

= El Lissitzky =

Lazar Markovich Lissitzky ( Russian : ?? ? ???? ?? ? ?????? ???? ? ???? , listen ; November 23 [ O.S. November 11 ] 1890 ? December 30 , 1941 ) , known as El Lissitzky ( Russian : ??? ???? ? ???? , Yiddish : ?? ??????? ) , was a Russian artist , designer , photographer , typographer , polemicist and architect . He was an important figure of the Russian avant @-@ garde , helping develop suprematism with his mentor , Kazimir Malevich , and designing numerous exhibition displays and propaganda works for the Soviet Union . His work greatly influenced the Bauhaus and constructivist movements , and he experimented with production techniques and stylistic devices that would go on to dominate 20th @-@ century graphic design .

Lissitzky 's entire career was laced with the belief that the artist could be an agent for change , later summarized with his edict , " das zielbewußte Schaffen " ( goal @-@ oriented creation ) . Lissitzky , of Lithuanian Jewish ?rigin , began his career illustrating Yiddish children 's books in an effort to promote Jewish culture in Russia , a country that was undergoing massive change at the time and that had just repealed its antisemitic laws . When only 15 he started teaching , a duty he would maintain for most of his life . Over the years , he taught in a variety of positions , schools , and artistic media , spreading and exchanging ideas . He took this ethic with him when he worked with Malevich in heading the suprematist art group UNOVIS , when he developed a variant suprematist series of his own , Proun , and further still in 1921 , when he took up a job as the Russian cultural ambassador to Weimar Germany , working with and influencing important figures of the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements during his stay . In his remaining years he brought significant innovation and change to typography , exhibition design , photomontage , and book design , producing critically respected works and winning international acclaim for his exhibition design . This continued until his deathbed , where in 1941 he produced one of his last works ? a Soviet propaganda poster rallying the people to construct more tanks for the fight against Nazi Germany . In 2014 , the heirs of the artist , in collaboration with Van abbemuseum and the leading worldwide scholars , the Lissitzky foundation was established , to preserve the artist 's legacy and preparing a catalogue raisonn  of the artist oeuvre .

= = Early years = =

Lissitzky was born on November 23 , 1890 in Pochinok , a small Jewish community 50 kilometres ( 31 mi ) southeast of Smolensk , former Russian Empire . During his childhood , he lived and studied in the city of Vitebsk , now part of Belarus , and later spent 10 years in Smolensk living with his grandparents and attending the Smolensk Grammar School , spending summer vacations in Vitebsk . Always expressing an interest and talent in drawing , he started to receive instruction at 13 from Yehuda Pen , a local Jewish artist , and by the time he was 15 was teaching students himself . In 1909 , he applied to an art academy in Saint Petersburg , but was rejected . While he passed the entrance exam and was qualified , the law under the Tsarist regime only allowed a limited number of Jewish students to attend Russian schools and universities .

Like many other Jews then living in the Russian Empire , Lissitzky went to study in Germany . He left in 1909 to study architectural engineering at a Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt , Germany . During the summer of 1912 , Lissitzky , in his own words , " wandered through Europe " , spending time in Paris and covering 1 @,@ 200 kilometres ( 750 mi ) on foot in Italy , teaching himself about fine art and sketching architecture and landscapes that interested him . His interest in ancient Jewish culture had originated during the contacts with a Paris @-@ based group of Russian Jews led by sculptor Ossip Zadkine , a lifetime friend of Lissitzky since early childhood , who exposed Lissitzky to conflicts between different groups within the diaspora . Also in 1912 some of his pieces were included for the first time in an exhibit by the St. Petersburg Artists Union ; a notable first step . He remained in Germany until the outbreak of World War I , when he was forced to return home through Switzerland and the Balkans , along with many of his countrymen , including other expatriate artists born in the former Russian Empire , such as Wassily Kandinsky and Marc Chagall .

Upon his return to Moscow , Lissitzky attended the Polytechnic Institute of Riga , which had been evacuated to Moscow because of the war , and worked for the architectural firms of Boris Velikovsky and Roman Klein . During this work , he took an active and passionate interest in Jewish culture which , after the downfall of the openly antisemitic Tsarist regime , was experiencing a renaissance . The new Provisional Government repealed a decree that prohibited the printing of Hebrew letters and that barred Jews from citizenship . Thus Lissitzky soon devoted himself to Jewish art , exhibiting works by local Jewish artists , traveling to Mahilyow to study the traditional architecture and ornaments of old synagogues , and illustrating many Yiddish children 's books . These books were Lissitzky 's first major foray in book design , a field that he would greatly innovate during his career .

