Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art
New Perspectives

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The relationship between the avant-garde and the icon is of great importance for the discussion of the semiotics of Russian culture and the spiritual tradition in Russian art. The first reason is a historical one. From this perspective, the icon and the avant-garde image are diametrically opposite sign systems. In the icon, symbol coincides with meaning. Not by accident, it was the act of naming that gave icons their force. In the medieval consciousness a title was inseparable from the identity of the person bearing it. However, the avant-garde image (the abstract image in particular) is a pure sign able to acquire new meanings spontaneously. The sign and its meaning are in an arbitrary relationship here.

Moreover, in the medieval system of aesthetics an icon could be understood only in the context of the ritual associated with it. As we know, in medieval aesthetics, elements giving pleasure did not belong to the artistic idea. From this came the principle that the icon was not considered as a form of ‘free’ art that was drawn into the service both of the Church and the government. Only in Renaissance art theory did pleasure become one of the aims of art. For the icon, the individual perspectives of the artist and the spectator do not come into play. As a result, the art of the medieval icon painter lay in knowledge of the rules of the craft, as opposed to creative imagination. The aim of the icon is to enable an individual to perceive an image as a truth imposed upon the mind from outside, as revealed only to the Holy Fathers and the saints. For the icon, the laws of optics and the gaze of the spectator are not important. The icon refuses the spectator the possibility of cognition.
Such an understanding might be confirmed by the particularities of framing, both of icons and paintings. We know that the frame is a very important element of artistic space.\(^1\) It makes connections that relate to the general flow of signs and symbols within one, or another, culture of images. Of course it is also linked with changes in humanity’s picture of the world. The icon frame derives from the antique niche (antichnaia nisha), that is, the physical frame which would surround an ancient painting in situ — an indented space in which to present the image. Here, we have the symbolic unity of the covering of the icon and what it represents. In Old Testament tradition God was distanced from the world. For this reason the function of concealing the holy object was performed by a metal covering of the icon, and its casing, curtain clothes, and borders were decorated with ornament. The icon cover and its sacred clothes were called (from the Greek) ependysis, that is, adornment. The gaze of the viewer has no significance.

By contrast, the frame of the Renaissance painting is the ‘ego’ of the perceiving subject. We have here the transformation of the surrounding world into an object of cognition. Linear perspective, with which this frame was directly linked, presumed a single viewpoint. Hence the artistic space of the Renaissance painting acquired a series of new qualities. On an icon the image is set up as if on a blank wall. Thus the icon is perceived as the world itself. In a painting the image is constructed as if through the transparent glass of a window. For this reason the Renaissance picture must be perceived only as a part of the surrounding world. On the contrary, the model of the world in an icon does not permit the illusion of a spectator’s entry into it. A person stands before an icon with the utmost respect and accepts the world as it is.

In avant-garde art we have the deconstruction of any frame, for it declares the end of all rhetorical systems, including icons. The abolition of the picture frame by artists of the avant-garde began to address the problem of the conditional nature of human knowledge of the world. For these artists the aesthetic idea of a painting came to presuppose a new process of perception. Here the icon frame or the Renaissance frame could serve as a symbol of the art of the past, while at the same time being superseded by the new direction in contemporary art. A picture seemed to burst its bounds. Thus a painting and its frame were no longer linked by the laws of the religious system of symbols or the Renaissance theory of optics, but by a common search for what we might call ‘essences’.

In contrast with the icon, the avant-garde image (if we continue to regard it from the historical point of view) is the embodiment of the individuality of the artist. Consequently, the real project of the avant-garde was not formal innovation, as it was for the Symbolist painters, but the attempt to place the individual in touch with the transcendental, and to transform the world on the basis of ‘ideas’ revealed only to the

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artist. Hence avant-garde art became a programme, its paintings as symbols revealing their own content. The aim of the avant-garde image was to free the viewer’s mind from the usual stereotypes of perception. It appeared in the context of neo-Kantian philosophy, replacing the concept of three-dimensional space with a new theory of a multi-dimensional universe. Special attention was paid to mysticism, Theosophy, and occult doctrines, and to religious images and medieval icons in particular. These images began to be perceived as art objects. They were also perceived as means of opening the way to the ‘widening’ of human consciousness.

