

CONSTRUCTIVISM



EL LISSITZKY

Architecting Monuments of the Future

Constructivism, an avant-garde movement in art and architecture inspired by Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism, took root in Russia following the Russian Revolution of 1917. It reflected the idealisms of progressive artists who strove to architect the reconstruction of their country into a socialist utopia.

Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953), the founder of constructivism, epitomized this new movement in 1914 through his "painting reliefs" that were abstract geometric constructions that celebrated modernity and industrialization. In 1920, Antoine Pevsner and Naum created the Realist Manifesto that directed followers to "construct art", thus coining the term "constructivism" for this new movement. Constructivist artists used materials such as steel, wire, concrete, plastic, and wood to construct their 3-dimensional works. El Lissitzky, a prominent figure in constructivism, believed that artists could be productive agents of change as social engineers

that could sculpt this new socialist Russia. Although Germany was the primary epicenter of the most constructivist activities beyond the Soviet Union, Constructivism had an international appeal and soon spread to other art hubs including Paris, London and eventually United States. Other major contributors to the constructivist movement included such international figures as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy from Hungary, Theo van Doesburg from the Netherlands, and Ben Nicholson, the most prominent English constructivist.

In rejecting their pre-socialist past, constructivists were presented with the opportunity to devise a new common language to express their hopes and agenda. They created abstract symbols to describe and promote their man-made socialist order and industrial progress. Constructivist art, like Suprematist works, can be characterized by its focus on a level-headed, mathematical precision in creating carefully crafted simple geometric shapes—squares, circles, triangles, and intersecting lines. Given the constructivists' socialist agenda to better serve and promote their idealistic vision to the common masses, they focused on making their work universally accessible and utilitarian. Hence, they favored objective

forms over the subjective or the individualistic in their designs for buildings, theatre sets, posters, clothing, and furniture.

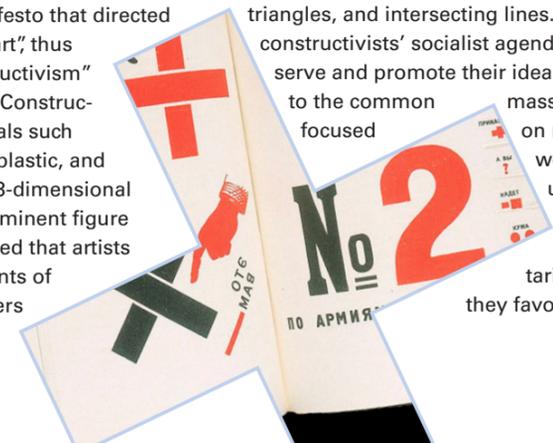
El Lissitzki (Nov. 23, 1890 – Dec. 30, 1941)—a Russian painter, typographer, designer, architect, photographer and teacher—was inarguably one of the most influential constructivists. He helped define this movement and advance techniques for typography, exhibition design, photomontage, and book design. Through a number of innovative production techniques and stylistic approaches, Lissitzky pioneered nonrepresentational art in early 20th century. One of his signature constructivist works was a self-portrait photomontage entitled



"The Constructor" (1925) where he represented himself as an artist that had discarded the paintbrush for the compass. This piece

eloquently captured the constructivist concept of the artist as an engineer of social order.

In 1890, Lissitzky (formally known as Lazar Markovich Lissitzky) was born in Pochinok, a small Jewish community. It wasn't until he was thirteen that Lissitzky received formal art instruction from Jehuda Pen, a local Jewish artist. He then went on to study architecture and engineering in Darmstadt, Germany—two subjects that would later greatly inform his interests in integrating 3-dimensional architectural forms into his expression of constructivism. In 1912, he wandered through Europe, primarily in Paris, to further his fine art and architecture studies. Lissitzky lived in Germany



until the outbreak of World War I at which point, he had to return to Russia. Following the war, he moved to Moscow where he received an architectural diploma from the Polytechnic Institute of Riga.

In his early career years, he illustrated Yiddish children's books to promote Jewish culture in a

active he dedicating



dialogue. Hence, he dedicated his time to more effective means for narrative expression. He was the first to introduce the concept of expressing different narrative structures in books through the develop-

ized letters—on the vertical and horizontal axes of a grid. Unlike suprematism at that time which was usually represented in flat, 2-dimensional forms such as paintings and lithographs, Lissitzky, always an architect at heart, pioneered the use of architectural forms to expand suprematism into 3-dimensional installations. He forged the groundwork for experimentations in architecture and exhibition design. Lissitzky drew upon Jewish themes and symbols in his

3D



fast-changing Russia that had just repealed its anti-Semitic laws. His work chronicled his growing fascination with making art an instrument for education and social change. This also was his first entrance into book design, a field in which he would later significantly innovate. In a book on traditional Jewish Passover, Lissitzky explored utilitarian expression through the clever employment of a typographic system of color-coding that matched the colors of characters in the story with a word referring to them.

Lissitzky recognized that books were enduring "monuments of the future" that could serve as a powerful means to convey socialist ideals and ideas of the present and to past to future generations. Not only were books potentially great instructors, they had the potential to be dynamic objects with the "unity of acoustics and optics" that could engage readers in an

ment of varied combinations of multiple fold-out pages in concert with other folded pages.

Eventually, he shifted his focus away from traditional Jewish art in favor of Kazimir Malevich's suprematism approach that rejected the imitation of natural shapes for the creation of distinct, geometric forms. In 1919, he created what may be considered one of his most famous examples of suprematist works—a propaganda poster "Beat the white with the Red Wedge." This poster exemplifies his adoption of political symbolism through the abstract representation of the Russian communist revolutionists as a red wedge in opposition to a white background representing Kerenski's white force of monarchists and conservatists who opposed the socialist Bolshevik Revolution.

One of Lissitzky's most notable accomplishments included developing a variant suprematist style called "pron" as expressed through a series of geometric paintings that combined the conventional suprematist concepts of shifting axes and multiple perspectives. Lissitzky's typographic design was characterized by bold representations of pure color, photographic collage, and a harmonious, concise arrangement of blocky text—often capital-

Artists, as engineers of social order, used political symbolism to inspire and educate.

Prouns, and sometimes used stylized Latin, Cyrillic and Hebrew letters as architectural elements or pictorial symbols in his designs.

In 1924, when Lissitzky went to Switzerland to treat his tuberculosis, he experimented heavily in typographic design and photography. He later returned to Moscow where he taught interior design, metalwork and architecture. In 1927, he married Sophie Kuppers, a widow of an art director of a gallery at which Lissitzky was showing his work one time. In these later years, he worked increasingly on developing propaganda designs and architecture, and shifted his focus away from his Proun works. In a birth announcement of his son Jen in 1930, Lissitzky depicted Jen in photomontage floating over a factory chimney, visually linking Jen's birth and future with Russia's political renaissance and industrial progress. His work introduced juxtapositions of real objects with naturalistic and abstract forms to convey a mythologized optimism about Soviet communism. Lissitzky's significant accomplishments and innovations in typography, design and architecture would later greatly influence the Bauhaus and De Stijl movements as well as shape the development of modern graphic design sensibilities. ■