His first designs appeared in the 1917 book , *Sihes hulin : Eyne fun di geshikhten* ( *An Everyday Conversation* ) , where he incorporated Hebrew letters with a distinctly art nouveau flair . His next book was a visual retelling of the traditional Jewish Passover song *Had gadya* ( *One Goat* ) , in which Lissitzky showcased a typographic device that he would often return to in later designs . In the book , he integrated letters with images through a system that matched the color of the characters in the story with the word referring to them . In the designs for the final page , Lissitzky depicts the mighty " hand of God " slaying the angel of death , who wears the tsar 's crown . This representation links the redemption of the Jews with the victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution . An alternative view asserts that the artist was wary of Bolshevik internationalization , leading to destruction of traditional Jewish culture . Visual representations of the hand of God would recur in numerous pieces throughout his entire career , most notably with his 1924 photomontage self @-@ portrait *The Constructor* , which prominently featured the hand .

= = Avant @-@ garde = =

= = = Constructivism = = =

In May 1919 , upon receiving an invitation from fellow Jewish artist Marc Chagall , Lissitzky returned to Vitebsk to teach graphic arts , printing , and architecture at the newly formed People 's Art School ? a school that Chagall created after being appointed Commissioner of Artistic Affairs for Vitebsk in 1918 . Lissitzky was engaged in designing and printing propaganda posters ; later , he preferred to keep quiet about this period , probably because one of main subjects of these posters was the exile Leon Trotsky . The quantity of these posters is sufficient to regard them as a separate genre in the artist 's output .

Chagall also invited other Russian artists , most notably the painter and art theoretician Kazimir Malevich and Lissitzky 's former teacher , Yehuda Pen . However , it was not until October 1919 when Lissitzky , then on an errand in Moscow , persuaded Malevich to relocate to Vitebsk . The move coincided with the opening of the first art exhibition in Vitebsk directed by Chagall . Malevich would bring with him a wealth of new ideas , most of which inspired Lissitzky but clashed with local public and professionals who favored figurative art and with Chagall himself . After going through impressionism , primitivism , and cubism , Malevich began developing and advocating his ideas on suprematism aggressively . In development since 1915 , suprematism rejected the imitation of natural shapes and focused more on the creation of distinct , geometric forms . He replaced the classic teaching program with his own and disseminated his suprematist theories and techniques school @-@ wide . Chagall advocated more classical ideals and Lissitzky , still loyal to Chagall , became torn between two opposing artistic paths . Lissitzky ultimately favoured Malevich 's suprematism and broke away from traditional Jewish art . Chagall left the school shortly thereafter .

At this point Lissitzky subscribed fully to suprematism and , under the guidance of Malevich , helped further develop the movement . In 1919 ? 1920 Lissitzky was a head of Architectural department at the People 's Art School where with his students , primarily Lazar Khidekel , he was working on transition from plane to volumetric suprematism . Lissitzky designed *On the New System of Art* by Malevich , who responded in December 1919 : " Lazar Markovich , I salute you on the publication of this little book " . Perhaps the most famous work by Lissitzky from the same period was the 1919

propaganda poster " Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge " . Russia was going through a civil war at the time , which was mainly fought between the " Reds " ( communists , socialists and revolutionaries ) and the " Whites " ( monarchists , conservatives , liberals and other socialists who opposed the Bolshevik Revolution ) . The image of the red wedge shattering the white form , simple as it was , communicated a powerful message that left no doubt in the viewer 's mind of its intention . The piece is often seen as alluding to the similar shapes used on military maps and , along with its political symbolism , was one of Lissitzky 's first major steps away from Malevich 's non @-@ objective suprematism into a style his own . He stated : " The artist constructs a new symbol with his brush . This symbol is not a recognizable form of anything that is already finished , already made , or already existent in the world ? it is a symbol of a new world , which is being built upon and which exists by the way of the people . "

In January 17 , 1920 , Malevich and Lissitzky co @-@ founded the short @-@ lived Molposnovis ( Young followers of a new art ) , a proto @-@ suprematist association of students , professors , and other artists . After a brief and stormy dispute between " old " and " young " generations , and two rounds of renaming , the group reemerged as UNOVIS ( Exponents of the new art ) in February . Under the leadership of Malevich the group worked on a " suprematist ballet " , choreographed by Nina Kogan and on the remake of a 1913 futurist opera Victory Over the Sun by Mikhail Matyushin and Aleksei Kruchenykh . Lissitzky and the entire group chose to share credit and responsibility for the works produced within the group , signing most pieces with a black square . This was partly a homage to a similar piece by their leader , Malevich , and a symbolic embrace of the Communist ideal . This would become the de facto seal of UNOVIS that took the place of individual names or initials . Black squares worn by members as chest badges and cufflinks also resembled the ritual tefillin and thus were no strange symbol in Vitebsk shtetl .

