

Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922
The Jewish Museum
September 14, 2018-January 6, 2019

Wall Texts and Object Labels

Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922, is organized by the Centre Pompidou, Paris, in collaboration with the Jewish Museum, New York.

Angela Lampe
Curator of Modern Collections, Musée National d'Art Moderne
Exhibition Curator

Claudia J. Nahson
Morris and Eva Feld Curator
Supervising Curator for the Jewish Museum

DONORS TO THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition is supported through the Samuel Brandt Fund, the David Berg Foundation, the Robert Lehman Foundation, the Centennial Fund, and the Peter Jay Sharp Exhibition Fund. The publication is made possible, in part, by The Malevich Society.

Nonflash, noncommercial photography for personal use is permitted in this exhibition except where the following symbol appears:

#ChagallLissitzkyMalevich

Exhibition design: Leslie Gill Architect
Graphic design: Topos Graphics
Lighting: Clint R. Coller
Intern: Paulina Fedotova
Research Assistant: Ori Hashmonay

The companion volume to the exhibition is on sale in the Cooper Shop in the museum's lobby.

--

Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918–1922

Introduction

“I found myself in Vitebsk when the great celebrations of the October Revolution were over, but the city was still resplendent with Malevich’s designs—circles, squares, dots, and lines of different colors—and with Chagall’s flying people. I had the impression of being in an enchanted city, but in those days everything was wonderful, and everything was possible, and at that moment the people of Vitebsk had become Suprematists.”

Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaia, 1921

This is the first major exhibition to explore a little-known chapter in the history of the Russian avant-garde: Marc Chagall’s encounter with the leading figures of abstraction, El (Lazar) Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich, at the time of the Russian Revolution. In 1917 Communist forces overthrew the autocratic Tzarist regime that had ruled Russia for more than four hundred years; a civil war followed, culminating in the establishment of the Soviet Union. This radical change in government kindled a passionate idealism among artists, who saw themselves as agents in the remaking of Russian society and culture.

In 1918 Chagall (1887–1985) conceived the People’s Art School in his native city of Vitebsk (today in Belarus). He was soon joined by Lissitzky (1890–1941) and Malevich (1879–1935), along with other teachers and students, many of them Jewish, including Lazar Khidekel and David Yakerson.

The three major figures sought, each in his distinctive fashion, to develop a leftist art in tune with the new revolutionary emphasis on collectivism, education, and innovation. Chagall remained mostly faithful to a figurative and allegorical style, in contrast to Malevich, whose recent invention, Suprematism, offered a radical form of geometric abstraction. Lissitzky, a trained architect, applied the concepts of Suprematism to his innovative Prouns—geometric compositions that he called “a transfer station on the way from painting to architecture.”

In this period of intense artistic and political ferment, history was made through art. Visionary creativity was nurtured in a city far from the cultural centers of Moscow and Petrograd. The five years following the 1917 Revolution transformed Vitebsk into the laboratory of a new world.

--

OUTSIDE THE ELEVATOR

Chronicle of the Russian Revolution, 1917

32mm film, black-and-white, silent,

Fifteen-second extract

Gaumont Pathé Archives, Saint-Ouen, France

--

TO THE LEFT OF THE INTRODUCTION

Teachers, students, and employees of the Vitebsk People's Art School, winter 1919–20
Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris

1. Iosif Baitin
2. Lev Yudin
3. Lev Zevin
4. Osip Bernstein
5. Ivan Turzhansky
6. David Yakerson
7. Yuri (Yehuda) Pen
8. Marc Chagall
9. Kazimir Malevich
10. Vera Ermolaeva
11. R. I. Rosenfeld
12. Itigin
13. Ivan Gavris
14. Mikhail (Moisei) Kunin
15. Sima Rivinson
16. Isaak Beskin
17. Fanya Belostotskaya
18. Evgenia Magaril
19. Elena Kabichtcher
20. Boris Tseitlin
21. Lazar Zuperman
22. Georgy Noskov
23. Tatiana Meerson
24. Khabas
25. Mikhail Noskov
26. [unidentified person]
27. D. Maratchev
28. Efim Minin
29. Anna Kagan
30. Ephraim A. Volkhonsky
31. Lazar Khidekel

--

IN THE NEXT ROOM

Section Text

POST-REVOLUTIONARY FERVOR IN VITEBSK

"Stubborn and insistent, . . . we offer and impose our ideas, our forms—the forms and ideas of the new Revolutionary Art; we have the courage to think that the future is with us."

Marc Chagall, 1918

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had a tremendous effect on Marc Chagall. The passage of a law abolishing all discrimination on the basis of religion or nationality gave the Jewish painter full rights of citizenship in Russia for the first time. This newly obtained freedom inspired a series of monumental masterpieces celebrating the happiness of the recently married Chagall and his wife, Bella (née Rosenfeld).

Chagall felt the need to do more for his native Vitebsk. He had the idea of establishing a revolutionary art school, open to all, without age restrictions or admission fees. The new revolutionary government approved the project, and Chagall was named Vitebsk's Commissar of Arts in September 1918. His first task was to organize the festivities marking the first anniversary of the October Revolution. The streets of Vitebsk were transformed into a sea of colorful banners and signs based on sketches by Chagall and the young artist David Yakerson. Chagall's exuberant and vibrant paintings from this period feature swinging or tilted figures—a reference to the recent upheavals in Russia. He wrote that Lenin had "turned [the country] upside down, just as I upturn my paintings."

--

TO THE RIGHT OF THE SECTION TEXT, MOVING CLOCKWISE

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Study for "Double Portrait with Wine Glass," 1917

Graphite and watercolor on the back of a page printed in Cyrillic

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Double Portrait with Wine Glass, 1917–18

Oil on canvas

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, gift of the artist, 1949

--

David Yakerson
(1896–1947)

Sketch for "Panel with the Figure of a Worker," 1918

Watercolor and ink on paper

Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History

David Yakerson, a native son of Vitebsk, trained with Yuri (Yehuda) Pen. Pen established the first art school in the city in 1897, which remained open until 1918. (See work by him in the following gallery.) Yakerson created Revolutionary designs, such as this one, that mostly focused on

workers and the military and were translated into banners and other large-scale decorations for the city. Yakerson's Cubo-Futurist aesthetics are manifest in these sketches, particularly in their bold colors, faceted forms, and focus on movement. These creations can be seen in the film screened in this room, which documents the celebrations of the first anniversary of the Revolution in Vitebsk.

--

David Yakerson

(1896–1947)

Red Guards, 1918

Watercolor and ink on paper

Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History

For Vitebsk's commemoration of the first anniversary of the October Revolution, artists came together to create posters, banners, garlands, and rostrums for public speaking. Yakerson produced this sketch for the occasion. Chagall had final approval on all proposals, which he noted, along with the desired quantity and size of reproductions, in blue crayon on the back of the page: "D[avid] Ya[kerson] 2 [copies] at 3–2 [meters]." Images of workers, peasants, and Red Army soldiers and the theme of class struggle frequently appeared in artwork made in the years immediately following the Revolution.

