

In the field of typography, Lissitzky's contributions were of major importance. He worked on designs for books and magazines throughout his career, and after 1919 became one of the pioneers of modern book design. His dynamic and ingenious designs incorporate many of the visual devices deployed in the *Prounen*, as seen in *Of Two Squares*, 1922, or *Dlia Golosa (For the Voice)*, 1923. In the period from 1927 to 1930, typography formed part of his work through the design of international exhibitions where he applied it on a grand scale: the All-Union Polygraphic Exhibition in Moscow, 1927, and the International Press Exhibition (Pressa) in Cologne, 1928. His quasi-official role as a typographic expert was corroborated by his cover designs for editions of works by three great Russian writers: Tolstoy, Chekhov and Gorky.

Between 1931 and 1941, El Lissitzky concentrated fundamentally on propaganda work, involving himself in the task of disseminating the achievements of modernisation in the Soviet Union and defending its policies. At a time of increasing internal persecution and repression, one of the main propaganda media employed by the Soviet state to advertise its progress and project a favourable image of the USSR abroad—and also at home—was the magazine *USSR in Construction* (1930–41). The magazine evolved towards a rhetorical visual style in which Lissitzky, who designed seventeen issues over the years from April 1932, played a key role.



El Lissitzky (1890–1941)

Proun 6 "Interpreting Planes", 1919–20

Oil on canvas, 81 x 59 cm

Stiftung Moritzburg Halle (Saale) Kunstmuseum des Landes Sachsen-Anhalt, Germany

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Cover (detail):

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Exhibition organized by the Museo Picasso Málaga, with MART, Museo d'arte moderna e contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Fundació Catalunya-La Pedrera, Barcelona and La Fábrica, Madrid. With the collaboration of M.T. Abraham Foundation, Paris

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El Lissitzky. The Experience of Totality

23.06.2014 - 24.09.2014



El Lissitzky (1890–1941)
The constructor (Selfportrait), 1924
 Gelatin silver print, 11.6 x 12.1 cm
 The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

The first decades of the 20th century brought numerous changes in art as well as in life, politics, economics and society. Innovations, inventions and changes appeared at an unprecedented rate. A cult of technology developed in the belief that it could solve the problems of mankind. Those years saw the outbreak of two world wars and, in 1917, of the Russian Revolution. In the sphere of the arts, innovation was one of the recurrent motifs. What had been done until then was regarded as obsolete, and a new geometric pictorial language emerged. Numerous 'isms' developed, such as cubism, futurism, suprematism and constructivism.

This period of change and innovation between the wars was the context of the work of Eliezer Markovich Lissitzky (Pochinok, Smolensk, Russia, 1890–Moscow, 1941), El Lissitzky, one of the most influential, experimental and controversial artists of the first decades of the 20th century.

El Lissitzky was a painter, graphic designer, typographer, exhibition designer, architect and photographer. One of the characteristics of his life and work was the crossing of boundaries and frontiers. He connected countries, cultures and the disciplines of art, architecture and design in a bid to draw art closer to life, and East to West. He journeyed constantly between the Soviet Union and Europe, especially Germany, where he had graduated in architectural engineering from the Technical Institute of Darmstadt in 1914.

After the October Revolution of 1917, El Lissitzky first became involved with the Russian national movement for the resurgence of



El Lissitzky (1890–1941)
Prounenraum (Proun Room), 1923. Reconstructed in 1971
 Painted wood, 320 x 364 x 364 cm
 Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

Jewish culture, devoting himself during his Kiev period (1918–19) to the illustration of books in Yiddish, above all for children. He then embraced the revolution after being invited by the painter Marc Chagall to teach at the Institute of Popular Art in Vitebsk. In that city, together with his students and the suprematist collective UNOVIS, he took part in all sorts of agitation activities, designing posters and drawings, which were displayed on trams and buildings in the city, to encourage labourers to return to their workplaces, or to support the reds (the revolutionary army) in their struggle against the whites (pro-Tsarists) during the civil war.

It was also in Vitebsk, where he remained until 1921, that Lissitzky found inspiration in the suprematist painting of Kazimir Malevich, whom he had invited to work at the Institute of Popular Art, to invent his own form of abstract art—paintings, engravings and drawings—which he called *Proun* (Projects for the Affirmation of the New). The ideas underlying *Proun* were later to take shape in sketches for architectural projects, and he also used the same visual devices to design costumes and machinery for the stage. For both El Lissitzky and Malevich, art was not to be considered simply as a vehicle for personal expression and the production of objects, but as a social and collective activity.

In the autumn of 1921, he left for Berlin. From there he travelled to various cities in Germany, establishing cultural contacts between Soviet and European artists, publicising his work, taking part in conferences, organising exhibitions, and designing covers for books and magazines like *Broom* and *Wendingen*. In 1924, after being



El Lissitzky (1890–1941)
View of the International Press Exhibition (Pressa) in Cologne, 1928
 Gelatin silver print, 17.7 x 23.5 cm
 The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow

diagnosed with tuberculosis, he departed for Switzerland, where he remained until his return to the Soviet Union in 1925. Of particular importance during this European period were his contributions to the display of artworks (*Proun Room*, for the Great Art Exhibition of Berlin in 1923) and his experiments with photography, an interest he developed after coming into contact with the avant-garde artists of Europe, particularly the dadaists Kurt Schwitters and Hans Arp and other members of De Stijl.

During his convalescence in Switzerland, he experimented with photograms and multiple exposures, and he created his famous self-portrait of 1924, *The Constructor*, which became an artistic symbol of the twenties after appearing on the cover of *Foto-Auge*, a publication brought out by Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold on the occasion of the international exhibition *Film und Foto* in Stuttgart, 1929. He also made portraits with multiple exposures of Hans Arp and Kurt Schwitters.

On his return to Moscow in 1925, El Lissitzky intended to dedicate himself to architecture, his true passion, taking advantage of the possibilities then offered in that field in his country. He entered various competitions and produced numerous designs, like that of a horizontal skyscraper for Moscow, the *Wolkenbügel*, which was to be a large building with communal apartments. None of the projects he designed in those years was ever built, and neither were those he produced later during the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32): the headquarters of *Pravda*, the House of Industry, and various designs for the theatre.