

AUTHENTICATION IN ART

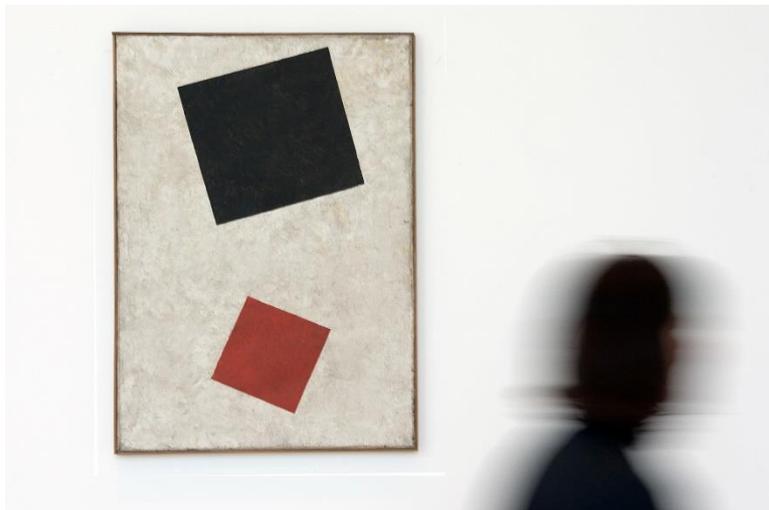
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Handelsblatt

Black Square, Red Faces

The Kasimir Malevich painting “Black Square, Red Square,” thought to be worth at least €50 million, is actually fake. It's a blow to the reputation of the German museum that owns it.

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In the eye of the beholder. Source: DPA

A hundred years ago, the abstract painting “Black Square” by Russian artist Kasimir Malevich was considered a scandalous work, both for its absolute rejection of representation and for its blasphemy. Spurning emperor and church, Malevich’s radical vision looked forward to the Russian Revolution.

In the years that followed, Malevich painted many more of his signature squares in varying sizes, almost always in red or black. One of these, “Black Square, Red Square,” was exhibited in the Wilhelm Hack Museum in Ludwigshafen from 1979 onward before being donated to the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, based in Düsseldorf, in 2015.

But now that painting, recently valued at €50 million to €80 million (\$58 million to \$93 million), has been revealed to be a forgery. Following two expert appraisals, the Kunstsammlung NRW has acknowledged that the picture is likely a clever fake from the 1970s.

The painting's new owners were warned that its provenance was murky and ordered tests to be carried out. But before the results came in, the collection's new masterpiece was put on public display in the summer of 2015, accompanied by massive media attention. And no wonder: A similar Malevich had recently been auctioned by Sotheby's for \$60 million.

Two years later, the assessors have submitted their report with unanimous judgment: The picture is a fake. As well as chemical analysis, X-rays and infrared imaging, the museum's experts subjected the picture to so-called C14 radioactivity analysis. Objects made before the 1950s, when atmospheric nuclear testing became widespread, contain considerably less radiation. The C14 test "indicated an origin after 1950, and probably between 1972 and 1975," said the report.

It's a bitter disappointment for the painting's owners, but they say openness is the only possible policy: "However difficult, we must acknowledge the forgery," Susanne Gaensheimer, director of the Kunstsammlung NRW, told Handelsblatt. Since the painting was a gift, there is no direct financial damage to the museum, but the blow to their reputation is serious, particularly given the widespread publicity surrounding the acquisition.

The story of "Black Square, Red Square" is inseparable from Wilhelm Hack, a Cologne businessman who grew wealthy during the world wars and devoted his later life to a lavish art collection. First concentrating on medieval art, he later developed a love of modernist abstraction, buying paintings by Piet Mondrian, Robert Delaunay, Wassily Kandinsky, and Malevich.

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Susanne Gaensheimer, director, Kunstsammlung NRW

In the 1960s, abstract movements such as Russian Constructivism were drawing increasing attention from experts and collectors, with auction prices climbing steadily. But even then, art market specialists were aware of collusion between Russian scholars and forgers. There were even rumors that the KGB was producing fakes, to be sold for much-needed hard currency. Forging a Malevich was more straightforward than faking a Rembrandt: Abstract paintings are easier to imitate, and there was no definitive catalogue of Malevich's works.

Mr. Hack went to extraordinary lengths to get his hands on Russian masterpieces. He obtained Kandinsky's "Picture with White Lines" in a secret swap with the Soviet government, giving them handwritten letters from Vladimir Lenin in return.

While the Kandinsky is thought to be authentic, there was always something of a cloud over the Malevich. For one thing, Mr. Hack could not name the previous owners. “We frequently had no information on sources,” the head of the Wilhelm Hack Museum told Handelsblatt.

As he grew older, Mr. Hack, like many wealthy collectors, looked to find his collection a new home, hoping to share it with a wider public. After disagreements with authorities in Cologne and Düsseldorf, he came to an agreement with the industrial city of Ludwigshafen, which built a museum to house the 120 works he donated.

However, both Malevich’s “Black Square, Red Square” and Kandinsky’s “Picture with White Lines” were only given to the new museum on loan. Years after Mr. Hack’s death, his heirs removed the paintings from the Ludwigshafen museum, and last June the Kandinsky was sold to an unnamed German collector for over \$40 million.

The Malevich was donated to the Kunstsammlung NRW, along with 43 drawings. At the time, the new owners couldn’t believe their luck. Marion Ackermann, then head of the museum, said: “This extraordinarily generous gesture closes a gap in our holdings: We have never had a Malevich among our collection of classical modernism. We are extremely grateful.”

The painting was immediately given its own three-month special exhibition. “Of course I wanted to show a gift like that straight away,” Ms. Ackermann said. Only later was it subjected to expert assessment.

Two years later, Investigation Report 15-0151 makes the verdict clear: “A number of technical indications clearly argue against authenticity,” the report said. As well as radiation evidence, indications include a suspicious brown tinting, thought to have been applied to the paint to simulate aging.

So once again, the Kunstsammlung NRW has no Malevich in its collection of classical modernism. But it is unlikely that the businessman who paid \$40 million for the Kandinsky will be asking for his painting to be assessed. For one thing, there is significant proof of the Kandinsky’s authenticity. But collectors also often prefer to preserve a little mystery with their treasures.