



## Malevich show revives debate on fake art



VoR collage

**The first retrospective of work by Kazimir Malevich opened at the Tate Modern in London earlier this month – provoking a row about the provenance of some of his work. VoR's Alice Lagnado reports.**

The Tate Modern's Malevich exhibition is proving very popular, with British art lovers queuing up to see the 420 paintings, drawings, and sculptures on display.

But the exhibition has also provoked a row about the provenance of some of Malevich's work on the Russian art market.

Curator Marina Molchanova, who owns Moscow's Elysium art gallery, has said that an international council of experts made up of museum directors and art historians should be established in order to look at how Russian avant-garde paintings are researched and authenticated. Malevich could not possibly have painted so many works in his lifetime, she says.

Tate Modern says that the pieces in the Malevich exhibition have clear provenance and proven track records in their histories of being collected, published and exhibited.

No one doubts that the Tate has done its homework. But the exhibition does highlight the wider issue of fake Russian avant-garde paintings.

*"Making fakes of Russian avant-garde work has been going on for at least 30, if not 40 years,"* says John Varoli, who spent 15 years covering art in Russia for the *New York Times* and *The Art Newspaper*.

*"It's not new. And of course it coincides with the rise in demand for works of the Russian avant-garde. 'Obviously counterfeiters fake work that is 'hot' on the market."*

*"They're often able to take advantage of newly rich people who want to collect art, who want to collect the attributes of power and prestige. Rich people like to have beautiful things in their houses."*

*"Some experts tell me that as much as 80 percent of what they're seeing is fake."*

But what can be done about the trade in counterfeits?

What about Marina Molchanova's proposal to set up a council of experts?

*"I've read about this idea, and she's a top specialist – it's a good idea,"* says Varoli. *"Some type of international body certainly needs to be set up to make the final decisions."*

*"At the moment, the final decision about authenticity is pretty much made individually by each gallery, each art expert, each auction house."*

*"Often I hear art dealers saying, oh, that auction house is selling fakes. Then you speak to that auction house and they say, that art dealer's selling fakes. The main players in the market tend to accuse each other!"*

*"They need a type of United Nations for the art world that would really be the authority, that could say once and for all, 'this is authentic.'"*

The market in fake Russian avant-garde works is so extensive because of the price they can fetch – and because Russian art experts were, in the past, cut off from the rest of the world.

*"Firstly, Russian avant-garde is the most expensive segment of Russian art. Then, the problem really is in the history,"* Elena Sudakova, the director of the *Gallery for Russian Arts and Design*, or GRAD, in London, tells me.

*"The avant-garde was not studied during Soviet times. So a lot of the fakes appeared in the western market during the 1960s and 1970s because there were no experts on Russian avant-garde [available in the west] then."*

*"There were several collectors who were specialists, but there were no museum experts in that field."*

So many fakes were produced in the west during the Soviet era, rather than now, when it is easy to access experts to authenticate the paintings.

Even putting aside the argument about fakes, Malevich is viewed with some suspicion in Russia. While a tiny percentage of the population revere his work, many people find his work unappealing – especially works like his famous Black Square.

*"In Britain, abstract art always had a reasonably difficult time, and in Russia, the work has had a very complex history,"* says the curator of the Malevich exhibition and head of exhibitions at the Tate Modern, Achim Borchardt-Hume.

*"In the early 1930s, Malevich was arrested and questioned for counter-revolutionary activities. At the same time he got a state salary. Soon after he died, all his work had to be taken off the walls of the museums as part of the doctrine of socialist realism. Then in the 1950s and 1960s, [his work] slowly came out again, but the avant-garde work only really came out in the 1980s."*

*"I think because the representation of Russian avant-garde art was interrupted, for a great many ordinary Russians, it still is quite difficult."*

Yet Malevich's work is very much rooted in Russia – and Ukraine – as his early paintings of peasants show.

*"What I find fascinating about this moment in time is that artists like Malevich or [Mikhail] Larionov or [Natalia] Goncharova made a very conscious decision."*

*"They didn't want to have to decide between western modernity and being Russian. They wanted both."*

*"It's not that they couldn't make up their minds. Lots of people start to use terms like derivative or imitation, which I think is completely wrong."*

*"I think that they became very aware of what was happening in other parts of the world, that they wanted to take part in that, but they did not want to be forced to abandon their own cultural identity."*

*"The extraordinary energy that this generates comes out of fusing these two different models."*

But Achim Borchardt-Hume is hopeful that Malevich will enjoy wider audiences in Russia in future.

*"The difficulty with modern art in many parts of world remains, that people feel they don't understand it easily and then get very worried about whether somebody is having a joke at their expense."*

*"Even when the exhibition opened here in London, there were questions about the Black Square, 'is this really art?', but I think the more you can open up the conversation [the better], and of course in Britain over the last 10-20 years there's been a real flourishing of visual arts institutions, more and more people are coming to museums. And I think a similar thing is probably going to happen in Russia as well."*

Elena Sudakova of the GRAD gallery sees a recent change in the perceptions of Malevich in Russia.

*"I have children, and I can see that there are a lot of school excursions organised to the Tretyakov gallery. They addressed this subject finally – as you saw at the opening of the Olympics in Sochi, parts of it were devoted to Constructivism. The Olympics ceremonies in Russia only show those [artists] that they believe to be symbols of Russia."*

*"So I would say that there has been a political change to [perceptions of] abstract art. And to Malevich, of course, because he was the pioneer of abstract art."*

The Malevich exhibition has of course brought over many works from Russia – from the Tretyakov gallery in Moscow, the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg, and 11 regional museums – as well as from museums all round the world.

Achim Borchardt-Hume says that the work from St Petersburg in particular has far outstripped expectations because lenders gave more and more paintings to the Tate as their enthusiasm for this huge exhibition grew.

Malevich at Tate Modern: Revolutionary of Russian Art

(VoR)

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