--

David Yakerson

(1896–1947)

Sketch for "Construction of the Palace of Labor," 1918

Pen and ink, watercolor, and graphite on paper

Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History

--

Marc Chagall

(1887–1985)

Onward, Onward, 1918

Study for the first anniversary of the October Revolution

Graphite and gouache on grid-lined paper

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

As commissar of arts for the city and region of Vitebsk, Chagall was put in charge of the decorations for the first anniversary of the Revolution on November 7, 1918, producing a number of sketches himself. In this drawing, a young man wearing checked pants, a peasant shirt, and a hat strides out above the city. Borne up by leftist enthusiasm, he takes a mighty step forward. The

Cyrillic inscription at left reads “forward, forward, without a halt.” The grid lines, just barely visible, show that the work was intended to be enlarged to adorn Revolutionary Vitebsk.

--

Marc Chagall

(1887–1985)

Rider Blowing a Horn, 1918

Watercolor, graphite, and gouache on paper

Private collection

In this sketch, which he dedicated to Vitebsk, Chagall depicts himself riding a green horse and blowing a horn. He would later write in his autobiography: “Throughout the town, my multicolored animals swung back and forth, swollen with revolution. The workers marched forward, singing the ‘International.’ When I saw their smiles I was sure they understood me. Their communist leaders appeared to be less satisfied. Why is the cow green, and why is the horse flying in the sky? Why? What does that have to do with Marx and Lenin?”

--

Marc Chagall

(1887–1985)

Man with His Head Thrown Back, 1919

Oil on cardboard mounted on panel

Private collection

--

ON THE SCREEN ABOVE THE FIREPLACE

Celebrations in Vitebsk, 1918

32mm film, black-and-white, silent, one-minute extract

Belarusian State Archives of Film and Photography, Dzerzhinsk

This film documents the celebrations held in Vitebsk on the first anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Some 60,000 people, out of a total population of 80,000, participated in parades and marches, among other citywide events. Newspapers reported that the festivities were not as elaborate as expected due to financial constraints; instead of spanning four days as originally planned, they lasted only two days. A banner designed by David Yakerson, similar to a study on view in this gallery, can be seen in this excerpt.

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Anywhere out of the World, 1915–19

Oil on cardboard mounted on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, Gunma, Japan, extended loan from the Bureau of Public Utilities, Gunma Prefectural Government

This painting may be a self-portrait. Chagall bisected the head of the figure because, as he explained, it “needed a blank space there” to strengthen the composition. The pictorial strategy, which appears in some of his earlier paintings, could be a rendition of the “luftmensch,” a Yiddish term used to describe a person who is concerned with intellectual pursuits rather than with the practicalities of life. The sideways cityscape adds tension to the scene.

The painting’s overall geometrization is reminiscent of El Lissitzky’s Proun paintings—abstract compositions meant to be looked at from various vantage points. A number of Prouns are on view in one of the following galleries.

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Self-Portrait with Easel, 1919

Gouache on paper

Private collection

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Composition with a Goat, 1917–20

Oil, ink, graphite, and gum arabic on card stock

Private collection

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Profile at the Window, 1918

Graphite, gouache, and ink on cardboard

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Sketch for Purim, 1916–17
Ink and watercolor on paper
Private collection

Purim commemorates the fifth-century BCE deliverance of Persian Jews from execution. The story comes from the biblical Book of Esther, which is read in the synagogue on this special day. The holiday is further celebrated by feasting, giving alms to the poor, and exchanging gifts of food with friends, as depicted in this preparatory study for a mural painting.

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Embroidered Shirt, 1919
Page from a notebook, colored ink and lace print on paper
Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

A Gentleman, 1920
Page from a notebook, ink on paper
Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

"What Use Will This Limpid Clarity Be to Me?" (Village Walking), from "Mourning" by David Hofstein, 1920
Ink on vellum
Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

The Yiddish author David Hofstein's book Mourning contains elegies to devastated Jewish communities in post-Revolutionary Ukraine. During the Russian Civil War of 1918–21, the anti-Communist White forces often used anti-Semitism as a rallying cry for mobilization against the Bolsheviks, resulting in anti-Jewish violence. While they resided near Moscow, Hofstein and Chagall came into contact with children who were orphaned as a result of these pogroms. The two men decided to collaborate on the publication and donate the proceeds to support the survivors.

--

Marc Chagall

(1887–1985)

The Abduction, 1920

Page from a notebook, ink and lace prints on paper

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

--

Marc Chagall

(1887–1985)

The Traveler, 1918 (dated 1914)

Gouache and black ink on dark paper

Private collection

--

Marc Chagall

(1887–1985)

The Moon-Painter, 1916–17

Gouache, watercolor, and ink on paper

Private collection

--

Marc Chagall

(1887–1985)

The Old Man with Glasses, 1920

Gouache on paper

Private collection

--

IN THE CENTRAL CASE

El Lissitzky

(1890–1941)

Had Gadya (Tale of a Little Goat), 1919

Suite of eleven illustrated lithographs, published by Kultur-Lige, Kiev

The Jewish Museum, New York, Gift of Leonard E. and Phyllis S. Greenberg, 1986–121a-l

“Had Gadya” is a ten-verse Aramaic song that is chanted at the conclusion of the Passover seder. In this refrain, a young goat is eaten by a cat, which in turn is bitten by a dog, and so on, introducing a different antagonist in each verse. To end the accumulating violence—an allegory for the oppression of Jews—God destroys the final attacker, the Angel of Death, demonstrating His ultimate triumph over evil.

Between 1916 and 1919, El Lissitzky worked as an illustrator of books for the Jewish community, producing a series of “Had Gadya” watercolors in 1917. In his version, Lissitzky transforms the story into a metaphor for the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution. Two years later these artworks were published as a book of lithographic prints by the Kultur-Lige, an organization that promoted Jewish culture. Had Gadya represents a turning point in Lissitzky’s work, demonstrating his shift from champion of Jewish cultural tradition to avant-garde artist.

Cover

Page 1

Father Bought a Little Goat for Two Zuzim

Page 2

The Cat Came and Devoured the Little Goat

Page 3

The Dog Came and Bit the Cat

Page 4

The Stick Came and Beat the Dog

Page 5

The Fire Came and Burnt the Stick

Page 6

The Water Came and Extinguished the Fire

Page 7

The Ox Came and Drank the Water

Page 8

The Slaughterer Came and Slaughtered the Ox

Page 9

The Angel of Death Came and Slew the Slaughterer

Page 10

Then Came the Most Holy and Slew the Angel of Death

--

IN THE NEXT ROOM

Section Text

THE PEOPLE'S ART SCHOOL

"We hope that new artist-proletarians will soon emerge from the working classes. . . . Give us people! Artists! Revolutionary painters! From the capitals to the provinces! To us! What will tempt you to come?"

Marc Chagall, 1918

The People's Art School officially opened on January 28, 1919, in a nationalized mansion that had formerly belonged to a banker. Eager to provide a high level of instruction in all styles, Marc Chagall approached artists as diverse as the traditionalist Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, who served as the school's first director, and Ivan Puni, who was a key figure in the Russian avant-garde. El Lissitzky moved to Vitebsk in May 1919 to teach at the school. The institution then had 120 youths enrolled, mainly Jewish boys from working-class families. Later that year the academic painter Yuri (Yehuda) Pen, a former teacher of Chagall, joined the faculty, and David Yakerson took over the sculpture studio.