The group , which disbanded in 1922 , would be pivotal in the dissemination of suprematist ideology in Russia and abroad and launch Lissitzky 's status as one of the leading figures in the avant garde . Incidentally , the earliest appearance of the signature Lissitzky ( Russian : ??? ??????? ) emerged in the handmade UNOVIS Miscellany , issued in two copies in March ? April 1920 , and containing his manifesto on book art : " the book enters the skull through the eye not the ear therefore the pathways the waves move at much greater speed and with more intensity. if i ( sic ) can only sing through my mouth with a book i ( sic ) can show myself in various guises . "

= = = Proun = = =

During this period Lissitzky proceeded to develop a suprematist style of his own , a series of abstract , geometric paintings which he called Proun ( pronounced " pro @-@ oon " ) . The exact meaning of " Proun " was never fully revealed , with some suggesting that it is a contraction of proekt unovisa ( designed by UNOVIS ) or proekt utverzhdanya novogo ( Design for the confirmation of the new ) . Later , Lissitzky defined them ambiguously as " the station where one changes from painting to architecture . "

Proun was essentially Lissitzky 's exploration of the visual language of suprematism with spatial elements , utilizing shifting axes and multiple perspectives ; both uncommon ideas in suprematism . Suprematism at the time was conducted almost exclusively in flat , 2D forms and shapes , and Lissitzky , with a taste for architecture and other 3D concepts , tried to expand suprematism beyond this . His Proun works ( known as Pro @-@ oon ) spanned over a half a decade and evolved from straightforward paintings and lithographs into fully three @-@ dimensional installations . They would also lay the foundation for his later experiments in architecture and exhibition design . While the paintings were artistic in their own right , their use as a staging ground for his early architectonic ideas was significant . In these works , the basic elements of architecture ? volume , mass , color , space and rhythm ? were subjected to a fresh formulation in relation to the new suprematist ideals . Through his Prouns , utopian models for a new and better world were developed . This approach , in which the artist creates art with socially defined purpose , could aptly be summarized with his edict " das zielbewußte Schaffen " ? " task oriented creation . "

Jewish themes and symbols also sometimes made appearances in his Prounen , usually with

Lissitzky using Hebrew letters as part of the typography or visual code . For the cover of the 1922 book *Arba 'ah Teyashim* ( Four Billy Goats ; cover ) , he shows an arrangement of Hebrew letters as architectural elements in a dynamic design that mirrors his contemporary Proun typography . This theme was extended into his illustrations for the *Shifs @-@ Karta* ( Passenger Ticket ) book .

= = = Return to Germany = = =

In 1921 , roughly concurrent with the demise of UNOVIS , suprematism was beginning to fracture into two ideologically adverse halves , one favoring Utopian , spiritual art and the other a more utilitarian art that served society . Lissitzky was fully aligned with neither and left Vitebsk in 1921 . He took a job as a cultural representative of Russia and moved to Berlin where he was to establish contacts between Russian and German artists . There he also took up work as a writer and designer for international magazines and journals while helping to promote the avant @-@ garde through various gallery shows . He started the very short @-@ lived but impressive periodical *Veshch @-@ Gegenstand Objekt* with Russian @-@ Jewish writer Ilya Ehrenburg . This was intended to display contemporary Russian art to Western Europe . It was a wide @-@ ranging pan @-@ arts publication , mainly focusing on new suprematist and constructivist works , and was published in German , French and Russian . In the first issue , Lissitzky wrote :

We consider the triumph of the constructive method to be essential for our present . We find it not only in the new economy and in the development of the industry , but also in the psychology of our contemporaries of art . *Veshch* will champion constructive art , whose mission is not , after all , to embellish life , but to organize it .