It is against this historical framework that the icon and avant-garde image can be brought together. This is a theoretical discussion that emerges when we begin to regard the icon as a work of art. Like an abstract painting, the icon invariably signals the unreliability of the surrounding reality. In this sense it was, and remains, entirely ‘modern’ when it comes to the deepest kind of artistic investigation into the limits of the visible in the era of modernism. The aim of the icon as art is the transgression or access to the world of the numinous (fig. 5.1). But the aim of the avant-garde image is the same. The icon and abstract image do not lead the consciousness of the spectator along the path of imagination. They lead it on the path of conviction in an unseen reality. In the case of an icon this is to heavenly beauty; in the case of an abstract image, to the multi-dimensional universe. Thus if the Renaissance painting actively cooperates with the surrounding reality, the icon and avant-garde image are set in opposition to it. The result is a break through the boundary between the material and the spiritual, transcending the limits of human possibility. The conviction among artists arose that the new kind of image must — as was the case with the icon — capture the visual reality of the numinous (fig. 5.2). Such a painting therefore demanded not an aesthetic experience (the icon did the same), but an appreciation that its endeavour was to penetrate to the essence of the visible material world. Consequently, a non-figurative image could be set alongside an early icon next to it on a wall, both images being open to the transcendental, and both being unconnected with external reality.

Keeping in mind these historical and theoretical aspects of the topic of the icon and the avant-garde, the next section of my chapter outlines a few problems concerning the spiritual tradition in Russian art. The rhetorical impulse constituted the framework of Christian culture. From the start, however, western and eastern Christendom resolved the problem of the image in somewhat different ways. In the Byzantine-Slav world, including Muscovite Russia, the icon was conceived as belonging to the realm of metaphysics rather than that of rhetoric. It was the major symbol of Christianity, witness to truth, and to the ‘presence’ in the world of Christ and the saints. Thus it was enveloped with a special respect and reverence. In the west, on the contrary, the image had a modest status. The image was a ‘Bible for simple people’ that had to instruct, to touch hearts, and to bring pleasure; its role was limited to the defence of the Christian mission. This relatively modest status of the cult image in Roman Catholic culture was determined by the scholastic tradition. The quest for truth was
5.2 Kazimir Malevich, *Quadrilateral* (also known as *Black Square*), 1915. Oil on board, 79.5 x 79.5 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kazimir_Malevich,_1915,_Black_Suprematic_Square,_oil_on_linen_canvas,_79.5_x_79.5_cm,_Tretyakov_Gallery,_Moscow.jpg
given over to scholasticism, not to the picture, for which it was too large and complex. After it accepted Christianity in the tenth century (AD 988), early Russia of course adopted the Byzantine rhetorical tradition, which formed the basis of both its writing and its icon painting. However, in the Old Russian context Byzantine rhetoric did not become a scholarly discipline as in the Catholic world. It was the image, rather than the book, that strove to become speculative philosophy.

This is only one of several issues that are very significant in understanding specific features of Russian image veneration and the ‘spirituality’ closely connected with religious experience. Another issue is the intellectual construction of Holy Russia as a ‘Great Spatial Icon’. What does this mean? It is evidently of the greatest importance that in Muscovite Russia the concept of translatio imperii (literally, the ‘transfer of rule’ from one leader to another in linear succession, stemming originally from God), which had been developed in the Middle Ages, was burdened with unique historical circumstances. This collective religious feeling was not only universally accepted, but adopted with ease: it was incorporated into the remarkable religious enthusiasm that accompanied the Reformation in western Europe, some of which was opposed to icon veneration, and it also took on importance against the background of the conquest of the Balkan Orthodox world by the Muslim Turks. Following the Byzantine model, Muscovite Russia began to conceive of itself as a God-chosen state, possessor both of the chief symbols of sacred power and of the main single symbol of Orthodox faith, the icon. Hence the concept of ‘empire’, traditional in imperial theology, acquired the character of the utopian concept of Holy Russia or, metaphorically speaking, of Russia as a Great Spatial Icon, whose vast geographical expanse had to be saturated through and through with holiness.²

This brings us to the third very important issue for the understanding of the spiritual tradition in Russian art. The reform of the Russian Orthodox Church begun by Patriarch Nikon (1605–81) and Tsar Alexis (1645–76) was accompanied by radical changes in the concept of the visual image. They led to the establishment of a new ritual and a new system of signs for the Russian icon at the Great Moscow Council of the Church in 1666–67. Hitherto, Russian icons had shown the saints making the sign of blessing with two fingers, while the abbreviated name of Christ used four letters, IC XC. In icons of the new devotion, the name of Christ was abbreviated with five letters as IUC XC, and three fingers formed the sign of blessing.