The art movement known as Suprematism arrived, along with its founder, Kazimir Malevich, in November 1919. His ideology, which proposed an art of pure geometric form, quickly gained traction among the school's students. These abstract artists also embraced the idea of work made collectively, whereas Chagall continued to produce individualist art. He defied the system of objectless art promoted by Malevich and his pupils by making mischievous and ironic use of its formal vocabulary.

Chagall liked to conspicuously mark his presence in his work with the inclusion of his name and multiple self-portraits. He later wrote, "I told [the students] that a square on the canvas is an object no more nor less than a chair or a dresser. . . . But in this black square on the miserable canvas background I saw nothing of the enchantment of colors." Abandoned by his disciples, who preferred to learn from Malevich, Chagall left the school in June 1920.

View of the People's Art School building in Vitebsk (former Vichniak mansion), 2017
Photograph by Igor Goussakov

--

TO THE RIGHT OF THE SECTION TEXT, MOVING CLOCKWISE

Marc Chagall

(1887–1985)

Self-Portrait, 1918

Gouache on paper

Private collection

--

Views of Vitebsk, late nineteenth or early twentieth century

Postcards

Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris

--

Marc Chagall at the entrance of the People's Art School, Vitebsk, c. 1919

Gelatin silver print

Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris

--

Members of the Creative Committee of the People's Art School, Vitebsk, summer 1919

Front row, left to right: El Lissitzky, Vera Ermolaeva, Marc Chagall, Yuri (Yehuda) Pen, Aleksandr Romm

Gelatin silver print

Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris

--

Marc Chagall and his students at the People's Art School, Vitebsk, the first half of 1919

Standing, right to left: Mikhail Veksler, Lev Tsiperson

Seated, left to right: Lazar Khidekel, Marc Chagall, Mikhail (Moisei) Kunin, Ilya Chashnik, Chaim Zeldin

Seated on the floor: Lev Zevin

Gelatin silver print

Members of the Creative Committee of the People's Art School, Vitebsk, winter 1919

Seated, left to right: Yuri (Yehuda) Pen, Marc Chagall, Vera Ermolaeva, Kazimir Malevich

Gelatin silver print

Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris

--

The first exhibition at the People's Art School, Vitebsk, summer 1919

Gelatin silver print

Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris

--

Yuri (Yehuda) Pen

(1854–1937)

Portrait of Marc Chagall, 1914

Oil on canvas

Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Belarus, National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk

Yuri Pen depicts Marc Chagall, his former student, as a dapper young man who had recently returned to Vitebsk from a long sojourn in Paris. The work was originally in the collection of the Vitebsk Museum of Contemporary Art at the People's Art School. Functioning within Chagall's broader vision for the institution, the museum exposed students to a multiplicity of styles and offered a panorama of Russian art at the time.

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

The Visit of the Self-Portrait, 1918
Ink, graphite, and white paint on paper
Private collection

--

Yuri (Yehuda) Pen
(1854–1937)

Self-Portrait, 1922
Oil on canvas
Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Belarus, National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk

Yuri Pen, who opened the first private art school in Vitebsk, thought of himself primarily as a Jewish artist. He painted the inhabitants and the everyday life of the shtetl—a small-town Jewish community. Committed to traditional realistic painting, he was nonetheless the teacher of many avant-garde artists, among them El Lissitzky, Ossip Zadkine, Solomon Yudovin, David Yakerson, and the most famous, Chagall. In Self-Portrait, inspired by the example of Rembrandt, the painter stands in his studio before a wall that is covered in canvases. On the upper left, a now-lost portrait of Chagall appears. Might this have been a tribute to the continuity of artistic instruction in Vitebsk, a legacy taken up by the People's Art School?

--

IN THE NEXT ROOM
STARTING ON THE LEFT, MOVING CLOCKWISE

David Yakerson posing in front of his monument to Karl Liebknecht, unveiled in Vitebsk, May 23, 1920
Private collection

--

David Yakerson
(1896–1947)

Suprematist Composition, 1920
Graphite and ink on paper
Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History

--

David Yakerson
(1896–1947)

Suprematist Composition (Walking Robot), 1920
Graphite and ink on paper
Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History

David Yakerson was only twenty-three years old when he joined the faculty in fall 1919, making him the youngest teacher at the People's Art School. At the time his style was rapidly changing, shifting from Impressionist modeling to Cubist organization of sculptural masses. Between 1920 and 1921, he produced many Suprematist drawings and studies reflecting his very personal reading of the doctrine of Malevich, whose influence was also felt in his sculpture. Nevertheless, the connection with nature and anthropomorphic shapes remained powerful in his work.

--

David Yakerson
(1896–1947)

Fourteen Suprematist Studies, 1920
Watercolor and ink on paper
Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History

--

David Yakerson
(1896–1947)

Suprematist Composition, 1920
Watercolor, gouache, ink, and graphite
on paper
Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Cubist Landscape, 1919

Oil, tempera, graphite, and plaster on canvas

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation of Ida Chagall, 1984

This work illustrates Chagall's relationship to the Suprematist avant-garde at the time. Its disjointed geometrical shapes and use of heterogenous materials to create texture originated in Cubo-Futurism. One of the steps leading to Suprematism according to Malevich's theory of art, this style privileged movement, fragmented forms, and bold colors. In the composition, geometric forms overtake a figure carrying an umbrella in front of the Vitebsk School—perhaps a stand-in for the artist, protecting himself from the imminent Suprematist storm. To the left of this figure, in a scene typical of Chagall's shtetls, a man with a goat makes a faint appearance. The artist repeats his name endlessly across the canvas, humorously illustrating the gulf between his painterly poetics and the stark Suprematist creations of his rival Malevich, who advocated collective art.

--
Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Over Vitebsk, 1915–20, after a 1914 painting

Oil on canvas

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest (by exchange), 1949

Flying over Chagall's depiction of Vitebsk is the mythical figure of the Wandering Jew, who was doomed to roam the earth without a homeland. To celebrate the first anniversary of the Revolution in 1918, Chagall created a decorative banner with this motif that, like a picture within a picture, floated above the streets of Vitebsk during the parade (see below). This character haunted Chagall's imagination: he returned to it on several occasions between 1914 and 1922. In its lower part, this version recalls the starkly geometric elements of some Suprematist compositions.

Festivities for the first anniversary of the Revolution, banner with the motif of the Wandering Jew, Vitebsk, 1918

--
Ivan Puni
(1894–1956)

Railroad Car, 1919

Graphite, ink, color pencil, and distemper on cardboard

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation of Mrs. Kseniya Puni, 1966

--

Ivan Puni

(1894–1956)

Vitebsk, 1919

Black and blue color pencil, ink, and distemper on paper

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation of Mrs. Kseniya Puni, 1966

--

Lazar Khidekel

(1904–1986)

Vitebsk Rooftops, 1920

Dry brush on cardboard

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

Lazar Khidekel was only fourteen when, shortly before the People's Art School opened, Chagall invited him to enroll. Khidekel's early works, such as this one, reflect his first forays into abstraction: he renders the rooftops of his native Vitebsk with fractured planes, turning the scene into a geometric composition. The young Jewish artist soon became a steadfast follower of Malevich.

