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Towards Abstraction

Abstraction is the most dramatic and far-reaching development in the history of twentieth-century art. Ever since the latter part of the nineteenth century a number of artists were consciously or unconsciously moving toward a conception of painting as an entity unto itself rather than an imitation of, an illusion of, the physical world. In 1890 the French Symbolist painter Maurice Denis uttered a prophetic statement when he said that a painting, before it is anything else, is “essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a particular order.” We saw in chapter 10 that the originators of Cubism, Picasso and Braque, never exploited their style for the purposes of total abstraction. Although their Cubist pictures may represent highly abstracted interpretations of the material world, they were not in themselves abstract. We also saw, however, that other artists schooled in Cubism who were working in Paris, namely Delaunay, Kupka, and, for a time, Léger, made paintings that were not dependent upon recognizable forms. Slightly later in Zurich, the Dada artist Jean Arp was making collages with no discernible source in the real world (see fig. 298). Simultaneously, in other art centers in Europe and in the United States, a number of vanguard artists were abandoning the realm of appearances in pursuit of absolute, pure form. In Russia and the Netherlands, in particular, abstraction found even more fertile ground than in France; it was in these countries that early twentieth-century abstraction found its most expansive and most radical manifestations, with implications not merely for painting and sculpture but for architecture as well as graphic, industrial, and even fashion design. In the hands of these Utopian-minded pioneers, abstraction was not simply self-referential, art-for-art’s-sake formalism. Rather it represented a powerful new way of perceiving and ultimately transforming the world. The artists fervently believed that art lost none of its expressive power or meaning when divorced from the tangible world. In fact, through the formal expression of pure sensation they hoped to discover a universal visual language able to transcend mundane experience and place the viewer in touch with an alternative, ultimately spiritual world.

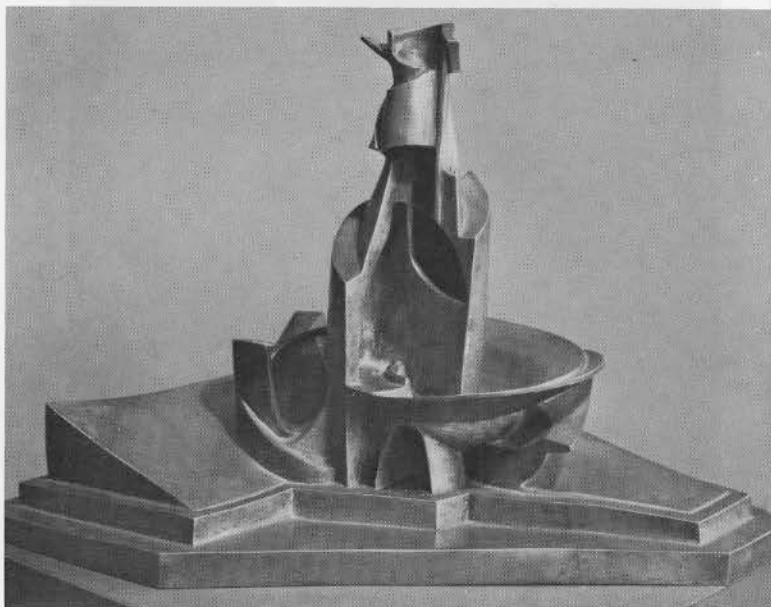
Many terms have been employed to describe the nonimi-

tative works of art produced throughout the twentieth century, including abstract, nonobjective, and nonrepresentational. All these terms refer to an art that depends solely on color, line, and shape for its imagery rather than motifs drawn from observable reality.

Futurism in Italy

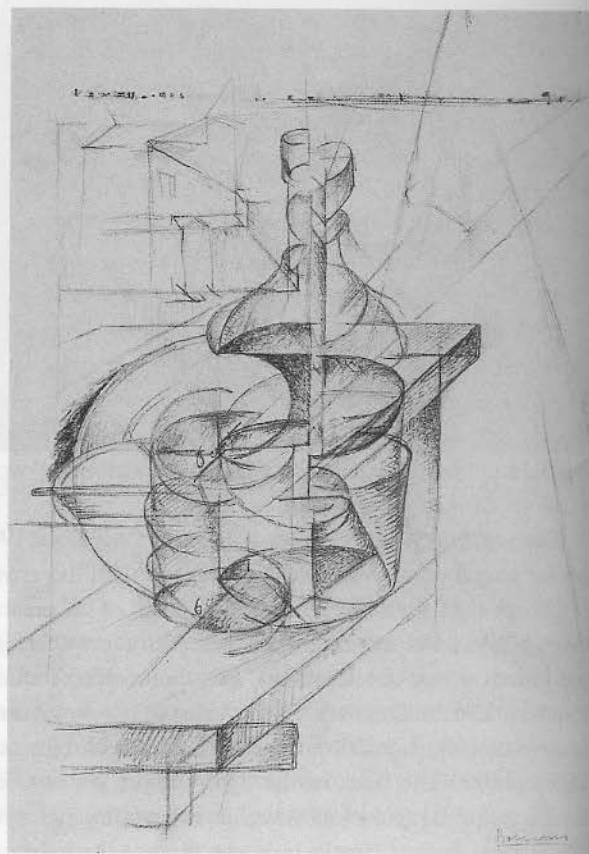
In their paintings and sculptures the Italian Futurist artists sometimes verged on total abstraction (color plate 109, page 206), but for the most part they, like the Cubists, drew upon imagery derived from the physical world. Futurism was first of all a literary concept, born in the mind of the poet and propagandist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1908 and announced in a series of manifestos in 1909, 1910, and subsequently. It began as a rebellion of young intellectuals against the cultural torpor into which Italy had sunk during the nineteenth century, and as so frequently happens in such movements, its manifestos initially focused on what they had to destroy before new ideas could flourish. The first manifesto, written by Marinetti, demanded the destruction of the libraries, museums, academies, and cities of the past, which he called mausoleums. It extolled the beauties of revolution, of war, of the speed and dynamism of machine technology: “. . . A roaring motorcar, which looks as though running on shrapnel, is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*.” Much of the spirit of Futurism reflected the flamboyant personality of Marinetti himself, rooted in the anarchist and revolutionary fervor of the day, it attacked the ills of an aristocratic and bourgeois society and celebrated progress, energy, and change. In the field of politics it unfortunately was to become a pillar of Italian fascism.

In late 1909 or early 1910 the painters Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, and Luigi Russolo joined Marinetti’s movement. Later it also included Gino Severini, who had been working in Paris since 1906, and Giacomo Balla. The group drew up a second manifesto in 1910. This again attacked the old institutions and promoted the artistic expression of motion, metamorphosis, and the simultaneity of vision itself. The painted moving object was to merge with its environment, so that no clear distinction could be drawn



above: 238. UMBERTO BOCCIONI. *Development of a Bottle in Space*. 1912. Silvered bronze (cast 1931), 15 x 23 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (38.1 x 60.3 x 32.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York ARISTIDE MAILLOL FUND

right: 239. UMBERTO BOCCIONI. *Table + Bottle + House*. 1912. Pencil on paper, 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 9 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (33.4 x 23.9 cm). Civico Gabinetto dei Disegni, Castello Sforzesco, Milan



CARLO CARRÀ (1881–1966) was important in bridging the gap between Italian Futurism and a slightly later Italian movement called the Metaphysical School (see fig. 296). From 1912, however, Carrà moved steadily toward an orthodox version of Cubism that expressed little of the ideals of speed and dynamism extolled in the Futurist manifestos. He returned to painting the nude, a subject that led him toward a form of massive, sculptural modeling. It was only a short step from this work to the metaphysical painting of Giorgio de Chirico, which Carrà began to investigate around 1916. Meanwhile, in the propagandistic collage *Patriotic Celebration* (color plate 110, page 207), Carrà employed radiating colors, words and letters, Italian flags, and other lines and symbols to extol the king and army of Italy, and to visually simulate the noises of sirens and mobs. He used these “free words,” as Marinetti did, to affect and stimulate the spirit and imagination directly through their visual associations, without the intervention of reason. A similar development was taking place among Russian Futurist poets and artists.

UMBERTO BOCCIONI (1882–1916) was perhaps the most talented of the Futurists. In his monumental work *The City Rises* (color plate 111, page 207) he sought his first “great synthesis of labor, light, and movement.” Dominated by the large, surging figure of a horse before which human figures fall like ninepins, it constitutes one of the Futurists’ first major statements: a visual essay on the qualities of violent action, speed, the disintegration of solid objects by light, and their reintegration into the totality of the picture by that very same light.

The greatest contribution of Boccioni during the last few

years of his short life was the creation of Futurist sculpture. During a visit to Paris in 1912, he went to the studios of Archipenko, Brancusi, and Duchamp-Villon and saw sculpture by Picasso. Immediately upon his return to Milan he wrote the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* (1912), in which he called for a complete renewal of this “mummified art.” He began the manifesto with the customary attack on all academic tradition. The attack became specific and virulent on the subject of the nude, which still dominated the work not only of the traditionalists but even of the leading progressive sculptors, Rodin, Bourdelle, and Maillol. Only in the Impressionist sculpture of Medardo Rosso (see fig. 144), then the principal Italian sculptor of stature, did Boccioni find exciting innovations. Yet he recognized that, in his concern to capture the transitory moment, Rosso was bound to represent the subject in nature in ways that paralleled those of the Impressionist painters.

Taking off from Rosso, Boccioni sought a dynamic fusion between his sculptural forms and surrounding environment. He emphasized the need for an “absolute and complete abolition of definite lines and closed sculpture. We break open the figure and enclose it in [an] environment.” He also asserted the sculptor’s right to use any form of distortion or fragmentation of figure or object, and insisted on the use of every kind of material—“glass, wood, cardboard, iron, cement, horse-hair, leather, cloth, mirrors, electric lights, etc., etc.”

Boccioni’s Futurist sculpture and his manifesto were the first of several related developments in three-dimensional art, among them Constructivist sculpture, Dada and Surrealist assemblage, kinetic sculpture, and even the Pop sculptural



240. UMBERTO BOCCIONI. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. 1913. Bronze (cast 1931). 43 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 34 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (111.2 x 88.5 x 40 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York

ACQUIRED THROUGH THE LILLIE P. BUSS BEQUEST.

PHOTOGRAPH © 1995 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

environments of the 1960s (color plate 302, page 528; see fig. 640). His *Development of a Bottle in Space* (fig. 238) enlarged the tradition of the analysis of sculptural space. The bottle is stripped open, unwound, and integrated with an environmental base that makes the homely object, only fifteen inches high, resemble a model for a vast monument. In a related drawing (fig. 239), possibly made in preparation for the sculpture, the forms of a bottle and glass are opened up, set in motion with rotational, curving lines, and penetrated by the flat planes of the table on which they sit.

Boccioni's most impressive sculpture, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (fig. 240), was also his most traditional and the one most specifically related to his paintings. The figure, made up of fluttering, curving planes of bronze, moves essentially in two dimensions, like a translation of his painted figures into relief. It has something in common with the ancient Greek *Victory of Samothrace* so despised by Marinetti: the stances of both figures are similar—a body in dramatic mid-stride, draperies flowing out behind, and arms missing.