During his stay Lissitzky also developed his career as a graphic designer with some historically important works such as the books *Dlia Golossa* ( For the Voice ) , a collection of poems from Vladimir Mayakovsky , and *Die Kunstismen* ( The Artisms ) together with Jean Arp . In Berlin he also met and befriended many other artists , most notably Kurt Schwitters , László Moholy @-@ Nagy , and Theo van Doesburg . Together with Schwitters and van Doesburg , Lissitzky presented the idea of an international artistic movement under the guidelines of constructivism while also working with Kurt Schwitters on the issue *Nasci* ( Nature ) of the periodical *Merz* , and continuing to illustrate children 's books . The year after the publication of his first Proun series in Moscow in 1921 , Schwitters introduced Lissitzky to the Hanover gallery *kestnergesellschaft* , where he held his first solo exhibition . The second Proun series , printed in Hanover in 1923 , was a success , utilizing new printing techniques . Later on , he met Sophie Kuppers , who was the widow of Paul Kuppers , an art director of the *kestnergesellschaft* at which Lissitzky was showing , and whom he would marry in 1927 .

= = = Horizontal skyscrapers = = =

In 1923 ? 1925 , Lissitzky proposed and developed the idea of horizontal skyscrapers ( *Wolkenbügel* , " cloud @-@ irons " ) . A series of eight such structures was intended to mark the major intersections of the Boulevard Ring in Moscow . Each *Wolkenbügel* was a flat three @-@ story , 180 @-@ meter @-@ wide L @-@ shaped slab raised 50 meters above street level . It rested on three pylons ( 10 × 16 × 50 meters each ) , placed on three different street corners . One pylon extended underground , doubling as the staircase into a proposed subway station ; two others provided shelter for ground @-@ level tram stations .

Lissitzky argued that as long as humans cannot fly , moving horizontally is natural and moving vertically is not . Thus , where there is not sufficient land for construction , a new plane created in the air at medium altitude should be preferred to an American @-@ style tower . These buildings , according to Lissitzky , also provided superior insulation and ventilation for their inhabitants .

Lissitzky , aware of severe mismatch between his ideas and the existing urban landscape , experimented with different configurations of the horizontal surface and height @-@ to @-@ width ratios so that the structure appeared balanced visually ( " spatial balance is in the contrast of vertical and horizontal tensions " ) . The raised platform was shaped in a way that each of its four facets

looked distinctly different . Each tower faced the Kremlin with the same facet , providing a pointing arrow to pedestrians on the streets . All eight buildings were planned identically , so Lissitzky proposed color @-@ coding them for easier orientation .

An illustration of the concept appeared on the front cover of Adolf Behne 's book *Der Moderne Zweckbau* , and articles on it written by Lissitzky appeared in the Moscow @-@ based architectural review *ASNOVA News* ( journal of *ASNOVA* , the Association of New Architects ) and in the German art journal *Das Kunstblatt* .

After some time of creating " paper architecture " projects such as the *Wolkenbügel* he was hired to design an actual building in Moscow . Located at 55 @.@ 777277 ° N 37 @.@ 610828 ° E ? / 55 @.@ 777277 ; 37 @.@ 610828 17 , 1st Samotechny Lane , it is Lissitzky 's sole tangible work of architecture . It was commissioned in 1932 by *Ogonyok* magazine to be used as a print shop . In June 2007 the independent Russky Avangard foundation filed a request to list the building on the heritage register . In September 2007 the city commission ( *Moskomnasledie* ) approved the request and passed it to the city government for a final approval , which did not happen . In October 2008 , the abandoned building was badly damaged by fire .

= = Exhibitions of the 1920s = =

After two years of intensive work Lissitzky was taken ill with acute pneumonia in October 1923 . A few weeks later he was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis ; in February 1924 he relocated to a Swiss sanatorium near Locarno . He kept very busy during his stay , working on advertisement designs for *Pelikan Industries* ( who in turn paid for his treatment ) , translating articles written by Malevich into German , and experimenting heavily in typographic design and photography . In 1925 , after the Swiss government denied his request to renew his visa , Lissitzky returned to Moscow and began teaching interior design , metalwork , and architecture at *VKhUTEMAS* ( *State Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops* ) , a post he would keep until 1930 . He all but stopped his Proun works and became increasingly active in architecture and propaganda designs .

In June 1926 , Lissitzky left the country again , this time for a brief stay in Germany and the Netherlands . There he designed an exhibition room for the *Internationale Kunstausstellung* art show in Dresden and the *Raum Konstruktive Kunst* ( *Room for constructivist art* ) and *Abstraktes Kabinett* shows in Hanover , and perfected the 1925 *Wolkenbügel* concept in collaboration with Mart Stam . In his autobiography ( written in June 1941 , and later edited and released by his wife ) , Lissitzky wrote , " 1926 . My most important work as an artist begins : the creation of exhibitions . "

Back in the USSR , Lissitzky designed displays for the official Soviet pavilions at the international exhibitions of the period , up to the 1939 New York World 's Fair . One of his most notable exhibits was the All @-@ Union Polygraphic Exhibit in Moscow in August ? October 1927 , where Lissitzky headed the design team for " photography and photomechanics " ( i.e. photomontage ) artists and the installation crew . His work was perceived as radically new , especially when juxtaposed with the classicist designs of Vladimir Favorsky ( head of the book art section of the same exhibition ) and of the foreign exhibits .