--

Lazar Khidekel

(1904–1986)

Vitebsk Street, 1920

Dry brush on cardboard

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

--

Ivan Puni

(1894–1956)

The Red Violin, 1919

Distemper on paper marouflaged onto canvas

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation of Mrs. Kseniya Puni, 1966

--

Lazar Khidekel
(1904–1986)

Backyard in Vitebsk, 1919
Gouache on cardboard
Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

--

Mikhail (Moisei) Kunin
(1897–1972)

Art of the Commune, 1919
Oil on canvas
Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Belarus, National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk

A native of Vitebsk, Mikhail Kunin received artistic training from Yuri (Yehuda) Pen and then attended the People's Art School from 1919 to 1921, taking classes with Chagall and then Malevich. Kunin painted this still life, with its colorful objects, during Chagall's class. Its title, Art of the Commune, is inscribed on the lower left, along with the Russian words for "Futurists" and "leap into the future." Ambitious and involved, Kunin was a member of the School's student executive committee and its Communist Council. Although he studied under Malevich, he continued to work in a figurative style, not hesitating to criticize Suprematism and its practitioners, notably for what he said were their nihilism and their tendency to destroy painterly culture.

--

Aleksandr Romm
(1886–1952)

At the Train Station, c. 1920

A Merchant, 1918

Graphite on paper
Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History

Aleksandr Romm taught drawing and art history at the People's Art School. He later became a prominent Soviet art historian.

--

IN THE CENTRAL CASES

David Yakerson

(1896–1947)

Cubo-Suprematist Figure (Model for a Monument), 1920

Painted plaster

Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

--

David Yakerson

(1896–1947)

Model for the Monument to Karl Liebknecht, 1920

Plaster

Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

In September 1919, David Yakerson took charge of the sculpture class at the People's Art School. The young Jewish artist was also the principal sculptor responsible for the implementation of the State Plan for Monumental Propaganda in Vitebsk. As such, he designed a monument to the memory of Karl Liebknecht, who, along with Rosa Luxemburg, had led a short-lived German Communist revolution between 1918 and 1919. The sculpture was installed in Vitebsk's Lipki Garden on May 23, 1920, little more than a year after they were murdered. The plaster model's base of stacked cubes and other blocks—surmounted by a realistic portrait bust of the German leader—prefigures Malevich's utopian architectural constructions, which he called Arkhitektons (examples of which are on view nearby).

--

IN THE NEXT ROOM

Section Text**THE "NEW ART": LISSITZKY AND MALEVICH**

"[Suprematism] will liberate all those engaged in creative activity and make the world into a true model of perfection. This is the model we await from Kazimir Malevich. After the Old Testament there came the New—after the New the Communist testament—and after the Communist there follows finally the testament of Suprematism."

El Lissitzky, 1920

At the start of the 1919 academic year, Marc Chagall invited his friend El Lissitzky to teach in the school's printing, graphicart, and architecture studios. Shortly thereafter, Lissitzky persuaded Kazimir Malevich to join him. Malevich was the founder of Suprematism, which advocated highly distilled abstraction based on simple geometric forms and painted in a limited range of colors. This art of pure form moved beyond the physical world, possessing a spiritual dimension.

Malevich devised a teaching program that progressively led students to Suprematism. First, they studied Cubism as the foundation of an objectless approach to pictorial art, then moved on to Futurism and Cubo-Futurism, styles that built on Cubism's fragmented forms, adding motion and action. As they explored Cubist processes of deconstruction of form and creation of nonrealistic space, followed by the Futurist principles of dynamism, students gradually mastered Suprematist detachment from the object. A champion of collective work, the charismatic Malevich inspired his enthusiastic young students to work together and to be highly productive.

Moving away from painting, Malevich focused on theoretical writings, which he promoted in lectures and publications, such as On New Systems in Art. Meanwhile Lissitzky, an architect by training, invented the Proun, or Project for the Affirmation of the New. The Proun extended Suprematism, adapting architectural volumes to the pictorial plane of paintings and drawings.

--

TO THE RIGHT OF THE SECTION TEXT, ACROSS THE DOORWAY, MOVING CLOCKWISE

El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich,
summer 1920

--

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Schema I–III from "On New Systems in Art," 1919

Lithograph

Dallas Museum of Art, The Art Museum League Fund in honor of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark

This three-panel drawing deals with the construction of a figure in Cubist style. The left panel is annotated "Schematic. Construction of the model's bones is the basis of Cubist construction: of the bones on which the development of forms, volumes, the straight and curved lines of the planes takes place." The middle panel is inscribed "Scheme of Cubist formation (construction)," and the right panel reads "Cubist constructive drawing."

--

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Dynamic Model from "On New Systems in Art," 1919

Lithograph

Dallas Museum of Art, The Art Museum League Fund in honor of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark

--

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Untitled (Cow and Violin) from "On New Systems in Art," 1919

Lithograph

Dallas Museum of Art, The Art Museum League Fund in honor of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark

The inscription below the image reads in Russian: "Logic has always placed an obstacle before the new subconscious movements and, in order to free itself from prejudices, the course of alogism was advanced. The drawing shown above represents a moment of struggle—the juxtaposition of two forms: the cow and the violin in a Cubist construction."

--

IN THE WALL CASE

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

On New Systems in Art, 1919

Copy given to El Lissitzky, inscribed July 15, 1919, Nemchinovka, published December 1919
Linocut with comments and drawings, thirty-two pages, printed by the Graphic Workshop,
People's Art School, Vitebsk
Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

Before Malevich arrived in Vitebsk in November 1919, he had renounced painting to devote himself to writing and further developing his philosophy of Suprematism. Completed in July 1919, On New Systems in Art was one of the texts Malevich published in Vitebsk shortly after his arrival. The long essay, handwritten by the artist, was geared toward students and artists and features images of Dynamic Model, Cow and Violin, and Schema I–III. These lithographs illustrate the stages of development in Cubism and are on view nearby.

--

Manuscript note, page 1

Lazar Markovich, I salute you on the publication of this little book. It constitutes a step on my own path and the beginning of our collective activity. From you I expect clothing and constructions for those who will follow the innovators. However, build them like this: let them not long be able to stagnate in them— let them not have the time to form a petty-bourgeois muddle, let them not grow fat in their beauty.

Kazimir Malevich
December 4, 1919, Vitebsk

In Lissitzky's hand:

Please make corrections for me, Kazimir Severinovich, on this marked copy.

--

Manuscript note, page 29

To you young architects, I entrust pure plowed fields. All trappings of the centuries have been removed and laid bare the forehead of the innovative inventor's new wisdom, carrying the chalice of new structures.

Everything is pure, like the flat black-and-white surface of the square; therefore go install excellent storerooms for life—make marks, offer refuge, rest, and a place to sleep, and we, gently as a shadow, let us go into the infinite, the free, the incomprehensible, leaving reason to those who want to understand it and sort out the fossilized traces.

Leave them their tongue so that they may bark at you, but we, we have no need of a tongue; we need a way, a way as pure as shadow.

Kazimir Malevich

--

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Letter to Marc Chagall, April 8, 1920
Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris

Dearest Marc Zakharovich,
Given that students in your class have invited me to clarify certain questions regarding Cubism as a system for the construction of the pictorial organism and its theory that painting progresses from a figurative and utilitarian object dependence to a self-causation that engenders the creator's pure artistic act and completes the journey of creation in accordance with the natural law of the organization and interaction of forms.

I, for my part, consider such a familiarization to be essential. Furthermore, I would like to know whether you would see any problem in my visiting your studio.