World War I killed several of the most talented experimental artists including Boccioni. Afterwards Futurism lost much of its impetus although many of the more propagandistic ideas and slogans were integrated into the rising tide of fascism and used for political and social ends.

Abstraction in Russia

In the attempt to evaluate the Russian achievement in the early part of this century, a number of points must be kept in mind. Russia, since the eighteenth century of Peter and Catherine the Great, had maintained a tradition of royal

patronage of the arts and had close ties with the West. Russians who could afford it traveled frequently to France, Italy, and Germany, and through books and periodicals they were aware of new developments in European art. Russian literature and music attained great heights during the nineteenth century, while theater and ballet also made substantial strides and began to draw on the visual arts in interesting collaborations.

Art Nouveau and the ideas of French Symbolists and Post-Impressionist Nabis made themselves widely felt in the late 1880s through the movement known as the World of Art (*Mir Iskusstva*); Russian artists mingled these influences with Byzantine and Russian painting and decorative traditions.

In 1890, World of Art was joined by Sergei Diaghilev, destined to become perhaps the greatest of all impresarios of the ballet as well as an enthusiast for modern art in general. A few years later Diaghilev was launched on his career arranging exhibitions, concerts, theatrical and operatic performances, and ultimately the Ballets Russes, which opened in Paris in 1909 and went from success to success. From then on, Diaghilev drew on many of the greatest names in European painting to create his stage sets.

After *World of Art* periodical, first published in 1898 came other avant-garde journals. Reading these journals was yet another way that Russian artists could watch and absorb the progress of Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, and their offshoots. Great collections of the new French art were formed by the enlightened collectors Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov in Moscow. By 1914, Shchukin's collection contained over two hundred works by French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, Fauve, and Cubist painters, including more than fifty by Picasso and Matisse. Morozov's collection included Cézannes, Renoirs, Gauguins, and many works by Matisse. Both Shchukin and Morozov were most generous in opening their collections to Russian artists, and the effect of the Western vanguard on these creative individuals was incalculable. Through such modern art collections and the exhibitions of the Jack of Diamonds group, an alternative exhibition society founded in 1910 in Moscow, Cubist experiments were known in St. Petersburg and Moscow almost as soon as they were inaugurated. By the time Marinetti, whose Futurist manifesto had long been available in Russia, visited Russia in 1914, the Futurist movement in that country was in full force.

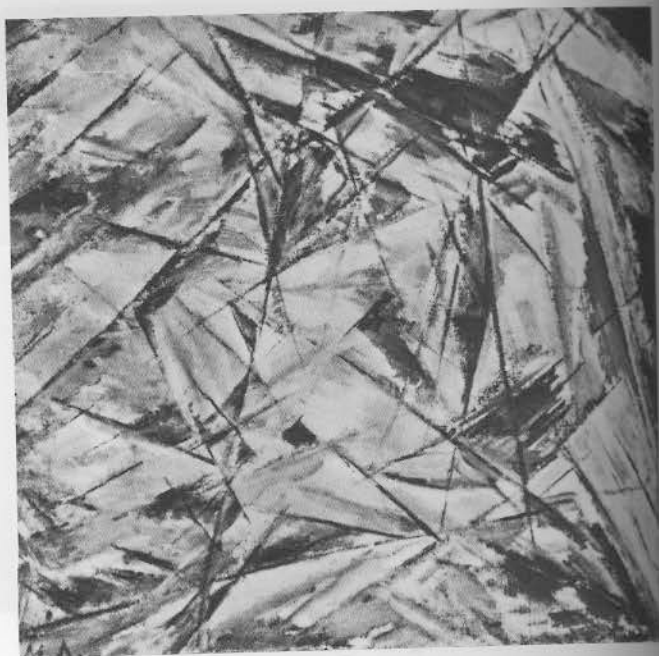
Only within roughly the last two decades, and especially with *glasnost* under Mikhail Gorbachev and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has scholarship on Russian avant-garde art really come into its own. Before that time, study of Russian modernism was restricted and sometimes suppressed; it was particularly difficult for Western scholars, who were often denied access to archival materials and works of art during the Cold War due to official policies of censorship and control of

art that dated back to the government of the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, who, in 1932, decreed that Socialist Realism (naturalistic art that celebrated the worker) was the only acceptable form of art. Moreover, the kinds of small, independent art groups that had until then flourished in Russia, particularly among the avant-garde, were proscribed. Paintings by many of the greatest artists were relegated to storerooms, hidden, or even destroyed; they could not be lent to outside museums. Such was the fate of the works of Kazimir Malevich, for example, an artist who chose not to leave the country after Stalin's rise to power unlike many of his contemporaries. Though known in the West through works that had been brought to New York, Amsterdam, and a few other cities, his paintings had not been seen in Russia for decades when they were at last exhibited there in 1988. Throughout this period, works by the Russian avant-garde were protected and studied by a small number of important Russian scholars, curators, and art collectors, sometimes against very difficult circumstances, but only relatively recently have they been able to collaborate freely with colleagues outside Russia to produce the kinds of exhibitions and publications necessary for a full understanding of this extraordinary art.

Rayonism, Cubo-Futurism, and Suprematism

Lifelong companions and professional collaborators, **MIKHAIL LARIONOV** (1881–1964) and **NATALYA SERGEYVNA GONCHAROVA** (1881–1962) are among the earliest proponents of the Russian avant-garde. Larionov was a founding member of the Jack of Diamonds group in 1910, but by the following year he and Goncharova had left it and formed a rival organization, the Donkey's Tail, claiming the need for a contemporary Russian art that drew less from Western Europe (since the Jack of Diamonds exhibitions included work by Western European artists) and more from indigenous artistic traditions. (Nevertheless, in 1912 they both participated in the second Blaue Reiter exhibition in Munich, as well as in a historic Post-Impressionist show in London.) They turned to Russian icons and *lubok* (folk) prints for inspiration and made works in what they termed a Neo-Primitive style. In 1912 Larionov created Rayonism based on his studies of optics and theories about how intersecting rays of light reflect off of the surface of objects (fig. 241). Rayonist works were first shown in December 1912 and then in a 1913 exhibition called "The Target." Although Rayonism was indebted to Cubism, and also related to Italian Futurism in its emphasis on dynamic, linear forms, Larionov and his circle emphasized its Russian origins. His paintings were among the first nonobjective works of art made in Russia. In them Larionov sought to merge his studies of nineteenth-century color theories with more recent scientific experiments (such as radiation). His 1913 manifesto titled *Rayonism*, which extolled this style as the "the true liberation of painting," was critical as the first published discourse in Russia on nonobjectivity in art.

Like Larionov, Goncharova was drawn to ancient Russian art forms. In addition to icons and *lubok* she studied tradi-



tional examples of embroidery. This nonhierarchical distinction between craft and "high" art is a key characteristic of the Russian avant-garde and is perhaps one of the reasons why so many women had positions at the artistic forefront equal to those of their male colleagues. After her Neo-Primitive phase, Goncharova produced paintings in a Futurist and Rayonist vein. Her colorful 1912 canvas *Linen* (color plate 112, page 207), reveals a knowledge of Cubist painters such as Gleizes



left: 241. MIKHAIL LARIONOV. *Blue Rayonism*. 1912. Oil on canvas, 25½ x 27½" (64.8 x 69.9 cm).

Collection Boris Tcherinsky, Paris

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below left: 242. NATALYA SERGEYVNA GONCHAROVA. *Icon Painting Motifs*. 1912.

Watercolor on cardboard, 19½ x 13¾" (49.5 x 34.6 cm).

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

GIFT OF GEORGE COSTAKIS

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right: 243. LYUBOV POPOVA. Stage design for Vsevolod Meyerhold's *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. 1922.

India ink, watercolor, paper collage, and varnish on paper, 19¼ x 27¼" (50.2 x 69.2 cm).

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



and Metzinger, but the Cyrillic letters add a distinctively Russian touch. She also continued to make paintings in a folk style, as can be seen in *Icon Painting Motifs* (fig. 242). The conceptual nature of such images explains, to some degree, how an ancient heritage of icons and flat-pattern design prepared Russians to accept total abstraction.

Larionov and Goncharova left Russia in 1915 to design for Diaghilev. They settled in Paris, became French citizens in 1938, and married in 1955. Neither artist produced more than a few significant Rayonist paintings, but their ideas were instrumental for an art that synthesized Cubism, Futurism, and Orphism and that contained "a sensation of the fourth dimension." This pseudo-scientific concept of a fourth spatial dimension, popularized by scientists, philosophers, and spiritualists gained currency among the avant-garde across Europe and in the United States in the early twentieth century.

One of the very strongest artists to emerge within the milieu of the prerevolutionary Russian avant-garde was the tragically short-lived **LYUBOV POPOVA** (1889–1924), whose sure hand and brilliant palette are evident even in her earliest work. The daughter of a wealthy bourgeois family, Popova was able to travel extensively throughout her formative years, visiting Paris in 1912 and studying under the Cubists Le Fauconnier and Metzinger. In 1913 she began working in the studio of Vladimir Tatlin, the Constructivist (figs. 249, 250). She also knew Goncharova and Larionov and like them was interested in Russian medieval art. When war broke out in 1914, Popova was in Italy, whence she returned to Russia and resumed working in Tatlin's studio. Unlike Tatlin, she was not concerned with the construction of objects in space, but rather found her expressive mode in painting. She developed a mature Cubo-Futurist style (the term is Malevich's), showing a complete assimilation of Western pictorial devices into her own dynamic idiom. Her still life *Objects from the Dyer's Shop* (color plate 113, page 208) contains a rich chromatic scheme that probably reflects her study of Russian folk

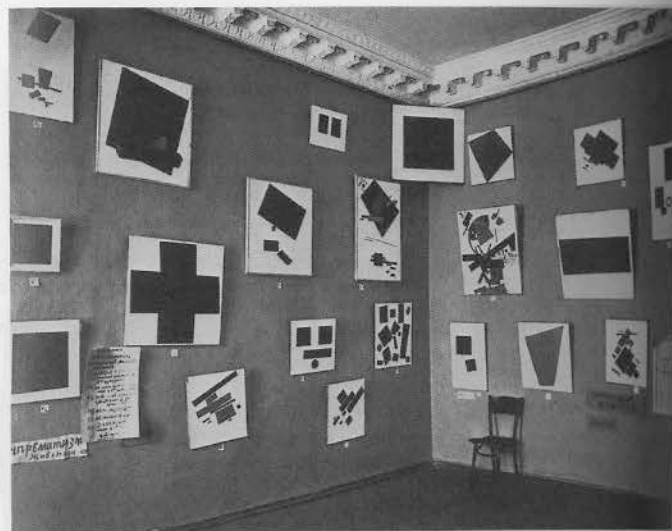
art. Here the Cubist-derived language of integrated, pictorialized form and space may have received its most authoritative expression outside the oeuvre of the two founding Cubists themselves. In late 1915 or early 1916, partly in response to Malevich's Suprematist canvases, Popova began to compose totally abstract paintings that she called Painterly Architectonics. In these powerful compositions she paid increasing attention to the facture, building up her paint surfaces with strong textures.