In the beginning of 1928 , Lissitzky visited Cologne in preparation for the 1928 *Pressa Show* scheduled for April ? May 1928 . The state delegated Lissitzky to supervise the Soviet program ; instead of building their own pavilion , the Soviets rented the existing central pavilion , the largest building on the fairground . To make full use of it , the Soviet program designed by Lissitzky revolved around the theme of a film show , with nearly continuous presentation of the new feature films , propagandist newsreels and early animation , on multiple screens inside the pavilion and on the open @-@ air screens . His work was praised for near absence of paper exhibits ; " everything moves , rotates , everything is energized " ( Russian : ??? ??????? , ??????? , ????????????????? ) . Lissitzky also designed and managed on site less demanding exhibitions like the 1930 *Hygiene show* in Dresden .

Along with pavilion design , Lissitzky began experimenting with print media again . His work with book and periodical design was perhaps some of his most accomplished and influential . He launched radical innovations in typography and photomontage , two fields in which he was

particularly adept . He even designed a photomontage birth announcement in 1930 for his recently born son , Jen . The image itself is seen as being another personal endorsement of the Soviet Union , as it superimposed an image of the infant Jen over a factory chimney , linking Jen 's future with his country 's industrial progress . Around this time , Lissitzky 's interest in book design escalated . In his remaining years , some of his most challenging and innovative works in this field would develop . In discussing his vision of the book , he wrote :

In contrast to the old monumental art [ the book ] itself goes to the people , and does not stand like a cathedral in one place waiting for someone to approach . . . [ The book is the ] monument of the future .

He perceived books as permanent objects that were invested with power . This power was unique in that it could transmit ideas to people of different times , cultures , and interests , and do so in ways other art forms could not . This ambition laced all of his work , particularly in his later years . Lissitzky was devoted to the idea of creating art with power and purpose , art that could invoke change .

= = Later years = =

In 1932 , Stalin closed down independent artists ' unions ; former avant @-@ garde artists had to adapt to the new climate or risk being officially criticised or even blacklisted . Lissitzky retained his reputation as the master of exhibition art and management into the late 1930s . His tuberculosis gradually reduced his physical abilities , and he was becoming more and more dependent on his wife in actual completion of his work .

In 1937 , Lissitzky served as the lead decorator for the upcoming All @-@ Union Agricultural Exhibition , reporting to the master planner Vyacheslav Oltarzhevsky but largely independent and highly critical of him . The project was plagued by delays and political interventions . By the end of 1937 the " apparent simplicity " of Lissitzky 's artwork aroused the concerns of the political supervisors , and Lissitzky responded : " The simpler the shape , the finer precision and quality of execution required ... yet until now [ the working crews ] are instructed by the foremen ( Oltarzhevsky and Korostashevsky ) , not the authors " ( i.e. Vladimir Shchuko , author of the Central Pavilion , and Lissitzky himself ) . His artwork , as described in 1937 proposals , completely departed from the modernist art of the 1920s in favor of socialist realism . The iconic statue of Stalin in front of the central pavilion was proposed by Lissitzky personally : " this will give the square its head and its face " ( Russian : ??? ????? ????? ????? ? ????? ? ) .

In June 1938 , he was only one of seventeen professionals and managers responsible for the Central Pavilion ; in October 1938 , he shared the responsibility for its Main Hall decoration with Vladimir Akhmetiev . He simultaneously worked on the decoration of the Soviet pavilion for the 1939 New York World 's Fair ; the June 1938 commission considered Lissitzky 's work along with nineteen other proposals and eventually rejected it .

Lissitzky 's work on the USSR im Bau ( USSR in construction ) magazine took his experimentation and innovation with book design to an extreme . In issue # 2 he included multiple fold @-@ out pages , presented in concert with other folded pages that together produced design combinations and a narrative structure that was completely original . Each issue focused on a particular issue of the time ? a new dam being built , constitutional reforms , Red Army progress and so on . In 1941 , his tuberculosis worsened , but he continued to produce works , one of his last being a propaganda poster for Russia 's efforts in World War II , titled " Davaite pobolshe tankov ! " ( Give us more tanks ! ) He died on December 30 , 1941 , in Moscow .

= = Gallery of work = =