Kazimir Malevich
April 8, 1920

--

ON THE WALL

Kazimir Malevich

(1879–1935)

Mystic Suprematism (Red Cross on Black Circle), 1920–22

Oil on canvas

Stedelijk Museum Collection, Amsterdam, ownership recognized by agreement with the estate of Kazimir Malevich, 2008

Starting in 1915, the cruciform motif became one of the basic components, along with the square and the circle, of the new Suprematist art Malevich envisioned. The Orthodox cross in this work is emblematic of the moment in which Suprematism's spiritual aspects became formally tied to religious painting. In Malevich's complex symbolic system, a red cross on top of a black circle raises the metaphysical question of the disconnection of bodily experience from spiritual aspiration.

--

Kazimir Malevich

(1879–1935)

Cover design for "Cycle of Lectures" by Nikolai Punin, 1920

Colored lithograph

Dallas Museum of Art, The Art Museum League Fund in honor of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark

--

Kazimir Malevich

(1879–1935)

Suprematist Cross, 1920

Woodcut

Dallas Museum of Art, The Art Museum League Fund in honor of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark

--

Kazimir Malevich

(1879–1935)

Suprematism of the Spirit, 1919

Oil on panel

Stedelijk Museum Collection, Amsterdam, on loan from the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands and Stichting Khardzhiev

Kazimir Malevich did little painting while he was in Vitebsk, having declared the medium obsolete. A rare exception, Suprematism of the Spirit goes beyond its materiality, serving as a manifesto of Malevich's theoretical and artistic reflections. The white square, a figure of infinity and

abstraction, is superimposed on an Orthodox cross with a tilted crossbar. The “crucified square,” as Lissitzky called it, shows Malevich’s mystical aspiration to a “religion of Pure action,” the act of the spirit as it seeks to grasp the laws of the universe and attain infinity.

--

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge, 1919–20, printed after 1965

Offset print

Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC

Created in Vitebsk, the poster Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge is an early example of agitprop (Soviet political propaganda) that uses abstraction. The work was produced during the Russian Civil War (1918–21) in support of the Red Army and the young Soviet government in their struggle against anti-Bolshevik White forces. In the middle of the composition, a revolutionary red triangle drives into a white circle on a black background. The symbolic significance of these forms—emphasized by the scattered Russian words for wedge, red, beat, and whites—would have been easily understood by the artist’s contemporaries.

--

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

Proun 6, 1919–20

Oil on canvas

Kulturstiftung Sachsen-Anhalt, Kunstmuseum Moritzburg Halle (Saale), Germany

--

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

Propaganda Board in Vitebsk: “The Factory Workbenches Await You, Let’s Get Production Moving!” 1919–20

Vintage gelatin silver print

Richard and Ellen Sandor Family Collection

--

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

Proun 55, 1923

Oil on canvas

Kulturstiftung Sachsen-Anhalt, Kunstmuseum Moritzburg Halle (Saale), Germany

--

IN THE CASE AND ON THE MONITOR

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

A Suprematist Tale of Two Squares in Six Constructions, 1920

Printed paper, published by Skythen Verlag, Berlin, 1922

Spencer Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundation

Originally made in 1920, El Lissitzky's preparatory prints later became the book A Suprematist Tale of Two Squares in Six Constructions. The tale is of the red square's victory over the black, symbolizing the new world order associated with Communism. Like a Suprematist ABCs for the people of the future, Two Squares was intended for the world's children. Both its graphics and words are extremely geometricized, animated by almost cinematic movement and rhythm. The typography suggests that the words are meant to be sung, rather than read, as indicated by the opening injunction, "Do not read!" Clearly this book was intended to be looked at and played with.

--

ON THE WALL

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

Untitled (Rosa Luxemburg), 1919–20

Graphite, ink, and gouache on paper

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

A leader of the upstart communist revolution in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg was assassinated, along with Karl Liebknecht, in early 1919. They soon became leftist martyrs and frequent subjects of public monuments. David Yakerson was commissioned to build a large monument for Vitebsk's Lipki Garden as a tribute to Liebknecht. In memory of Luxemburg, El Lissitzky created an intimate Proun—an abstract composition in which the colors black for death and red for revolution coalesce.

--

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

Album of Figurines for the Opera "Victory over the Sun," 1923

Ten lithographs

Private collection

El Lissitzky found inspiration for these works in the Futurist opera Victory over the Sun, which was staged at Vitebsk in February 1920. Between 1920 and 1921, he created a series of sketches

for a performance of the opera in which actors would be replaced by figurines or puppets, operated by an electromechanical system that would be an integral part of the scenery design. Never realized, this idea of a machine-driven opera underscored its Futuristic character. After he moved to Germany in 1921, Lissitzky produced this portfolio of ten color lithographs in Hannover, which is identical to the version created in Vitebsk.

--

IN AND ABOVE THE CENTRAL CASE

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Suprematism: 34 Drawings, 1920

Lithographs, edition of about 100, published by UNOVIS, Vitebsk, probably printed by El Lissitzky
Dallas Museum of Art, The Art Museum League Fund in honor of Mr. and Mrs. James H. Clark

Printed in the graphic workshop of the People's Art School in Vitebsk, Suprematism: 34 Drawings illustrates the development of Suprematism. The volume reproduces a handwritten introduction by Kazimir Malevich followed by images of geometric elements and of the various ways they can be combined. Given its didactic nature, the book was likely created as a Suprematist manual to be used by the movement's followers.

--

Designed by El Lissitzky
(1890–1941) and UNOVIS

Speaker's Rostrum for Outdoor Public Spaces, 1920–24

Reconstructed model, 1985

Steel, sheet metal, brass, and wood

TECTA Kragstuhlmuseum, Lauenförde, Germany

One of Malevich's best-known pupils and a member of the art collective called UNOVIS, Ilya Chashnik (1902–1929) first experimented with architecture in 1920. At this time, when he was no more than eighteen, Chashnik created a design for a speaker's rostrum for Smolensk's Red Square. The plan never came to fruition. Lissitzky then took up Chashnik's sketch and presented a modified version at the International Exhibition of New Theater Techniques, held in Vienna in 1924. The Lenin Rostrum, as it came to be known, was an unbuilt yet iconic project and was credited there to UNOVIS and more specifically to "Lissitzky's studio."

--

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

Lenin Rostrum, 1924

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

--

ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE CENTRAL CASE

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

Drawing for “Proun 6B,” 1919–21

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

El Lissitzky’s best-known innovation, the Proun (Project for the Affirmation of the New), first saw the light of day in Vitebsk between late 1919 and early 1920. Endowing the viewer with an active role, the Proun is a construction to be looked at from above, below, and all around. “Circling round it, we screw ourselves into the space. We have set the Proun in motion,” Lissitzky wrote. These volumetric compositions mark the first stage in the translation of Suprematism into architecture and three-dimensional space.

--

El Lissitzky
(1890–1941)

Proun 10, 1919–21

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

The Prouns are composed of lines, geometrical surfaces, cubes, and parallelepipeds (prisms with rhomboid sides). Lissitzky arranged these elements—shown either resting on an imaginary surface or floating in space—into perfectly balanced constructions. The flat shapes and the drawn lines are rendered alongside architectural elements shown in axonometric projection, expressing Lissitzky’s vision of the Prouns as a “station between painting and architecture.” These works represent an environment in constant flux and signify new forms of life and human relationships that change with progress toward a socialist society.