In the aftermath of the 1917 October Revolution, Russian artists were involved in serious debate about the appropriate nature of art under the new Communist regime. Constructivist artists abandoned traditional media such as painting and dedicated themselves to "production art." Their intention was to merge art with technology in products that ranged from utilitarian household objects to textile design, propagandistic posters, and stage sets for political rallies. Popova, who renounced easel painting in 1921, made designs for the theater, including a 1922 set for *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (fig. 243), a play staged by Vsevolod Meyerhold, one of the leading figures of avant-garde theater. The set was organized according to the principles that informed Popova's abstract paintings. Like a large Constructivist environment, it consisted of arrangements of geometric shapes within a structure of horizontal and vertical elements.

More than any other individual, even Delaunay or Kupka, it was **KAZIMIR MALEVICH** (1878–1935) who took Cubist geometry to its most radical conclusion. Malevich studied art in Moscow, where he visited the collections of Shchukin and Morozov. He was painting outdoors in an Impressionist style by 1903 and for a brief time experimented with the Neo-Impressionist technique of Seurat. In 1910 he exhibited with Larionov and Goncharova in the first Jack of Diamonds show in Moscow and subsequently joined their rival Donkey's Tail exhibition in which he exhibited Neo-Primitivist paintings of heavy-limbed peasants in bright Fauvist colors. By 1912 he

was painting in a Cubist manner. In *Morning in the Village after a Snowstorm* (color plate 114, page 208) cylindrical figures of peasants move through a mechanized landscape, with houses and trees modeled in light, graded hues of red, white, and blue. The snow is organized into sharp-edged metallic-looking mounds. The resemblance to Léger's earlier machine Cubism is startling (see fig. 228), but it is questionable whether either man saw the other's early works for, unlike some of his colleagues, Malevich never traveled to Paris. For the next two years he explored different aspects and devices of Cubism and Futurism. He called his highly personalized amalgamation of the two styles Cubo-Futurism. In 1913 he designed Cubo-Futurist sets and costumes for an experimental performance billed as the "First Futurist Opera," called *Victory over the Sun*. This highly unorthodox opera, staged twice in St. Petersburg, anticipated the early Dada performances that took place in Zurich in 1916 (see fig. 297). The actors were mostly nonprofessionals who recited or sang their lines, accompanied by an out-of-tune piano. The nonnarrative texts of *Victory over the Sun* were called *zaum*, meaning "transrational" or "beyond-the-mind," and were intended to divest words of all conventional meaning. In 1913–14 Malevich created visual analogues to these semantic experiments in a number of paintings, labeling the style Transrational Realism. Through the juxtaposition of disparate elements in his compositions, he mounted a protest "against logic and philistine meaning and prejudice." In certain paintings of 1914, autonomous colored planes emerge from a matrix of Cubo-Futurist forms. In Malevich's abstract work of the following year, these planes came to function as entirely independent forms suspended on a white ground. "In the year 1913," the artist wrote, "in my desperate attempt to free art from the burden of the object, I took refuge in the square form and exhibited a picture which consisted of nothing more than a black square on a white field." Like Larionov (and a number of modern artists, for that matter), Malevich had a tendency to date his paintings retrospectively and assign them impossibly early dates. It was not until 1915 that he unveiled thirty-nine totally nonrepresentational paintings, whose style he called Suprematism, at a landmark exhibition in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) called "0, 10 (Zero–Ten). The Last Futurist Exhibition" (fig. 244). Included in the exhibition was the painting *Black Square*, hung high across the corner of the room in the traditional place of a Russian icon. This emblem of Suprematism, the most reductive, uncompromisingly abstract painting of its time, represented an astonishing conceptual leap from Malevich's work of the previous year. The artist, in his volume of essays entitled *The World of Non-Objectivity*, defined Suprematism as "the supremacy of pure feeling in creative art." "To the Suprematist," he wrote, "the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth."

As with Kandinsky and his first abstract paintings (color plate 76, page 160), the creation of this simple square on a plain ground was a moment of spiritual revelation to

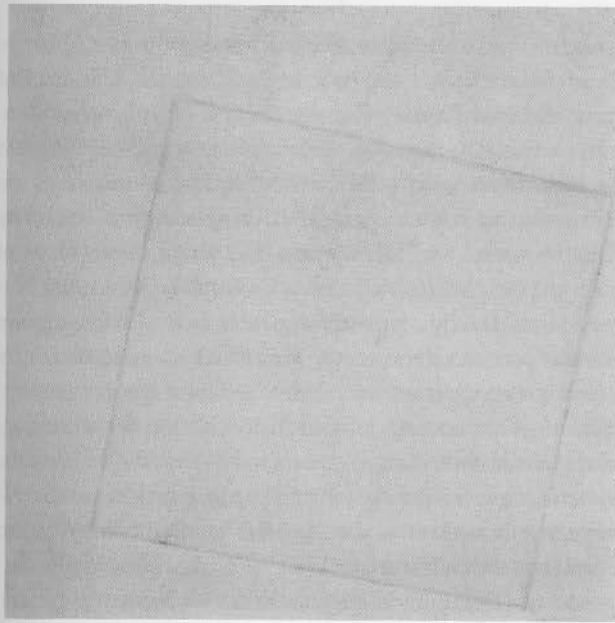


244. KAZIMIR MALEVICH. Installation photograph of his paintings in "0, 10 (Zero–Ten). The Last Futurist Exhibition" in Petrograd (St. Petersburg), December 1915

Malevich. For the first time in the history of painting, he felt, it had been demonstrated that a painting could exist completely independent of any reflection or imitation of the external world—whether figure, landscape, or still life. Actually, of course, he had been preceded by Delaunay, Kupka, and Larionov in the creation of abstract paintings, and he was certainly aware of their efforts, as well as those of Kandinsky, who moved to largely nonobjective imagery in late 1913. Malevich, however, can claim to have carried abstraction to an ultimate geometric simplification—the black square. It is noteworthy that the two dominant wings of twentieth-century abstraction—the painterly Expressionism of Kandinsky and the hard-edge geometric purity of Malevich—should have been founded by two Russians. And each of these men had a conviction that his discoveries were spiritual visions rooted in the traditions of Old Russia.

In his attempts to define this new Suprematist vocabulary, Malevich tried many combinations of rectangle, circle, and cross, oriented vertically and horizontally. His passionate curiosity about the expressive qualities of geometric shapes next led him to arrange clusters of colored rectangles and other shapes on the diagonal in a state of dynamic tension with one another. This arrangement of forms implied continuous motion in a field perpetually charged with energy. Malevich established three stages of Suprematism: the black, the red or colored, and the white. In the final phase, realized in monochromatic paintings of 1917 and 1918 (fig. 245), the artist achieved the ultimate stage in the Suprematist ascent toward an ideal world and a complete renunciation of materiality, for white symbolized the "real concept of infinity." This example displays a tilted square of white within the canvas square of a somewhat different shade of white—a reduction of painting to the simplest relations of geometric shapes.

Malevich understood the historic importance of architecture as an abstract visual art and in the early 1920s, when he had temporarily abandoned painting, he experimented with drawings and models in which he studied the problems of form in three dimensions and his vision of Suprematist cities.



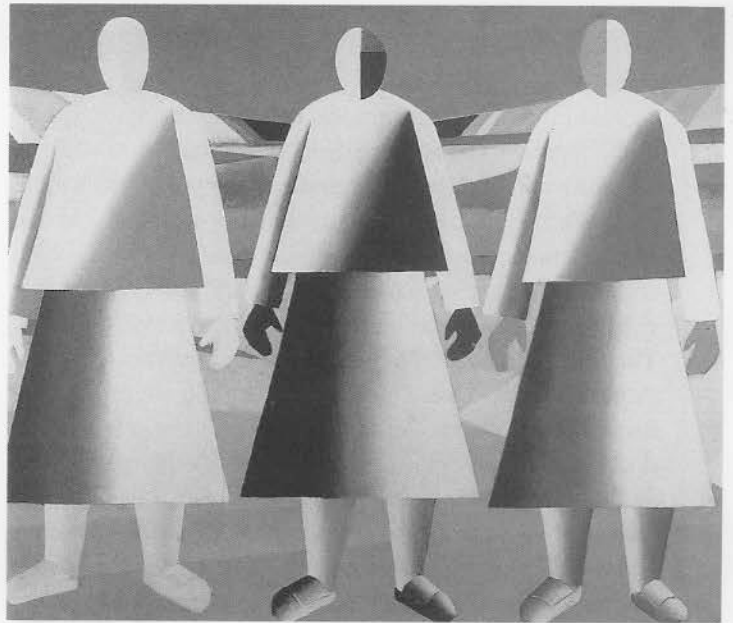
245. KAZIMIR MALEVICH. *Suprematist Composition: White Square on White*. 1918. Oil on canvas, 31¼ x 31¼" (79.4 x 79.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York

PHOTOGRAPH © 1995 THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

planets, and satellites suspended in space. His abstract three-dimensional models, called *Arkhitektons*, were significant to the growth of Constructivism in Russia and, transmitted to Germany and Western Europe by his disciples, notably El Lissitzky, influenced the design teachings of the Bauhaus.

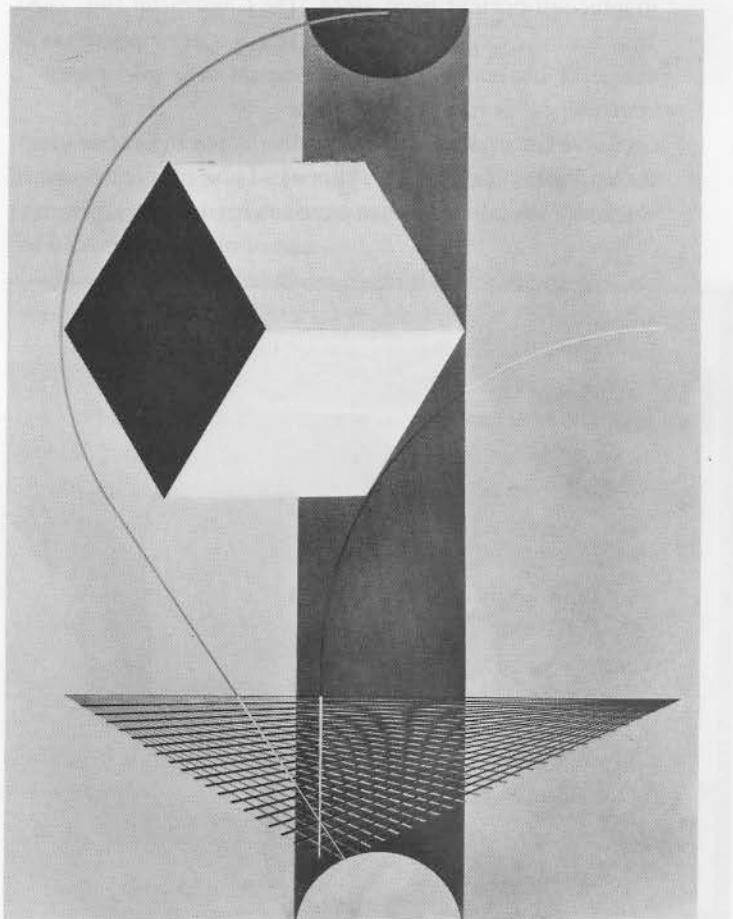
In the 1920s Malevich's idealist views were increasingly at odds with powerful conservative artistic forces in the Soviet Union who promoted Socialist Realism as the only genuine proletarian art. Eventually, this style was officially established as the only legitimate form of artistic expression. By the end of 1926 Malevich was dismissed from his position as director of GINKhUK, the Institute of Artistic Culture, and in 1930 he was even imprisoned for two months and interrogated about his artistic philosophy. In his late work Malevich returned to figurative style though in several works between 1928 (fig. 246) and 1932 he combined echoes of his early Cubo-Futurist work with Suprematist concepts. Perhaps the empty landscapes and faceless automaton figures of the last years express, as one discerning critic wrote in 1930, "the 'machine' into which man is being forced—both in painting and outside it."

