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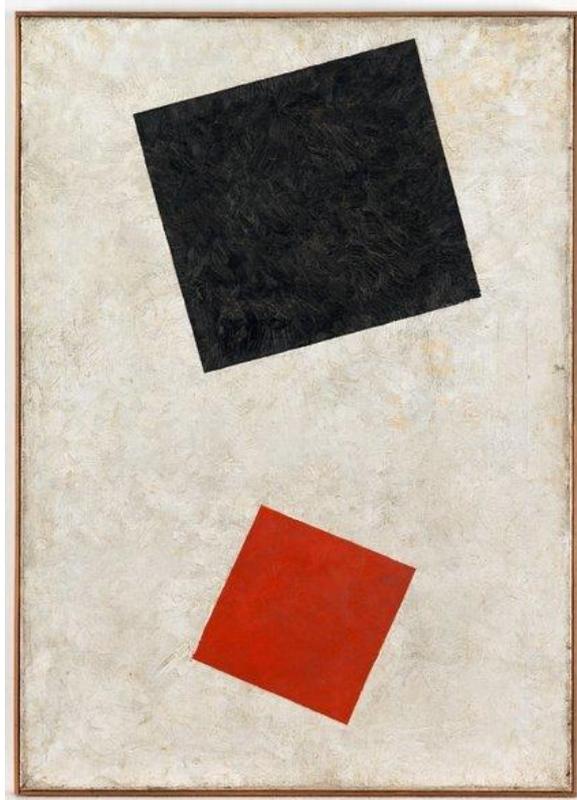
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## Unknown or Unreal? The Shadow on Some Russian Avant-Garde Art

By CATHERINE HICKLEY APRIL 6, 2018



The painting “Black Rectangle, Red Square,” in a German public collection, was once thought to have been painted in 1915 by Kazimir Malevich, but last year was found to be a forgery. [CreditAchim Kukulies](#)

WIESBADEN, Germany — Multiple art experts were brought in as witnesses here in a case, decided last month, of two men accused of having trafficked in hundreds of forged paintings, all said to have been created by masters of the Russian avant-garde.

One of them, Patricia Railing, who had written a book on Kazimir Malevich, said at a hearing that many of the works seemed genuine. Four paintings attributed to Malevich were “very good,” she said in a later interview. “They could hang in the Stedelijk and be very proud.”

Her ex-husband, [Andrei Nakov, the author](#) of the Malevich catalogue raisonné, took a different view. He told the authorities that the seized works were unquestionably fakes.

“Awful imitations,” he labeled them in a later interview. “I said to the police, ‘Stop showing me this rubbish.’”

This difference of opinion, replicated among the rest of the experts, seemed to irritate the judge tasked with sorting it all out.

“Ask 10 different art historians the same question and you get 10 different answers,” said the judge, Ingeborg Bäumer-Kurandt. “Behind the experts there are diverse vested interests influencing how these paintings are evaluated.”

This kind of dispute can occur with art from any period. But it is surfacing with disturbing frequency in recent months when it comes to work created — or said to have been created — during the Russian avant-garde, a period in the early 20th century in which Malevich, Marc Chagall, Wassily Kandinsky, Natalia Goncharova and El Lissitzky did some of their best work.

Photo



Works on display at the “Russian Modernism” exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent earlier this year. It was closed after questions arose concerning the attributions attached to some of the paintings. Credit Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent

Earlier this year, the Ghent Museum of Fine Art in Belgium closed [an exhibition of two-dozen works](#) on loan after dealers and scholars described some of the pieces as “highly questionable.” [The museum’s director](#) was suspended.

Late last year in Germany, the state art collections of North Rhine-Westphalia said [a painting dated 1915](#) that it believed to be by Malevich had been unmasked as a forgery. Scientific tests showed that the painting, “Black Rectangle, Red Square,” could not have been produced before 1950.

And in [the case that finished here](#) last month, Itzhak Zarug, a 73-year-old Israeli dealer, and his business partner, Moez Ben Hazaz, had been suspected of being the leaders of an international ring of art forgers who specialized in the avant-garde.

Photo



A German court last month dropped charges of forgery against Itzhak Zarug, a dealer with a large collection of works that he attributes to masters of the Russian avant-garde. But he was convicted of falsifying some provenances. Credit: Courtesy of Itzhak Zarug

But, while they were convicted of falsifying the provenance of artworks and selling one work proven to be a forgery, the court dropped all charges of forgery and criminal conspiracy against them.

A big problem for dealers who specialize in this period, Mr. Zarug said in an interview, is that the provenance of much Russian avant-garde art is “a black hole.”

Many works were hidden away after the Revolution, as censorship built in the 1920s. Under Stalin’s increasingly draconian regime in the 1930s, artists either had to comply with the demands of the state propaganda machine for Social Realist art, emigrate or work in secret. Noncompliant works — including much of the avant-garde — ended up in museum basements.