--

IN THE HALLWAY BETWEEN THIS AND THE NEXT ROOM

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Arkhitektons and Figurines, late 1920s

Plaster, twenty-eight parts

Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

In Vitebsk Malevich began to develop his ideas of architectural Suprematism; when he was appointed to the Petrograd State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK) in 1923, he investigated

this new artform in earnest. Malevich and his students assembled plaster constructions called Arkhitektons, from the Greek word “arkhitektoneo,” to be an architect or builder. These endlessly transformable ideal volumes were models of virtual spaces.

--

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Arkhitekton: Zeta, 1926

Gelatin silver print

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

--

Kazimir Malevich working on Arkhitektons at the GINKhUK (State Institute of Artistic Culture), Leningrad, 1925–26

Left to right: Nikolai Suetin, Kazimir Malevich, Ilya Chashnik, and Vasily Vorobiev
Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

--

IN THE NEXT ROOM

Section Text

COLLECTIVE UTOPIA

“Under the common flag of UNOVIS, we may together clothe the Earth in new forms and meanings.”

UNOVIS Creative Committee, 1920

In February 1920 at Malevich’s initiative, the teachers and students of the school formed the collective UNOVIS, an acronym for “Affirmers of the New Art.” The artists viewed themselves not as individuals but as creative units within UNOVIS. Identified by a black square sewn onto their jacket sleeves or lapels, members promoted Suprematism and the new in all spheres of social and cultural life—a utopian project to transform the world. Full of energy, these artists designed posters, magazines, banners, ration cards, stage sets, tram cars, and speakers’ rostrums and painted geometric forms of all kinds onto the facades of buildings. Colored squares and circles appeared all over the city streets in an expression of the group’s slogan: “The streets are our palettes.” Starting in 1920, local UNOVIS branches were established in Smolensk, Orenburg, Moscow, and elsewhere in Russia. The last group presentation of work by UNOVIS artists took place in Petrograd in 1923.

--

TO THE LEFT OF THE SECTION TEXT

Kazimir Malevich and UNOVIS members bound for Moscow to participate in the First All-Russian Conference of Art Teachers and Students, Vitebsk train station, June 5, 1920

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

--

TO THE RIGHT OF THE SECTION TEXT, MOVING CLOCKWISE

Nikolai Suetin

(1897–1954)

“Long Live the Revolution!”: Sketch for the Decoration of a Vitebsk Tram Car, 1921

Watercolor and graphite on paper

Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

An active member of UNOVIS, Nikolai Suetin sought to apply Suprematist ideals to Vitebsk’s everyday reality. So, between 1920 and 1922, he helped create street decorations and wall frescos for the celebrations of May Day and the anniversaries of the October Revolution. Trams had begun to run in Vitebsk in 1898, before they appeared even in Moscow or Saint Petersburg, and between 1920 and 1926, the streetcars displayed UNOVIS designs. Slogans—such as “Long Live the World Revolution!” written here in Cyrillic— were often an integral part of such compositions.

--

Decorated tram car, Vitebsk, c. 1919, based on a UNOVIS design

National Library of Russia

--

Decoration of the White Barracks in Vitebsk by Kazimir Malevich and his students for the celebration of the second anniversary of the Committee to Combat Unemployment, December 1919

--

Kazimir Malevich

(1879–1935)

El Lissitzky

(1890–1941)

Project for the Decoration of Workshops for the Committee to Combat Unemployment

From the “UNOVIS No. 1” Almanac

Linogravure and gouache (facsimile)

Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou, Paris

--

Vera Ermolaeva

(1893–1938)

Design for the opera “Victory over the Sun,” 1920

Woodcut with watercolor additions

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Larry Aldrich Fund, 1977

Performed twice in Saint Petersburg in December 1913, the Futurist opera Victory over the Sun was a collaboration between Kazimir Malevich, Aleksei Kruchenykh, and Mikhail Matiushin. UNOVIS staged the work at a rally in Vitebsk—without music, for lack of funds—on February 6, 1920. Vera Ermolaeva directed the opera, while the students of the School produced the scenery and costumes. Its plot celebrates the destruction of the old-world order and prophesies a radiant future for humanity. This sketch, which Ermolaeva drew afterward, was published in the UNOVIS No. 1 Almanac (on view nearby).

--

Lazar Khidekel

(1904–1986)

Ten works on paper

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

The artist and architect Lazar Khidekel studied at the Vitebsk School under Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Chagall, and finally Lissitzky. At the age of fifteen, he was one of the students closest to Malevich and a founding member of UNOVIS. Highly influenced by Malevich’s ideas about the cosmos and space flight, Khidekel believed in a three-dimensional and cosmic Suprematism. In Vitebsk, he developed cruciform compositions that later led to Suprematist architectural projects, including futuristic aerial cities and space dwellings.

1 Suprematist Space, 1921

Ink and silver paint on paper

2 UNOVIS stamp, 1924

Ink on paper

3 Design for a Suprematist Horizontal Arkhitekton: Axonometric Drawing, 1922

Graphite on paper

4 Design for a Cosmic Habitat, 1920

Ink, watercolor, and graphite on paper

5 Linear Suprematism, 1920

Ink on paper

6 Suprematist Composition with Blue Square, 1921

Ink, watercolor, and graphite on paper

7 Dynamic Balance, 1921

Ink, watercolor, and graphite on paper

8 Intersecting Lines, 1920

Ink on paper

9 Volumetric Exploration of the Cross: Suprematist Axonometric Drawing, 1921

Graphite on paper

10 Kinetic Elements of Suprematism: Circular Movement, 1920

Ink and graphite on paper

--

Ilya Chashnik

(1902–1929)

Suprematist Composition: Design for a Pictorial Relief, c. 1921

Pen and ink, graphite, and watercolor on paper

Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

A member of UNOVIS, Ilya Chashnik was part of a younger generation of Suprematist artists. After Lissitzky left for Moscow in October 1920, he was, with Nikolai Suetin, one of the students closest to Malevich. While oriented toward the architectural, his work is marked by the notion of the cosmos that Malevich developed.

--

Sergei Senkin

(1894–1963)

Construction of Three UNOVIS Forms, 1919

Oil on wood panel

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

--

IN THE WALL CASE, LEFT TO RIGHT

UNOVIS

“UNOVIS No. 1” Almanac, 1920

Ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper (facsimile)

Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou, Paris

Completed in late May 1920, the almanac UNOVIS No. 1 marked the birth and growth of the UNOVIS group, founded on Malevich's initiative. With Lissitzky as artistic director, the publication featured articles, manifestos, statements, and drawings by UNOVIS members, together with a detailed account of its activities. It was published in five typewritten copies, only two of which are known to exist today. The work stands as a monument to the utopian thinking and activity of Malevich's students.

Images of the individual pages are available on the iPad at left.