Of the artists emerging from Russian Suprematism the most influential internationally was EL (ELEAZAR) LISSITZKY, (1890–1941) who studied architectural engineering in Germany. On his return to Russia at the outbreak of World War I, Lissitzky took up a passionate interest in the revival of Jewish culture, illustrating books written in Yiddish and organizing exhibitions of Jewish art. Like Marc Chagall, he was a major figure in the Jewish Renaissance in Russia around the time of the 1917 Revolution, which brought about the fall of the Czarist regime. In 1919 Chagall appointed Lissitzky to the faculty of an art school in Vitebsk that he headed. There Lissitzky, much to the disappointment of Chagall, became a disciple of the art of another faculty member, Malevich, developing his own form of abstraction, which he called *Prouns*



246. KAZIMIR MALEVICH. *Girls in the Field*. c. 1928. Oil on canvas, 41¾ x 49¼" (106 x 125 cm). State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

(fig. 247). The exact origin of this neologism is unclear, but it may be an acronym for "Project for the Affirmation of the



247. EL LISSITZKY. *Construction 99 (Proun 99)*. 1924–25. Oil on wood, 50½ x 38¾" (128.3 x 98.4 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven GIFT OF THE SOCIÉTÉ ANONYME

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New" in Russian. Lissitzky's Prouns are diverse compositions made up of two- and three-dimensional geometric shapes floating in space. The forms, sometimes depicted axonometrically, represent the artist's extension of Suprematist theories into the realm of architecture. Indeed, Lissitzky extended the Proun literally into the third dimension in 1923 with his *Prounenraum* (*Proun Room*) (color plate 115, page 208), consisting of painted walls and wood reliefs in a room that the viewer was to walk through in a counterclockwise direction. The artist wanted the walls to dissolve visually to allow the Proun elements to activate the space. The room was destroyed, but was reconstructed from Lissitzky's original documents for an exhibition in the Netherlands in 1965.

Lissitzky left Moscow in 1921 for Berlin, where he was associated with the Dutch abstractionist Theo van Doesburg and the Hungarian László Moholy-Nagy. He was one of the key artists who brought together Russian Suprematism and Constructivism, Dutch de Stijl, and the German Bauhaus and who, through Moholy-Nagy, later transmitted these ideas to a generation of students in the United States and elsewhere. In 1925 Lissitzky resettled permanently in Moscow, where in the 1930s he became an effective propagandist for the Stalinist regime. Once he abandoned abstraction, he made photographs as well as typographic, architectural and exhibition designs. Among his most memorable images is a photographic self-portrait from 1924, *The Constructor* (fig. 248). In a double exposure, the artist's face is superimposed on an image of his hand holding a compass over grid paper—a reminder of his role as an architect.

As we saw in our discussion of Der Blaue Reiter (see chapter 8), **VASILY KANDINSKY** (1866–1944) was a great figure in the transmission of Russian experiments in abstraction and

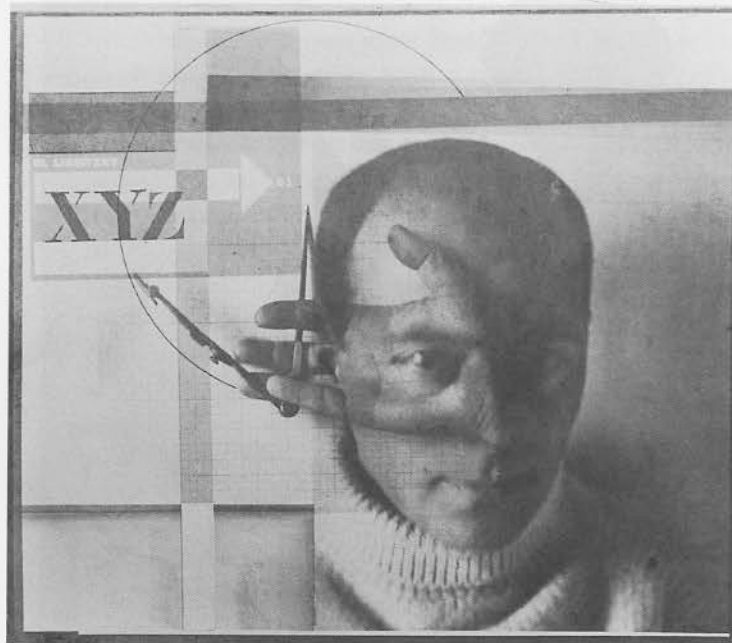
construction to the West. Forced by the outbreak of war to leave Germany, he went back to Russia in 1914. In the first years after the Russian Revolution, the new Soviet government actively encouraged experimentalism and new forms in the arts to coincide with the new society communism was attempting to construct. In 1918 Kandinsky was invited by Tatlin to join the Department of Visual Arts (IZO) of Narkompros (NKP, the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment) in Moscow, and subsequently helped to reorganize Russian provincial museums. He remained in revolutionary Russia for seven years but eventually found his spiritual conception of art coming into conflict with the utilitarian doctrines of the ascendant Constructivists. In 1921 he left the Soviet Union for good, conveying many of his and his colleagues' innovations to the new Bauhaus School in Weimar, Germany (see chapters 16, 17).

Meanwhile, until 1920, Kandinsky continued to paint in the manner of free abstraction that he had first devised during the period 1910–14 (color plate 75 and color plate 76, page 160). That year he began to introduce, in certain paintings, regular shapes and straight or geometrically curving lines. During 1921 the geometric patterns began to dominate, and the artist moved into another major phase of his career. There can be no doubt that Kandinsky had been affected by the geometric abstractions of Malevich, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Tatlin, and the Constructivists. Despite the change from free forms to color shapes with smooth, hard edges, the tempo of the paintings remained rapid, and the action continued to be the conflict of abstract forms. *White Line, No. 232* (color plate 116, page 257) is a transitional work: the major color areas are still painted in a loose, atmospheric manner, but they are accented by sharp, straight lines and curved forms in strong colors.

Russian Constructivism

The word *Konstruktivizm* (Constructivism) was first used by a group of Russian artists in the title of a small 1922 exhibition of their work in Moscow. It is a term that has been applied broadly in a stylistic sense to describe a Cubist-based art that was developed in many countries. In general, that art is characterized by abstract, geometric forms and a technique in which various materials, often industrial in nature, are assembled rather than carved or modeled. But Constructivism originally referred to a movement of Russian artists after the revolution of 1917 who enlisted art in the service of the new Soviet system. These artists believed that a full integration of art and life would help foster the ideological aims of the new society and enhance the lives of its citizens. Such utopian ideals were common to many modernist movements, but only in Russia were the revolutionary political regime and the revolution in art so closely linked. The artists not only made constructed objects, but were major innovators in such areas as typographic design, textiles, furniture, and theatrical design (color plate 117 and color plate 118, page 258; fig. 255).

Constructivism was one of the significant new concepts to develop in twentieth-century sculpture. From the beginning of its history, sculpture had involved a process of creating



248. EL LISSITZKY. *The Constructor (Self-Portrait)*. 1924.
Gelatin-silver print, 4½ x 4⅞" (11.3 x 12.5 cm).
Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands
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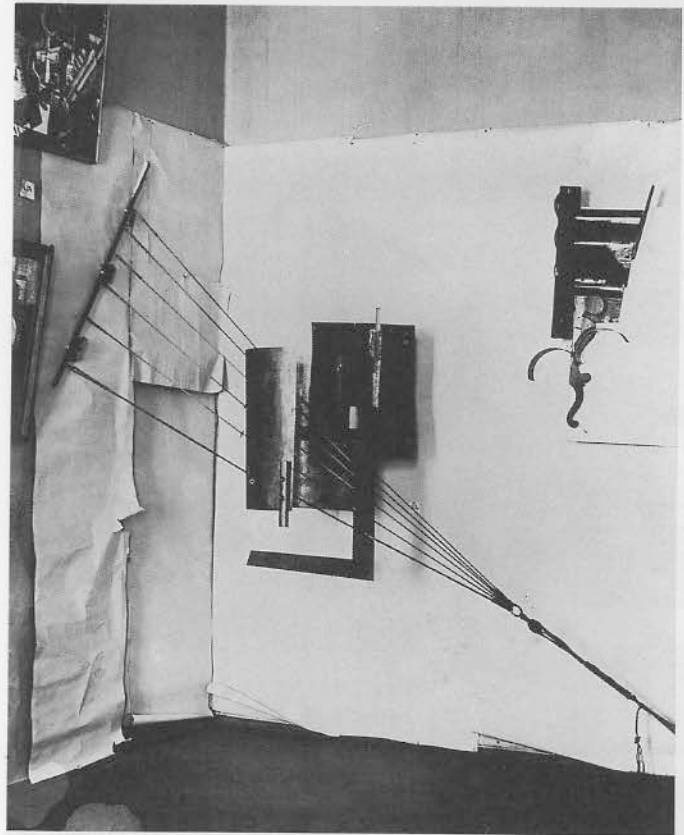
form by taking away from the amorphous mass of the raw material (the carving of wood or stone), or by building up the mass (modeling in clay or wax, that would later be cast in metal). These approaches presuppose that sculpture is mainly an art of mass rather than of space. Traditional techniques persisted well into the twentieth century, even in the work of so revolutionary a figure as Brancusi. The first Cubist sculpture of Picasso, the 1909 *Woman's Head* (see fig. 207), with its deep faceting of the surface, still respected the central mass.

True constructed sculpture, in which the form is assembled from elements of wood, metal, plastic, and other materials such as found objects, was a predictable consequence of the Cubists' experiments in painting. Even before Picasso, however, Braque made Cubist construction sculptures from pieces of paper and cardboard. Though the works have not survived, an early photograph shows a constructed still life mounted across a corner of the artist's studio (see fig. 214). It is tantalizing (but speculative) to think that Tatlin may have seen such a work during his trip to Paris, before embarking on his Counter-Reliefs. Picasso's 1912 *Guitar* and 1913 *Mandolin and Clarinet* (see figs. 215, 216) are groundbreaking Cubist constructions of cardboard, wire, string, and wood.

The subsequent development of constructed sculpture, particularly in its direction toward complete abstraction, took place outside France. Boccioni's Futurist sculpture manifesto of 1912 recommended the use of unorthodox materials, but his actual constructed sculpture remained tied to literal or Cubist subjects. Archipenko's constructed *Médrano* figures (color plate 97, page 201), executed between 1912 and 1914, were experiments in space-mass reversals, but the artist never deserted the subject—figure or still life—and soon reverted to a form of Cubist sculpture modeled in clay for casting in bronze.