But the market for Russian avant-garde art began to develop in the 1970s and flowered with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many legitimate works began to surface — often unaccompanied by provenance documentation.

Forgers took note, and took advantage of the murky situation, in part because the stakes in this market have grown so high.

With the emergence of a new generation of Russian collectors — some with immense wealth — prices have spiraled. A painting by Malevich, for example, [fetched \\$60 million](#) at Sotheby's in 2008.

The art of the avant-garde is “currently the hottest area of the Russian art market,” Aleksandra Babenko, an associate specialist in Russian pictures at [Christie's](#), [wrote in an article](#) published in February on the auction house's website. “But paintings are extremely rare and only salable when they have fully recorded provenance and early exhibition history.”

One company that has been employed in the hunt to determine authenticity is a lab operated by Elisabeth and Erhard Jägers near Cologne. Mr. Jägers says their work has found that Russian avant-garde art is particularly prone to forgery. In the case of the painter Alexej von Jawlensky, for instance, Mr. Jägers has tested 75 paintings attributed to the artist over the years, 50 of which he found to be fakes.

In the Zarug case here, the Jägers examined 19 paintings to determine whether they included any pigments or materials that would not have been available to the artists of the Russian avant-garde. Sixteen passed that test, meaning their materials were consistent with their having been made in the attributed period.



Mr. Zarug is to recover from the authorities this painting, "The Music Instrument," which he attributes to Kasimir Malevich; it was seized as a suspected forgery. Credit Zarug Collection

“Using scientific methods, we can find out if something is a forgery,” Mr. Jägers said by phone. “We cannot confirm that it is genuine. If the examination does not contradict the attribution of the work to a certain artist or period, the expertise of an art historian is necessary.”

In Ghent, the contested paintings that were exhibited came from the Dieleghem Foundation, an organization founded by Igor Toporovski and his wife, Olga, that holds works donated from their private collection based in Brussels.

In an interview last December, when the Ghent works were still on display, Mr. Toporovski said that he had acquired most of the works in Russia in the early 1990s.

“In Russia these artists practically never sold before the Revolution,” he said. “There were no galleries. This art was a little bit out of the market. That’s why the provenances are quite special.”

Mr. Zarug, in his interview, also spoke of how challenging it was to find art from the period with extensive exhibition or ownership histories.

Initially a dealer who focused on Judaica, antique books and manuscripts, Mr. Zarug said he began hunting for things to buy in the Soviet Union after the fall of the Berlin Wall. “The U.S.S.R. in 1990 was like the Wild West,” he said. Mr. Zarug said his diversification into Russian avant-garde art happened by chance. One of the dealers he had been working with regularly in Moscow offered him a painting attributed to Lissitzky for \$3,000, he said, and back home in Israel, he displayed the painting for gallery owners in an exhibition in his office. The first person to arrive “didn’t even look at the Judaica, he just looked at the painting,” Mr. Zarug said. “I saw his interest and understood it was something of value, so I thought I would ask a very high price. I asked for \$30,000. He said O.K.”

Mr. Zarug said he immediately returned to Moscow, bought another three paintings, and sold them to a dealer in Israel for a vast profit.

As he began searching for art in earnest across the Soviet Union, Mr. Zarug said he discovered huge stores of neglected paintings. On one occasion, he said, he found 100 pictures in very bad condition covered with a dust sheet in an attic in Moscow and bought them for \$1,000 each. On another, he said, he was taken to a deserted building in Azerbaijan where he was offered 206 paintings — including works he said are by Malevich and Kandinsky. In Tajikistan, the staff members of a museum sold him artworks directly from the basement, he said.

Some of Mr. Zarug’s acquisitions were more orthodox. He said he traced Chagall’s family in St. Petersburg and purchased some works on paper from Oxana Kornienko, the granddaughter of Chagall’s sister Lea, as well as an oil self-portrait dating from 1917 that has since been authenticated by the Comité Chagall in Paris and sold to a private collector. The Comité said it could not comment on whether Mr. Zarug had been the person who had the painting authenticated.

Some works he sold out of a gallery he had in Wiesbaden. The rest, he said, he kept in the private collection that was seized by the police. The authorities confiscated some 1,800 works, most of which are being returned to him.

Though he was convicted on the lesser counts, and sentenced to 32 months in jail, he had already been incarcerated for that length of time while he awaited trial, so now he is free. Mr. Hazaz, his partner, who was sentenced to three years, has also served his time.

In Mr. Zarug's view, the trial has "lifted a damaging taint on the value and prestige" of his collection. He said that when he gets it back, he will sell some pictures.

"I would like to put on a few exhibitions," he said. "And I want to rest a little."