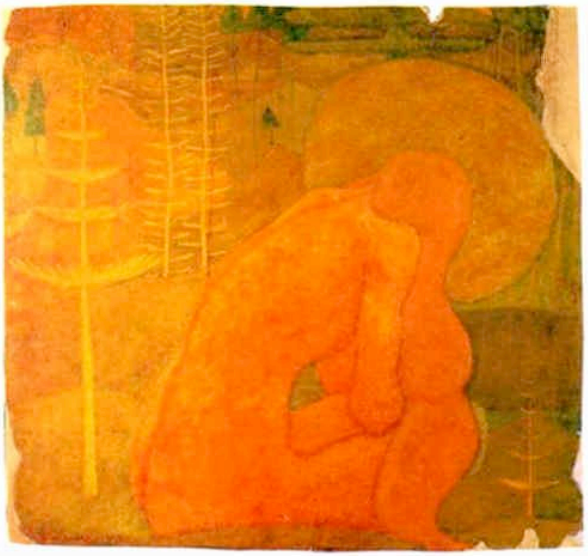
Evengelists (1910)



Goncharova, *Yellow and Green Forest. A Rayonist Construction.* (1912)

Goncharova. *St George the Victorious.* (1914)

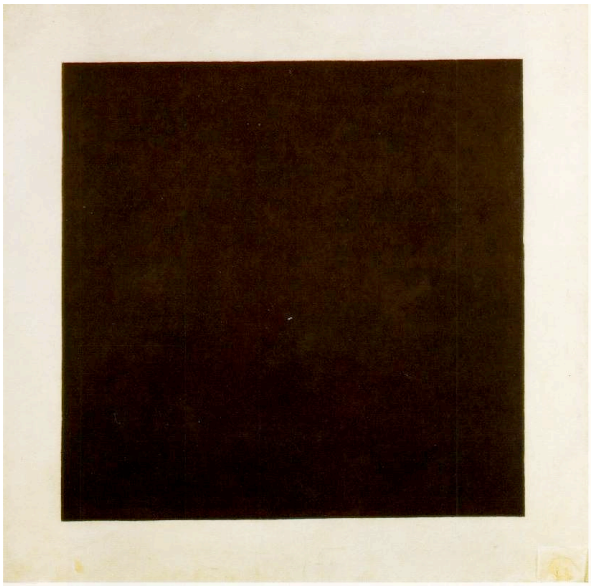
From the series: *Mystical Images of War*



Kazimir Malevich, *Prayer. Study for a Fresco Painting*. (1908)

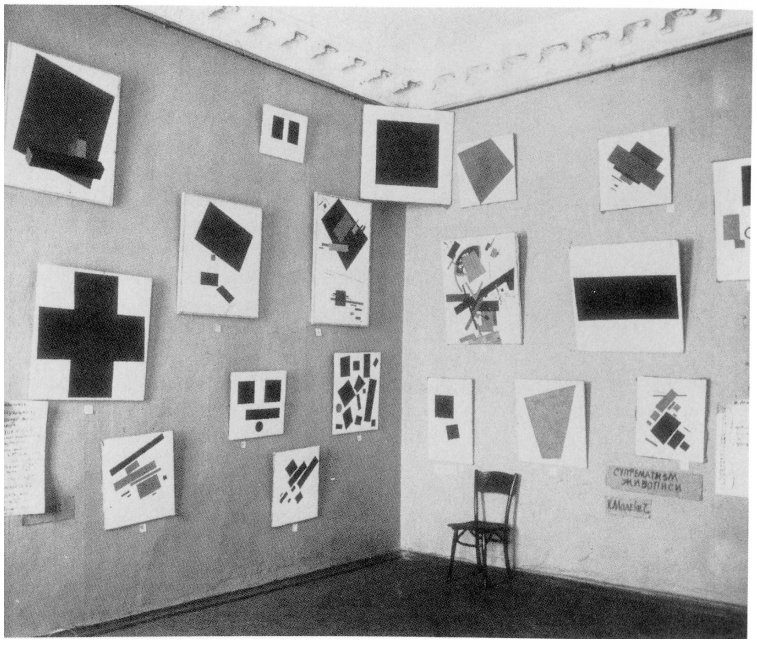
Kazimir Malevich, *Triumph of the Heavens. Study for a Fresco Painting.* (1908)

Kazimir Malevich, *Knife Grinder.* (1912)

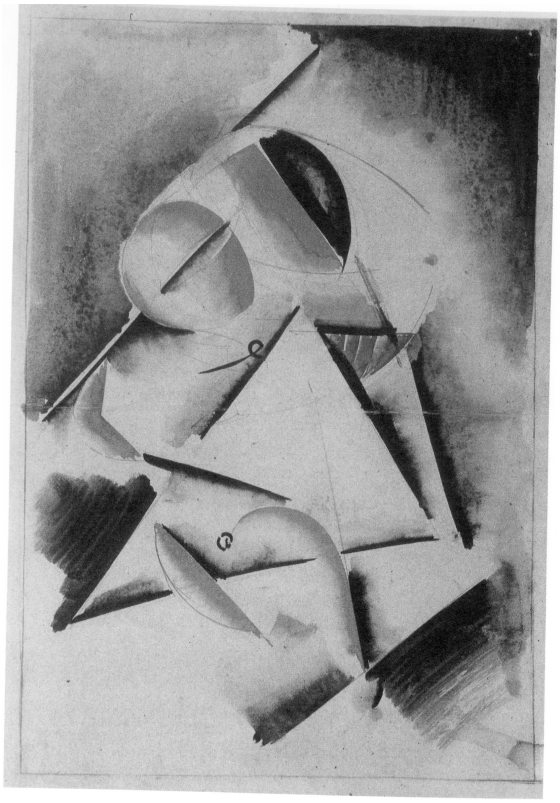


Kazimir Malevich, *The Black Square* (1913)

Kazimir Malevich. *Suprematism* (1921-1927)



Kazimir Malevich, *0,10 last Futurist Exhibit.* (December 1915-January 1916)

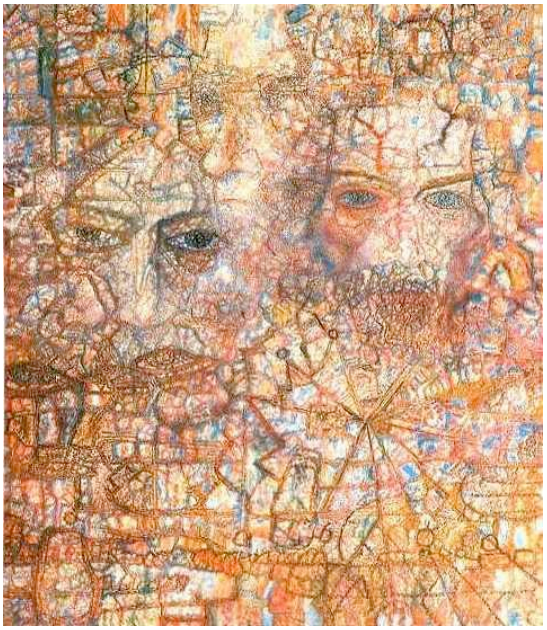


Tatlin, *Composition Analysis of an Icon of the Virgin Mary.* (1913)

Tatlin, *Artist's Model* (1910)

Filonov, *Icon of St. Ekaterina* (1908)

Filonov, *The Holy Family* (1914)



Filonov, *Countenances (Faces on an Icon)*. (1940)

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