--

UNOVIS

"UNOVIS No. 1" Almanac, 1920

Facsimiles

Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou, Paris

El Lissitzky

(1890–1941)

Cover of the "UNOVIS No. 1" Almanac, 1920

Ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper
right

Ivan Chervinka

(1891–after 1941)

Fabric design with Suprematist pattern

Printed canvas, based on a sketch by Kazimir Malevich

Ivan Chervinka

(1891–after 1950)

Poster with the slogan "All for One and One for All"

Line engraving, gouache, and graphite on paper

Kazimir Malevich

(1879–1935)

Design for a speaker's rostrum

Graphite and black and red ink on paper

Nina Kogan
(1889–1942)

Set design for “Suprematist Ballet”

Graphite, black and red ink, and gouache on paper

--

Lazar Khidekel
(1904–1986)

Members of the UNOVIS collective, 1920

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

List of the UNOVIS members

1. Avidon
2. I. Baitin
3. F. Bielostotskaya
4. O. Bernstein
5. Mikhail Veksler
6. A. Volkhonski
7. Ivan Gavris
8. Grigorovich
9. Guiroutsкая
10. Vera Ermolaeva
11. Lev Zevin
12. Chaim Zeldin
13. Lazar Zuperman
14. Natalia Ivanova
15. Nina Kogan
16. Korsokov
17. Kliatskina
18. Mikhail Kunin
19. El Lissitzky
20. Evgenia Magaril
21. Kazimir Malevich
22. Miturin
23. V. Noskov
24. Georgy Noskov
25. Mikhail Noskov
26. Rubin
27. Sifman
28. Strzeminski
29. Fradkin
30. Lazar Khidekel
31. Lev Tsiperson
32. Boris Tseitlin

- 33. Ilya Chashnik
- 34. Ivan Chervinka
- 35. Lev Yudin
- 14/VII 1920
- 36. Secretary Oberstrein
- 37. Nikolai Suetin

--

Lazar Khidekel, 1921

Exhibition print

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

--

Diploma from the Vitebsk Practical Art Institute awarded to Lazar Khidekel, 1922

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

This diploma “confers [on Lazar Khidekel] the degree of independent artist and upper-level instructor, with the right to teach in applied-art schools.” It is signed by Vera Ermolaeva, then director of the school, and Kazimir Malevich, president of the faculty council. In 1920 the name of the People’s Art School changed to the Vitebsk Free State Art Studios and then, in 1921, was reclassified as the Vitebsk Practical Art Institute.

--

Lazar Khidekel

(1904–1986)

The Way of UNOVIS No. 1, Vitebsk, January 1921

Lithograph

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

--

UNOVIS members, 1920

Standing, left to right: Ivan Chervinka, Kazimir Malevich, Efim Royak, Anna Kagan, Nikolai Suetin, Lev Yudin, and Evgenia Magaril

Seated, left to right: Mikhail Veksler, Vera Ermolaeva, Ilya Chashnik, and Lazar Khidekel

Gelatin silver print

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

--

UNOVIS membership application questionnaire, 1920

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

This questionnaire, which prospective members had to complete to join UNOVIS, reveals the artistic collective's tenor and ethos. Like a disclaimer, those who wished to become part of the group had to affirm that they were aware of "its ideology, its ties to the contemporary world, and its politics of action in art as politics of life." Candidates were also asked a number of probing questions relating to the "idea and form [they were] trying to affirm in art," their "judgment of the new systems in art," and a work "in the entire history of art [that] serves as an example" for them. They additionally had to specify the UNOVIS section in which they wished to work: "Agitation (Propaganda), Literature, Pictorial, Architectural, or Constructive-Technical." Applicants were clearly expected to devote themselves to the UNOVIS cause based on questions such as "Are you ready to fight for the affirmation of an idea and a form in art?" and "Are you ready to affirm the conceptions of UNOVIS entirely or any one of its truths in life?"

The UNOVIS collective, Vitebsk, February 1920

Second row, seated, left to right: A. Rivinson, unidentified person, Kazimir Malevich, Vera Ermolaeva, Ivan Gavris, Nina Kogan, El Lissitzky, Georgy Noskov?, Lazar Zuperman

Standing, left to right: Boris Tseitlin, Evgenia Magaril, Lev Yudin, A. Girutskaya

Gelatin silver print

Archives Marc et Ida Chagall, Paris

While UNOVIS membership was open to all, its program was enforced by a circle of insiders called the Creative Committee. This group had both permanent members—Malevich, Vera Ermolaeva, and Nina Kogan—and alternates elected from the most active members of the group, such as Lazar Khidekel, Ilya Chashnik, Nikolai Suetin, and Ivan Chervinka. Application for membership involved completing a special questionnaire, an example of which is on view nearby.

El Lissitzky

(1890–1941)

Letter to the members of the Vitebsk UNOVIS collective, Moscow, late 1920

Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

Moscow, November 12, 1920

Comrades, I am in Moscow right now. I hope that what started in the studio will continue to move forward and evolve. Please do keep me informed, with words and drawings, of your progress. If, in order to grasp a phenomenon, it is necessary to maintain distance from it, each month I am away from Vitebsk, I see more clearly the importance of what we are doing. The question of space and the living form of constructions is on everyone's lips. I am sure, and I know that these are the concepts on which we need to focus. Be curious and firm in your willingness, and we will win. We have much work to do. Be united. Be "us." I will also send you my results.

My best,

El Lissitzky

P.S. If Veksler has printed his lithograph, he should send it to me. Send AERO to Selyutin, and tell him that I will write him about the reimbursement, if I do not come myself soon. Chashnik, please pick up my overalls and my lithographic inkstick from him. Please keep them for me.

My address Moscow, 51 Arbat, apartment 134, Krivorutchko, to my attention

--

Lazar Khidekel
(1904–1986)

Ilya Chashnik
(1902–1929)

Cover of "AERO: Articles and Projects," 1920
Lithograph
Lazar Khidekel Family Archives and Art Collection

Under the auspices of UNOVIS, Lazar Khidekel and Ilya Chashnik published the AERO journal in a typewritten edition of less than ten. This copy is the only version known to exist today. Illustrated with graphics, AERO contains an article by Chashnik on the role of collective artistic production and its purpose of transforming world urban space. A second text by Khidekel enigmatically meditates on the relationship between art and life and on improvement of the process of remaking society. Plans for a second issue in 1921 never came to fruition. AERO reflects the influence of Malevich's thinking and teaching on the two young artists, especially the notion of economy as the optimal organization of the forces of universal energy, the importance of collective art making, and the rules by which a new world could be constructed.

Images of the individual pages are available on the iPad at right.

--

ON THE WALL

Anonymous

Untitled, 1920–21
Watercolor and graphite on paper
Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper
Gouache and graphite on paper
State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

Based on surviving plans of the Vitebsk School, these proposed decorations were intended for its building. Malevich, Lissitzky, and Ermolaeva used similar motifs in their designs for rostrums, which were reproduced in the UNOVIS No. 1 Almanac. In 1930, Malevich also presented the State Russian Museum with similar sketches, on which he inscribed "principle for the decoration of the walls of a room or an entire apartment in accordance with the Suprematist system (death to

wallpaper).” These sketches attest to the universal, interdisciplinary character of Suprematist decoration.

--

Ivan Kudriashev

(1896–1972)

Designs for the First Soviet Theater in Orenburg, 1920

Graphite, watercolor, ink, and wood on paper

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

In January 1919 Ivan Kudriashev joined Malevich as his pupil at the SVOMAS (State Free Art Studios) in Moscow. The Narkompros (People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment) then sent Kudriashev to help organize free art studios in Orenburg, where he founded a branch of UNOVIS and propagated Suprematist ideas. In autumn 1920, the municipal authorities announced a competition to decorate its First Soviet Theater, which Kudriashev won. Unfortunately, because of a shortage of money, his plans were not realized. His compositions and choice of colors echo the frescos and stained-glass windows of churches, attesting to the spiritual aspect of Suprematism.