In France and Italy the traditional techniques of sculpture—modeling, carving, bronze casting—were probably too powerfully imbedded to be overthrown, even by the leaders of the modern revolution. Sculptors who had attended art schools—Brancusi and Lipchitz for example—were trained in technical approaches unchanged since the eighteenth century. Modern sculpture there emerged from the Renaissance tradition more gradually than modern painting. Possibly as a consequence of this evolutionary rather than revolutionary process, even the experimentalists continued to utilize traditional techniques. The translation of Cubist collage into three-dimensional abstract construction was achieved in Russia first, then in Holland and Germany.

The founder of Russian Constructivism was VLADIMIR TATLIN (1895–1953). In 1914 he visited Berlin and Paris, where he saw Cubist paintings in Picasso's studio, as well as the constructions in which Picasso was investigating the implications of collage for sculpture. The result, on Tatlin's return to Russia, was a series of reliefs constructed from wood, metal, and cardboard, with surfaces coated with plaster, glazes, and broken glass. His exhibition of these works in his studio was among the first manifestations of Constructivism, just as the reliefs were among the first com-



249. VLADIMIR TATLIN. *Counter-Relief*. 1915. Iron, copper, wood, and rope, 28 x 46½" (71 x 118 cm). Reconstruction. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
© 1997 ESTATE VLADIMIR TATLIN/VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

plete abstractions, constructed or modeled, in the history of sculpture. Tatlin's constructions, like Malevich's Suprematist paintings, were to exert a profound influence on the course of Constructivism in Russia.

Most of Tatlin's first abstract reliefs have disappeared, and the primary record of them is a number of drawings and photographs that document his preoccupation with articulating space. The so-called Counter-Reliefs, begun in 1914, were released from the wall and suspended by wires across the corner of a room (again, the location in Russian homes for icons), as far removed from the earthbound tradition of past sculpture as the technical resources of the artist permitted. One of these reliefs (fig. 249) has been assembled from Tatlin's original parts in St. Petersburg's State Russian Museum. Because the reliefs are made from ordinary materials, rather than traditional sculptural media such as bronze or marble, and because they are not isolated on a base, they tend to inhabit the space of the viewer more directly than conventional sculpture.

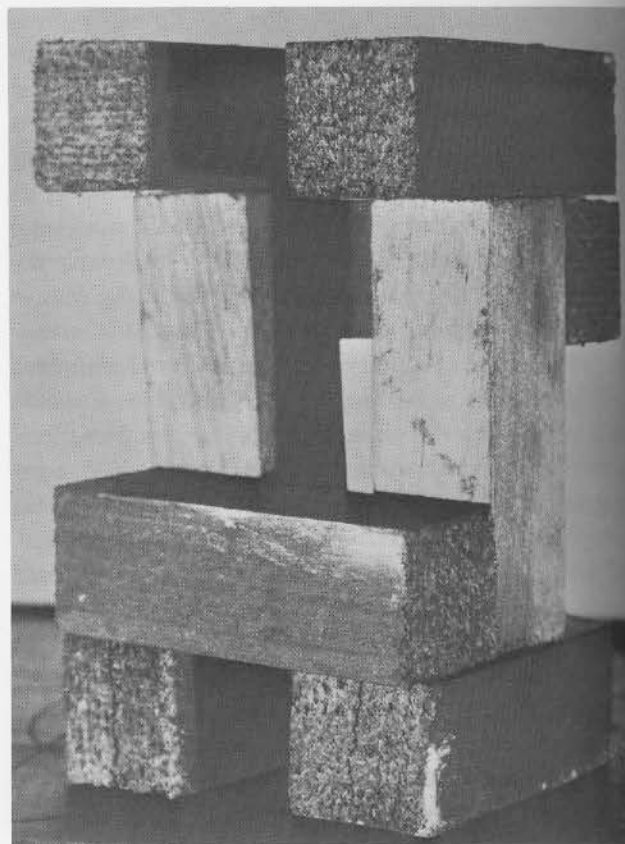
Tatlin developed a repertoire of forms in keeping with what he believed to be the properties of his chosen materials. According to the principles of what he called the "culture of materials" and "truth to materials," each substance, through its structural laws, dictates specific forms, such as the flat geometric plane of wood, the curved shell of glass, and the rolled cylinder or cone of metal. For a work of art to have significance, Tatlin came to believe that these principles must be



250. VLADIMIR TATLIN. Model for *Monument to the Third International*. 1919–20. Wood, iron, and glass, 20' (6.09 m). State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg
© 1997 ESTATE VLADIMIR TATLIN/VAGA, NEW YORK, NY

considered in both the conception and the execution of the work, which would then embody the laws of life itself.

Like many avant-garde artists, Tatlin embraced the Russian Revolution. Thereafter, he cultivated his interest in engineering and architecture, an interest that saw its most ambitious result in his twenty-foot high model for a *Monument to the Third International* (fig. 250) which was exhibited in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) and Moscow in December 1920. Had the full-scale project been built, it would have been approximately thirteen hundred feet high, much taller than the Eiffel Tower and the biggest sculptural form ever conceived at that time. It was to have been a metal spiral frame tilted at an angle and encompassing a glass cylinder, cube, and cone. These glass units, housing conferences and meetings, were to revolve, making a complete revolution once a year, once a month, and once a day, respectively. The industrial materials of iron and glass and the dynamic, kinetic nature of the work symbolized the new machine age. The tower was to function as a propaganda center for the Communist Third International, an organization devoted to the support of world revolution, and its rotating, ascending spiral form was a symbol of the aspirations of communism and, more generally, of the new era. It anticipated, and in scale transcended,

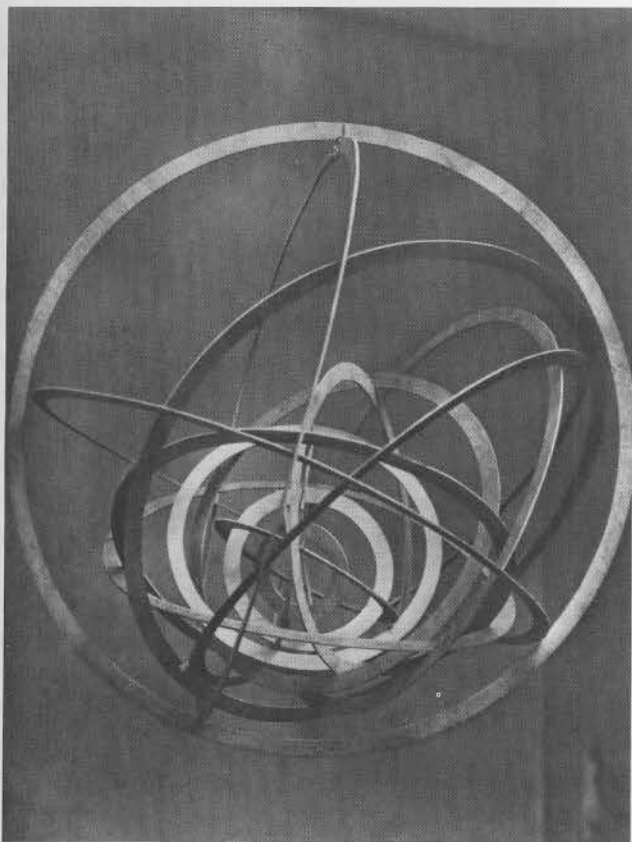


251. ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO. *Construction of Distance*. 1920. Wood. Private collection

all subsequent developments in constructed sculpture encompassing space, environment, and motion and has come to embody, probably more than any other invention, the ideals of Constructivism.

After the consolidation of the Soviet system in the 1920s, Tatlin readily adapted his nature-of-materials philosophy to the concept of production art, which held that in the classless society art should be rational, utilitarian, easily comprehensible, and socially useful, both aesthetically and practically. At its best this idealist doctrine inspired artists to envision a world in which even the most mundane objects would be beautifully designed. But as the Soviet Union grew intolerant of radical art, mandating the banalities of the Socialist Realist style, the ideals of production art turned to dogma. This doctrine worked tragically against such spiritually and aesthetically motivated artists as Malevich and Kandinsky, driving the latter out of Russia altogether. Tatlin, dedicated to Constructivist principles, went on to direct various important art schools and enthusiastically applied his immense talent to designing workers' clothing, furniture, and even a Leonardo-like flying machine called the *Letatlin*.

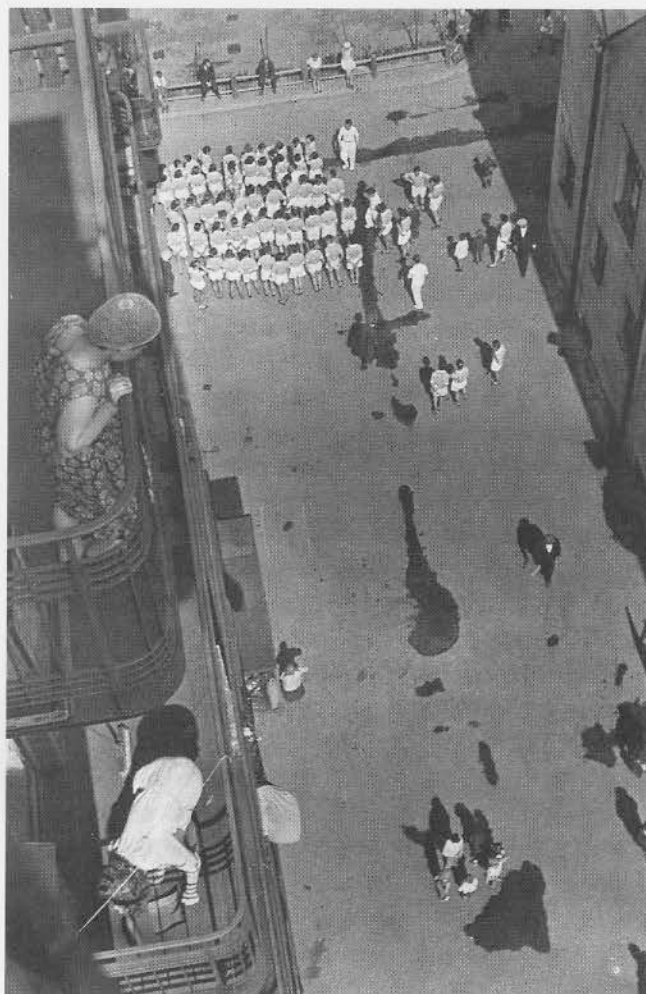
By 1915–16, ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO (1891–1956) had become familiar with the work of Malevich and Tatlin and he soon began to make abstract paintings and to experiment with constructions. By 1920 he, like Tatlin, was turning more and more to the idea that the artist could serve the revolution through a practical application of art in engineering, architecture, theater, and industrial and graphic design. In his



252. ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO. *Hanging Construction*. 1920.
Wood. Location unknown

Construction of Distance (fig. 251) he massed rectangular blocks in a horizontal-vertical grouping as abstract as a Neo-Plastic painting by Mondrian (color plate 201, page 389) and suggestive of the developing forms of the International Style in architecture (see chapter 16). Moreover, Rodchenko's example later proved highly relevant to Minimalist artists working in the United States in the 1960s (see fig. 699). His *Hanging Construction* (fig. 252) is a nest of concentric circles, which move slowly in currents of air. The shapes, cut from a single piece of plywood, could be collapsed after exhibition and easily stored. Rodchenko also made versions (none of which survives) based on a triangle, a square, a hexagon, and an ellipse. This creation of a three-dimensional object with planar elements reveals the Constructivists' interest in mathematics and geometry. It is also one of the first works of constructed sculpture to use actual movement, in a form suggestive of the fascination with space travel that underlay many of the ideas of the Constructivists. Apparently Rodchenko liked to shine lights on the constructions so that they would reflect off the silver paint on their surfaces, enhancing the sense of dematerialization in the work.