--

Anonymous

Untitled, 1920–21

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

--

Anonymous

Untitled, 1920–21

Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on paper

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

--

Section Text

AFTER VITEBSK

“In closing, one must say that the institute suffered through extremely difficult economic conditions in 1921 and 1922. . . . As there was no hope that the conditions of life would improve, the directors of the institute . . . left for Petrograd.”

Ivan Gavris, 1923

The storm of the Russian Civil War, which had pitted the Communist against the Tzarist armies, lost momentum after 1921. The political climate gradually changed, and the Soviet authorities established new social and ideological order. In May 1922 the first and last class graduated from the Vitebsk Art School.

Malevich left for Petrograd in June to continue his research on volumetric Suprematism, designing porcelain and creating his Arkhitektons (utopian architectural models). Moving to Berlin in 1922, Lissitzky further developed and exhibited his Prouns. As for Chagall, he subtly settled accounts with the Suprematists. He continued to appropriate and critique their art and aims in his work for the State Jewish Chamber Theater in Moscow, where he lived after June 1920.

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Costume sketch for the Actor Solomon Mikhoels in "It's a Lie" by Sholem Aleichem, 1919
Graphite, ink, and watercolor on paper
Private collection

A scene from It's a Lie, 1921, a one-act dialogue by Sholem Aleichem with decorations and costumes by Marc Chagall
Beth Hatefutsoth Photo Archive, Tel Aviv, Zuskin Collection

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

The Worker, 1920–21
Costume sketch for the Play "Comrade Khlestakov" by Dimitri Smolin, formerly associated with "The Inspector General" by Nikolai Gogol
Graphite, ink, and gouache on paper
Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Character with Two Hoops, 1920–21
Gouache on paper
Private collection

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Composition with Circles and Goat (State Jewish Chamber Theater), 1920

Oil on pasteboard mounted on particleboard
Private collection

After his departure from Vitebsk in 1920, Chagall moved to Moscow, where he was invited to work for the State Jewish Chamber Theater. Apart from the sets for three one-act plays by Sholem Aleichem, he painted panels to decorate the interior of the small theater, soon nicknamed Chagall's Little Box. This composition humorously alludes to his earlier experiences in Vitebsk, highlighting an acrobat or magician who tries to find his balance, accompanied by two blue circles and a benevolent-looking goat. Reminiscent of Lissitzky's Had Gadya illustrations and Prouns, the overall scene gloriously taunts his former friend who had distanced himself from Chagall to follow Malevich.

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Design for "The Agents" by Sholem Aleichem, 1921

Graphite, gouache, and ink on paper
Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

The Playboy of the Western World, 1921

Design for "The Playboy of the Western World" by John Millington Synge

Graphite, ink, gouache, and gold and silver paint on paper

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Set sketch for “Mazel Tov” by Sholem Aleichem, 1919

Oil, gouache, graphite, and distemper on pasteboard mounted on Japan paper
Private collection

A scene from Mazel Tov by Sholem Aleichem, with setting by Marc Chagall, including a now-lost curtain. The work features an upside-down goat and a diagonal board above the stove, which includes deconstructed letters that spell “Sholem Aleichem.”

Seated: Solomon Mikhoels as Reb Alter

Beth Hatefutsoth Photo Archive, Tel Aviv, Zuskin Collection

--

Marc Chagall
(1887–1985)

Collage, 1921

Pasted paper, graphite, and ink on paper

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris, donation in lieu of inheritance tax, 1988

Chagall often added dates, sometimes erroneous, to his works long after he created them. Although this collage is dated 1920, it incorporates a fragment of an invitation to the June 1921 exhibition of the artist’s murals for the auditorium of the State Jewish Chamber Theater in Moscow. Chagall was never paid for these murals, and the Hebrew word for “justice” within the upper triangle may be a call for him to receive his due. The inclusion of “justice” may also mean something else: the geometric composition is reminiscent of art created by Malevich’s followers, who overtook the People’s Art School, and could allude to how the Suprematists unjustly forced the school’s founder, Chagall, to leave Vitebsk in May 1920.

--

IN THE CENTRAL CASE, LEFT TO RIGHT

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Arkhitkton: Gota, 1923

Reproduction by Poul Pedersen, 1989, based on his 1978 reconstruction

Plaster, nine-part assemblage

Centre Pompidou, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris, purchase

--

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Arkhitekton: Beta, 1923

Reproduction by Poul Pedersen, 1989, based on his 1978 reconstruction
Plaster, sixty-nine-part assemblage
Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, purchase

--

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Lidded teapot, 1923

Porcelain, made by the State Porcelain Manufactory (former Imperial Manufactory), Petrograd
Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

--

Designed by Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Painted by A. Kudriavtsev

"Dynamic Composition" plate, 1923

Polychrome porcelain and enamel, made by the State Porcelain Manufactory (former Imperial Manufactory), Petrograd
Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

--

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Ilya Chashnik
(1902–1929)

Half cup, 1923

Enameled, glazed, and molded porcelain, made by the State Porcelain Manufactory (former Imperial Manufactory), Petrograd
Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, The Henry and Ludmilla Shapiro Collection; partial gift and partial purchase through the Decorative Arts Association Acquisition and Smithsonian Collections Acquisition Program Funds

--

Designed by Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Painted by Nikolai Suetin
(1897–1954)

“Suprematism” half cup, designed 1923, produced 1926
Porcelain and enamel paint, made by the State Porcelain Manufactory (former Imperial Manufactory), Petrograd
Vladimir Tsarenkov Collection, London

Suprematism’s goal, according to Kazimir Malevich, was to transform the appearance of the world through not only architecture but also everyday objects. Nikolai Suetin and Ilya Chashnik, Malevich’s leading pupils, worked in Petrograd (later Leningrad) between 1922 and 1926 and particularly focused on Suprematist design—a key UNOVIS endeavor in Vitebsk. Malevich designed porcelain, jewelry, fabric, and clothing. Although oriented toward utilitarian objects, Suprematist design valued the aesthetic and conceptual over function.

--

ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE CENTRAL CASE

Kazimir Malevich
(1879–1935)

Letter to Ivan Kudriashev, April 14, 1921
State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

In this letter Malevich notifies Ivan Kudriashev, with whom he cofounded a UNOVIS branch in Orenburg, of his upcoming visit and briefs him on his progress. “A time of the most enormous shift on our path has arrived,” he writes. “We are discovering the Suprematism of the World, the flatness of the square will spread by six facets and this will be the six perfections of World-Building. I’m working intensively on literary–philosophical thought and am surveying the world from a mountain from which no one has gazed, the mountain of Art. . . . Lectures on . . . Suprematism are being published in German newspapers. . . . Academicism is collapsing, only the provinces are still hanging on to it.”

--

UNOVIS

Poster announcing a lecture by Kazimir Malevich in Orenburg, 1920
Lithograph
State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

“We Want!” UNOVIS Manifesto, 1920
Offset lithograph
State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

“Address to 10,000 Young Students Who Signed the Appeal to the West,” April 1921

Offset lithograph

State Museum of Contemporary Art—Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki

--