Rodchenko was ardently committed to the Soviet experiment. After 1921 he devoted himself to graphic, textile, and theater design. His advertising poster from 1924 (color plate 117, page 258) typifies the striking typographical innovations of the Russian avant-garde. Rodchenko also excelled at photography. Commenting on images like the one reproduced here, he wrote in 1928: "In photography there is the old



253. ALEKSANDR RODCHENKO. *Assembling for a Demonstration*. 1928. Gelatin-silver print, 19½ x 13⅞" (49.5 x 35.3 cm).

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

MR. AND MRS. JOHN SPENCER FUND.

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point of view, the angle of vision of a man who stands on the ground and looks straight ahead or, as I call it, makes 'belly-button' shots. The most interesting angle shots today are those 'down from above' and 'up from below,' and their diagonals." By 1928 artists had long since discovered the value of the overhead perspective as a device for realizing a more abstract kind of image (see figs. 204, 434). In the vertiginous view of *Assembling for a Demonstration* (fig. 253) Rodchenko constructed a composition of sharp diagonals, light-dark contrasts, and asymmetrical patterns. Given the time and the place in which it was made, Rodchenko's photograph seems a metaphor for a new society where outdated perspectives have given way to dramatic new ones.

VARVARA FEDOROVNA STEPANOVA (1894–1958), like her husband, Rodchenko, gave up painting (at least until the 1930s) in order to devote herself to production art. This did not mean traditional decorative arts but rather functional materials manufactured in an equal partnership between artist and industrial worker. Within their Utopian framework, these new art forms were intended to aid in the creation of a new society. Tatlin's phrase "Art into Life" was the rallying cry of the Constructivists. Stepanova, who made designs for the

state textile factory in Moscow, created striking fabrics in repetitive, geometric patterns that suited industrial printing methods. She designed clothing, as did Rodchenko and Tatlin, for the new man and woman (color plate 118, page 258), with an emphasis on comfort and ease of movement for the worker. The severe economic crisis that crippled Russia during the years of civil war following the revolution thwarted the implementation of many Constructivist goals. Not surprisingly, Stepanova's sophisticated designs, grounded as they were in a modernist sensibility, were received with greater enthusiasm when exhibited in Paris in 1925 than among the working rank and file in Moscow.

The artists who adopted the name Constructivist in 1921 worked in three-dimensional form, but the origin of the aesthetic in Tatlin's philosophy of materials was in the *faktura* (texture of paint) and the paint surface—its thickness, glossiness, technique of application. *Faktura* could be considered and treated as autonomous expression, as texture that generates specific forms. In this way the narrative function of figurative art was replaced by a self-contained system. As early as 1913 **OLGA ROZANOVA** (1886–1918) had asserted that the painter should “speak solely the language of pure plastic experience.” In 1917, as if to illustrate the principle, she painted a remarkable picture (color plate 119, page 258), its composition simply a wide, lavishly brushed green stripe running up, or down, the center and cutting through a creamy white field of contrasted but equally strong scumbled texture. The result seems to reach across the decades to the 1950s and Barnett Newman's more monumental but scarcely more radical Zip paintings (color plate 251, page 458).

The Constructivist experiments of Tatlin, Rodchenko, and Stepanova came to an end in the early 1930s, as the Soviet government began to discourage abstract experiment in favor of practical enterprises useful to a struggling economy. Many of the Suprematists and Constructivists left Russia in the early 1920s. The most independent contributions of those who remained, including Tatlin and Rodchenko, were to be in graphic and theatrical design.

After the pioneering work in Russia, Constructivism developed elsewhere. The fact that artists like Kandinsky, Naum Gabo, and Anton Pevsner left Russia and carried their ideas to Western Europe was of primary importance in the creation of a new International Style in art and architecture.

The two leading Russian figures in the spread of Constructivism were the brothers **ANTON PEVSNER** (1886–1962) and **NAUM GABO** (1890–1977). Pevsner was first of all a painter whose history summarized that of many younger Russian artists. His exposure to nonacademic art first came about through his introduction to traditional Russian icons and folk art. He then discovered the Impressionists, Fauves, and Cubists in the Morozov and Shchukin collections. In Paris between 1911 and 1914, he knew and was influenced by Archipenko and Modigliani. Between 1915 and 1917 he lived in Norway with his brother Naum and on his return to Russia after the revolution taught at the Moscow Academy.

Naum Gabo (Naum Neemia Pevsner), who changed his name to avoid confusion with his elder brother, went to Munich in 1910 to study medicine but turned to mathematics and engineering. In Munich he became familiar with the scientific theories of Albert Einstein, among others, attended lectures by the art historian and critic Heinrich Wölfflin, and read Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. He left Germany when war broke out and settled for a time in Norway. There, in the winter of 1915–16, he began to make a series of heads and whole figures of pieces of cardboard or thin sheets of metal, figurative constructions transforming the masses of the head into lines or plane edges framing geometric voids. The interlocking plywood shapes that make up *Constructed Head No. 1* (fig. 254) establish the interpenetration of form and space without the creation of a surface or solid mass.

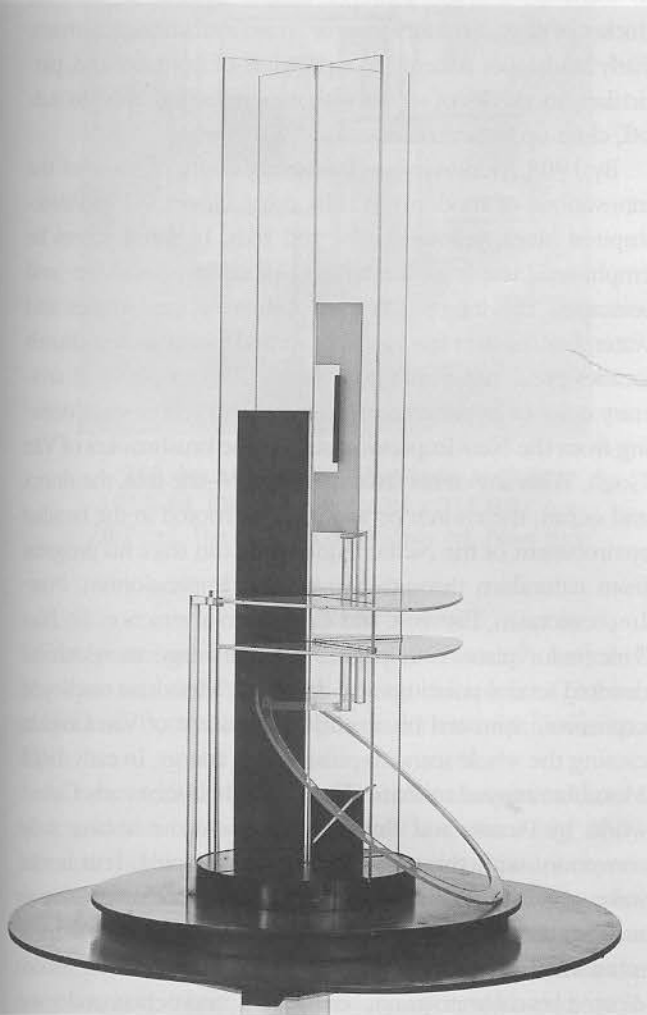
In 1917, after the Russian Revolution, Gabo returned to Russia with Pevsner. In Moscow he was drawn into the orbit of the avant-garde, meeting Kandinsky and Malevich and discovering Tatlin's constructions. He abandoned the figure and began to make abstract sculptures, including a motor-propelled kinetic object consisting of a single vibrating rod, as well as constructions of open geometric shapes in wood, metal, and transparent materials, as in *Column* (fig. 255). Originally conceived in 1920–21, these tower-shaped sculptures, like Tatlin's *Monument* (fig. 250), were part of Gabo's experiments for a visionary architecture. It is instructive to note that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's model for a glass skyscraper (see fig. 417) was made in Germany at virtually the same time.

Between 1917 and 1920 the hopes and enthusiasms of the Russian experimental artists were at their peak. Most of the abstract artists were initially enthusiastic about the revolution, hoping that from it would come the liberation and triumph of progressive art. By about 1920, however, Tatlin and the group around him had become increasingly doctrinaire in their insistence that art should serve the revolution in specific, practical ways. Under government pressure, artists had to abandon or subordinate pure experiment in painting and sculpture and turn their energies to engineering, industrial and product design.

Gabo's reaction to these developments was recorded in the *Realistic Manifesto*. It was signed by Gabo and Pevsner and distributed in August 1920 at a Moscow exhibition of their work, but Gabo drafted it and was principally responsible for the ideas it contained. In many ways the manifesto was the culmination of ideas that had been fermenting in the charged atmosphere of Russian abstract art over the previous several years. At first a supporter of the revolutionary regime, Gabo found himself increasingly at odds with those members of the avant-garde who denounced art in favor of utilitarian objects to aid in the establishment of the socialist state. In the *Realistic Manifesto*, in which the word “realistic” refers to the creation of a new, Platonic reality more absolute than any imitation of nature, Gabo distinguished between his idealistic though “politically neutral” art and the production art of



254. NAUM GABO. *Constructed Head No. 1*. 1915.
Reassembled 1985. Triple-layered plywood,
height 21¼" (54 cm). Städelsches Kunstinstitut und
Städtische Galerie, Frankfurt



255. NAUM GABO. *Column*. c. 1923, reconstructed 1937.
Wood, painted metal, and glass (later replaced with Perspex),
41½ x 29 x 29" (105.3 x 73.6 x 73.6 cm).
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Tatlin, Rodchenko, and others. With revolutionary fervor, he proclaimed that the art of the future would surpass what he regarded as the limited experiments of the Cubists and Futurists. He called on artists to join forces with scientists and engineers to create a sculpture whose powerful kinetic rhythms embodied "the renascent spirit of our time." "The most important idea in the manifesto," Gabo later wrote, "was the assertion that art has its absolute, independent value and a function to perform in society whether capitalistic, socialistic, or communistic—art will always be alive as one of the indispensable expressions of human experience and as an important means of communication."

Until 1921 vanguard artists were allowed the freedom to pursue their new experiments. But as civil war abated, the Soviet state began to impose its doctrine of Socialist Realism. The result was the departure from Russia of Kandinsky, Gabo, Pevsner, Lissitzky, Chagall, and many other leading spirits of the new art throughout the 1920s who, as we shall see in chapter 17, continued to develop their ideas in the West.

De Stijl in the Netherlands

World War I marked the terminal point of the first waves of twentieth-century invention and interrupted or ended the careers of many artists. During the war, nations were isolated and the French ceased to dominate experimentation in art. A striking instance of the effect of this isolation is to be seen in the notable native development of art in the Netherlands, neutral during World War I and thus culturally as well as politically removed from both sides.

In general, Dutch artists and architects seem to have moved rather cautiously into the twentieth century. In architecture, Hendrik Berlage was the first important innovator and, as such, almost alone (color plate 123, page 260). International Art Nouveau had less impact in Holland than in Belgium, Austria, or France, except for a few designers and painters. So the bold, abstract work that was produced during World War I by the modernist group known as *de Stijl* (the Style) seems all the more remarkable. The genius of this movement was Piet Mondrian; other members included the Dutch painters Theo van Doesburg and Bart van der Leek, the Hungarian painter Vilmos Huszar, the Belgian sculptor Georges Vantongerloo, and the architects Gerrit Rietveld, Cornelis van Eesteren, J. J. P. Oud (see figs. 285, 286), and Robert van 't Hoff (see fig. 284).

Van Doesburg was the leading spirit in the formation and promotion of the group and the creation of its influential journal, also called *de Stijl*, devoted to the art and theory of the group and published from 1917 to 1928. *De Stijl* was dedicated to the "absolute devaluation of tradition—the exposure of the whole swindle of lyricism and sentiment." The artists involved emphasized "the need for abstraction and simplification": mathematical structure as opposed to Impressionism and all "Baroque" forms of art. They created art "for clarity, for certainty, and for order." Their works began to display these qualities, transmitted through the straight line, the rectangle, or the cube, and eventually through colors sim-

plified to the primaries red, yellow, and blue and the neutrals black, white, and gray. For van Doesburg and Mondrian these simplifications had symbolic significance based on Eastern philosophy and the mystical teachings of Theosophy, a popular spiritual movement that was known among de Stijl artists partly through Kandinsky's book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Mondrian was particularly obsessed by the mystical implications of vertical-horizontal opposition and spent the rest of his life exploring them, producing in the process some of the most extraordinary works of art of the twentieth century. Despite van Doesburg's efforts to present the de Stijl group as a unified and coherent entity, it included many individual talents who did not strictly adhere to a single style. Nevertheless, the artists, designers, and architects of de Stijl shared ideas about the social role of art in modern society, the integration of all the arts through the collaboration of artists and designers, and an abiding faith in the potential of technology and design to realize new Utopian living environments based on abstract form. Together they developed an art based rigorously on theory, dedicated to formal purity, logic, balance, proportion, and rhythm.

The de Stijl artists were well aware of parallel developments in modern art in France, Germany, and Italy—Fauvism, Cubism, German Expressionism, and Italian Futurism. But they recognized as leaders only a few pioneers, such as Cézanne in painting and Frank Lloyd Wright and Berlage in architecture. They had little or no knowledge of the Russian experiments in abstraction until the end of the war, when international communications were reestablished. At that time, contact developed between the Dutch and Russian avant-garde, especially through El Lissitzky.

In addition to their work as painters, Mondrian and van Doesburg were influential theoreticians. In 1917 van Does-

burg published a book, *The New Movement in Painting*, and Mondrian published in *de Stijl* a series of articles, including "Neo-Plasticism in Painting," which in 1920, after his return to France, he expanded into his book *Le Néo-Plasticisme*, one of the key documents of abstract art. The term refers to the abstract style he had developed by that year.

By 1926 van Doesburg was seeking a new and individual variation on de Stijl, which he named Elementarism. In it he continued to use a composition consisting of rectangles, but tilted them at forty-five degrees to achieve what he felt to be a more immediately dynamic form of expression. At this point, differences between the two artists were so significant that Mondrian left the de Stijl group.

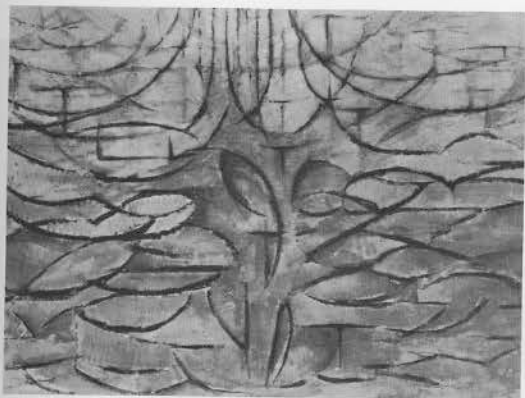
The transition from fairly conventional naturalistic paintings to a revolutionary modern style during and after World War I may be traced in the career of PIET MONDRIAN (1872–1944). Born Pieter Mondriaan, he was trained in the Amsterdam Rijksacademie and until 1904 worked primarily as a landscape painter. He then came under the influence of Toorop and for a time painted in a Symbolist manner. His early work evinces a tendency to work in series—which proved central to the development of his abstract work—and to focus on a single scene or object, whether a windmill, thicket of trees, a solitary tree, or an isolated chrysanthemum. Early landscapes adhered to a principle of frontality and, particularly in a series of scenes with windmills (fig. 256), to cut-off, close-up presentation.

By 1908 Mondrian was becoming aware of some of the innovations of modern art. His color blossomed in Fauve-inspired blues, yellows, pinks, and reds. In forest scenes he emphasized the linear undulation of saplings; in shore- and seascapes, the intense, flowing colors of sand dunes and water. For the next few years he painted motifs such as church facades presented frontally, in nearly abstract planes of arbitrary color or in patterns of loose red and yellow spots deriving from the Neo-Impressionists and the brushstrokes of Van Gogh. With any of his favorite subjects—the tree, the dunes and ocean, the church or windmill, all rooted in the familiar environment of the Netherlands—one can trace his progress from naturalism through Symbolism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism to abstraction. In *Blue Tree* (color plate 120, page 259), an image to which he devoted several paintings and drawings, Mondrian employed expressive, animated brushwork reminiscent of Van Gogh's, causing the whole scene to pulsate with energy. In early 1912 Mondrian moved to Paris. Though he had seen early Cubist works by Picasso and Braque in Holland, he became fully conversant with the style in the French capital. It is in the wake of this experience that he emerges as a major figure in modern art. He himself came to regard the previous years as transitional. During his first years in Paris, Mondrian subordinated his colors to grays, blue-greens, and ochers under the influence of the Analytic Cubism of Picasso and Braque. But he rarely attempted the tilted planes or sculptural projection that gave the works of the French Cubists their defined, if limited, sense of three-dimensional spatial existence; his most

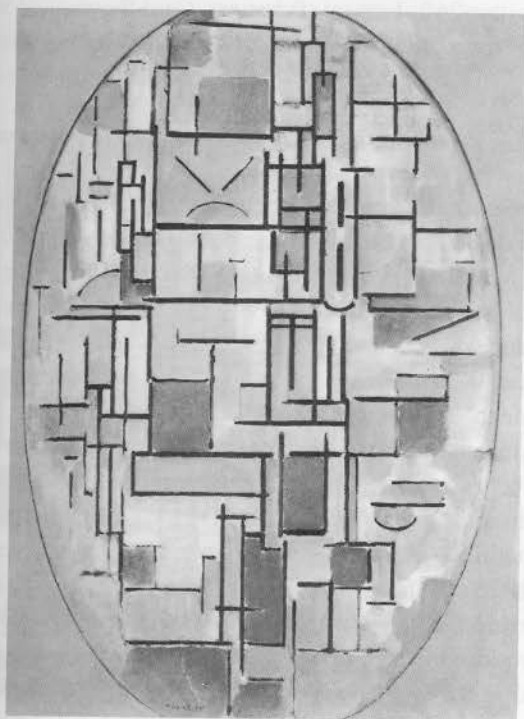


256. PIET MONDRIAN. *Mill by the Water*. c. 1905.
Oil on canvas mounted on cardboard,
11 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 15" (30.2 x 38.1 cm).

The Museum of Modern Art, New York PURCHASE
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257. PIET MONDRIAN. *Flowering Apple Tree*. 1912.
Oil on canvas, 31 x 42 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (78.5 x 107.5 cm).
Gemeente Museum, the Hague, the Netherlands



258. PIET MONDRIAN. *Color Planes in Oval*.
1913-14. Oil on canvas, 42 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 31" (107.6 x
78.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York

PURCHASE.

© 1997 MONDRIAN HOITZMAN TRUST

Cubist paintings still maintained an essential frontality. Mondrian was already moving beyond the tenets of Cubism to eliminate both subject and three-dimensional illusionistic depth.

As early as 1912 the tree had virtually disappeared into a linear grid that covered the surface of the canvas (fig. 257). Mondrian at this time favored centralized compositions, evident here in the central density of the pattern, which gradually loosens toward the edges. He also articulated this through an oval canvas (inspired by the Cubists), while the linear structure became more rectangular and abstract, as in *Color Planes in Oval* of 1913-14 (fig. 258). Despite its highly abstracted forms, this work belongs to a series of compositions Mondrian based on his drawings of Parisian building facades. By 1914 the artist had begun to experiment with a

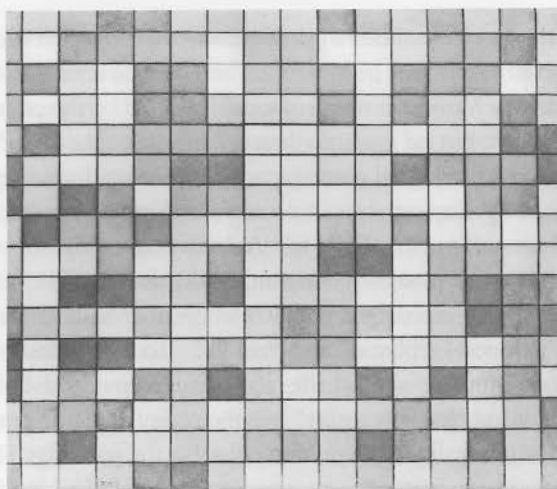
broader but still subtle range of colors, asserting their identity within a structure of horizontal and vertical lines.

In Paris Mondrian was profoundly affected by the example of Cubism, but he gradually began to feel that the style "did not accept the logical consequences of its own discoveries: it was not developing abstraction toward its ultimate goal, the expression of pure reality. I felt that this could only be established by pure plastics (plasticism)." In this statement, made in 1942, he emphasized the two words that summarize his lifelong quest—"plastic" and "reality". To him "plastic expression" meant simply the action of forms and colors. "Reality" or "the new reality" was the reality of plastic expression, or the reality of forms and colors in the painting. Thus, the new reality was the presence of the painting itself, as opposed to an illusionistic reality based on imitation of nature or romantic or expressive associations.

Gradually, as the artist tells it, Mondrian became aware that "(a) in plastic art reality can be expressed only through the equilibrium of *dynamic movements* of form and color; (b) pure means afford the most effective way of attaining this." These ideas led him to develop a set of organizational principles in his art. Chief among them were the balance of unequal opposites, achieved through the right angle, and the simplification of color to the primary hues plus black and white. It is important to recall that Mondrian did not arrive at his final position solely through theoretical speculation, but through a long and complex development in his painting.

In 1914 he returned to Holland, where he remained when war broke out. Between 1914 and 1916 he eliminated all vestiges of curved lines, so that the structure became predominantly vertical and horizontal. The paintings were still rooted in subject—a church facade, the ocean, and piers extending into the ocean—but these were now simplified to a pattern of short, straight lines, like plus and minus signs, through which the artist sought to suggest the underlying structure of nature. During 1917 and later he explored another variation (color plate 121, page 259)—rectangles of flat color of varying sizes, suspended in a sometimes loose, sometimes precise rectangular arrangement. The color rectangles sometimes touch, sometimes float independently, and sometimes overlap. They appear positively as forms in front of the light background. Their interaction creates a surprising illusion of depth and movement, even though they are kept rigidly parallel to the surface of the canvas.

Mondrian soon realized that these detached color planes created both a tangible sense of depth and a differentiation of foreground and background; this interfered with the pure reality he was seeking. This discovery led him during 1918 and 1919 to a series of works organized on a strict rectangular grid. In the so-called Checkerboards (fig. 259), rectangles of equal size and a few different colors are evenly distributed across the canvas. By controlling the strength and tone of his colors, Mondrian here neutralized any distinction between figure and ground, for the white and gray rectangles do not recede behind the colored ones or assume a subordinate role as support. Mondrian did not develop this compositional



259. PIET MONDRIAN. *Composition with Grid 9: Checkerboard with Light Colors*. 1919. Oil on canvas, 33 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 41 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (86 x 106 cm).

Gemeente Museum, the Hague, the Netherlands

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solution further, for he felt the modular grid was too prominent. Finally, therefore, he united the field of the canvas by thickening the dividing lines and running them through the rectangles to create a linear structure in tension with the color rectangles. In 1920, after returning to Paris, Mondrian came to the fulfillment of his Neo-Plastic artistic ideals. His paintings of this period express abstract, universal ideas: the dynamic balance of vertical and horizontal linear structure and simple, fundamental color. He continued to refine these ideas throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, until, as we shall see in chapter 17, he achieved works of monumental purity and simplicity (color plate 200, page 388; color plate 202, page 389). Mondrian's ultimate aim was to express a visual unity through an "equivalence of opposites"; this in turn expressed the higher mystical unity of the universe.

As already noted, THEO VAN DOESBURG (1883–1931) was the moving spirit in the formation and development of de Stijl. During his two years in the army (1914–16) he studied the new experimental painting and sculpture and was particularly impressed by Kandinsky's essay, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. In 1916 he experimented with free abstraction in the manner of Kandinsky, as well as with Cubism, but was still searching for his own path. This he found in his composition *Card Players* (fig. 260), based on Cézanne's painting (see fig. 73), but simplified to a complex of interacting shapes based on rectangles, the colors flat and reduced nearly to primaries. Fascinated by the mathematical implications of his new abstraction, van Doesburg explored its possibilities in linear structures, as in a later version of *Card Players* (fig. 261). Even Mondrian was affected by the fertility of van Doesburg's imagination. When artists work together as closely as the de Stijl painters did during 1917–19, it is extremely difficult and perhaps pointless to establish absolute priorities. Van Doesburg, Mondrian, and their colleague van der Leek for a time were all nourished by one another. However, each was beginning to go in his own direction in the 1920s, when



260. THEO VAN DOESBURG. *Card Players*.

1916–17. Tempera on canvas, 46 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 58" (118.1 x 147.3 cm).

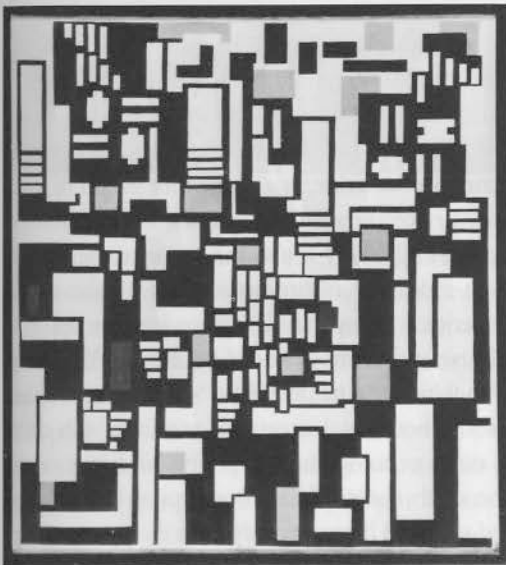
Private collection

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van Doesburg's attention turned toward architecture. He followed de Stijl principles until he published his *Fundamentals of the New Art* in 1924. He then began to abandon the rigid vertical-horizontal formula of Mondrian and de Stijl and to introduce diagonals. This heresy as well as fundamental differences over the nature of Neo-Plastic architecture led to Mondrian's resignation from de Stijl. Though by 1918 Mondrian himself made lozenge-shaped paintings with diagonal edges (see fig. 450), a development he discussed at length with van Doesburg, the lines contained within his compositions always remained strictly horizontal and vertical. In a 1926 manifesto in *de Stijl*, van Doesburg named his new departure Elementarism, and argued that the inclined plane reintroduced surprise, instability, and dynamism. In his murals at the Café l'Aubette, Strasbourg (fig. 262)—decorated in collaboration with Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp (see fig. 299)—van Doesburg made his most monumental statement of Elementarist principles. He tilted his colored rectangles at forty-five degree angles and framed them in uniform strips of color. The tilted rectangles are in part cut off by the ceiling and lower wall panels. Across the center runs a long balcony with steps at one end that add a horizontal and diagonal to the design. Incomplete rectangles emerge as triangles or irregular geometric shapes. In proper de Stijl fashion van Doesburg designed every detail of the interior, down to the ash trays. Here he realized his ideals about an all-embracing, total work of abstract art, saying that his aim was "to place man within painting instead of in front of it and thereby enable him to participate in it."

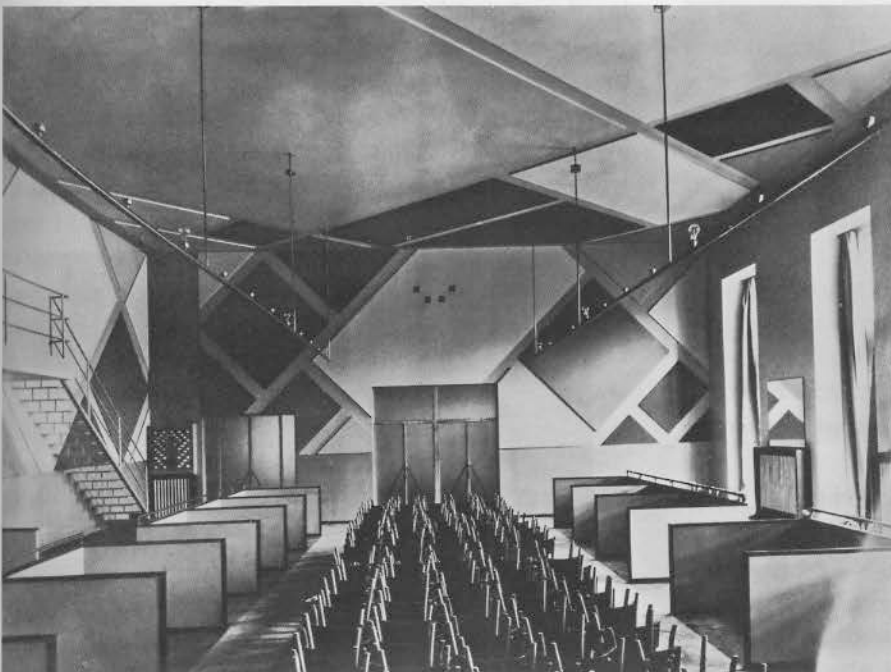
In the richly diverse and international art world of the 1920s, van Doesburg provided a point of contact between artists and movements in several countries. He even maintained a lively interest in Dada. His Dada activities included his short-lived Dada magazine *Mecano*, his Dada poems written under the pseudonym of I. K. Bonset, and a Dada cultural tour of Holland with his friend Kurt Schwitters.

In sculpture the achievements of de Stijl were not comparable to those of the Russian Constructivists and were, in fact, concentrated principally in the works of the Belgian **GEORGES VANTONGERLOO** (1886–1965). Vantongerloo was not only a sculptor but also a painter, architect, and theoretician. His first abstract sculptures (fig. 263), executed during 1917 and 1918, were conceived in the traditional sense as masses carved out of the block, rather than as constructions built up of separate elements. They constitute notable transformations of de Stijl painting into three-dimensional design. Later, Vantongerloo turned to open construction, sometimes in an architectural form and sometimes in free linear patterns. In his subsequent painting and sculpture he frequently deserted the straight line in favor of the curved, but throughout his career Vantongerloo maintained an interest in a mathematical basis for his art, to the point of deriving compositions from algebraic equations.

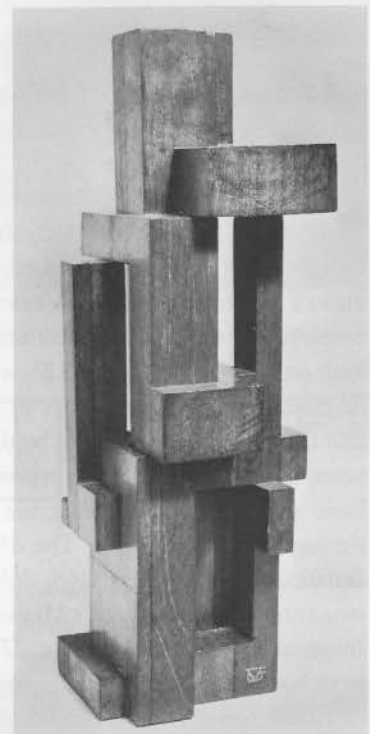


left: 261. THEO VAN DOESBURG.
Composition IX (Card Players).
1917. Oil on canvas, 45 $\frac{1}{2}$ x
41 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (115.9 x 106 cm).
Gemeente Museum, the Hague,
the Netherlands
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below: 262. THEO VAN DOESBURG,
SOPHIE TAEUBER, and JEAN ARP.
Interior, Café l'Aubette,
Strasbourg. 1926–28,
(destroyed 1940)



Until his death in 1931, van Doesburg promoted de Stijl abroad, traveling across Europe and seeking new adherents to the cause as older members defected. His efforts contributed to the establishment of de Stijl as a movement of international significance. With its belief in the integration of the fine and applied arts, the de Stijl experiment paralleled that of the Bauhaus in many ways. Van Doesburg was in Weimar in the early 1920s, lecturing and promoting de Stijl ideas at the Bauhaus, and fomenting dissent among the school's younger members. Although he was not a member of the faculty, he probably contributed to an increased emphasis at the Bauhaus on rational, machine-based design. (On the Bauhaus see chapters 16 and 17.)



263. GEORGES VANTONGERLOO.
Construction of Volume Relations.
1921. Mahogany,
16 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ " (41 x 14.4 x
14.5 cm), including base.
The Museum of Modern Art,
New York
GIFT OF SILVIA PIZITZ.
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