These apparently simple changes occurred amid profound shifts in Russian culture and mass consciousness. The new type of icon and the new devotion were the result of the influence of Renaissance ideas at the Russian court. They were also linked with the individualisation of religious sensibility, the appearance in Russia of western,

Latinised rhetoric, and, finally, the gradual decay of the icon-painting canon and the replacement of the Byzantine and Old Russian icon by religious painting (using linear perspective) within the official Church. From that time the Russian icon ceased to be available to unmediated perception: it belonged to the realm of the imagination, of sensed experience, and also of special ‘scholarly’ knowledge. In this regard, we find that in Russia of the second half of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, icon painting is taken both as a traditional craft among the ‘Old Believers’ and as a free art.\(^3\) In the first case, the religious image was perceived as a truth revealed only to the Holy Fathers, not to the icon painter whose role was to bear witness to it. So the traditional craft continued to follow Byzantine and Old Russian models. In the second case, the spectator was made to search for the artistic purpose within the image, that is, for the interpretation of artistic truth. This new type of Russian icon opened a new path in Russian art. The problem of the spectator’s perception was for the first time raised before the Russian icon painter: the old icons ceased to satisfy the demands of the imagination. The icon painter began to use books of emblems and engravings as sources for his art.

The frames of the new Russian icons began to reflect, in turn, new aesthetic conceptions. These frames operated as if they set the icon face to face with the surrounding world, with poetry, philosophy, and the whole of worldly culture. With this development the meaning of the icon as art was becoming clear: the contemplation of the image was meant to evoke astonishment and pleasure. An illustrative contrast is provided by the Old Believers, who collected old icons in their oratories that were not perceived as works of art. The Old Russian icon was perceived as a cult image, that is, as part of an old historical system of signs, but not as an original painted image; the prototype was important, but not an original. The idea of the Old Russian icon as an original work of art began to appear only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus the Old Russian icons had stayed silent for a long time, as their artistic form had been unrecognised until this point, of no concern to Old Believers, scholars, and collectors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the whole.

In order to stimulate interest in icons as artistic objects, first the original paint surface needed to be uncovered (which the availability of new methods of restoration made possible), and secondly the beauty of form in the context of Romantic aesthetics and new developments in art scholarship had to be elucidated.\(^4\) The ‘intuition’ of Schopenhauer and the neo-Kantian ‘theory of empathy’ as applied to art then came

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\(^3\) The term ‘Old Believers’ refers to those who continued to follow the liturgical and ritual practices of the Russian Orthodox Church that preceded the reforms of Patriarch Nikon in the late seventeenth century. (The reforms led to the so-called ‘raskol’ (schism) in the Church, creating a divide which has survived to the present day.)

\(^4\) The significance of Romantic aesthetic ideas in understanding the history of the classification and display of icons in the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries has been previously explored in Tarasov, _Framing Russian Art_, pp. 190–91.
into focus. Through ‘intuition’ a type of cognition that brought art scholarship close to artistic creation took place, while according to the theory of ‘empathy’, as formulated by German philosophers Wilhelm Dilthey, Theodor Lipps, and others, beauty began to be seen not as an objective quality of the object, but as the result of feelings ‘put into’ it by the perceiving subject. For Lipps, beauty was ‘pleasure objectified in itself’, while Dilthey viewed empathy (einfühlung) as the central category of a Romantic attitude to life. The work of Heinrich Wölfflin, in which universal categories of artistic form are outlined, is also particularly relevant here.

In the context of these Romantic and neo-Kantian aesthetic ideas, the beauty of the Old Russian icon began to be understood as an ‘aesthetic discovery’ of the artist, analogous to that of the Italian Renaissance. In works by a younger generation of Russian scholars — Pavel Muratov, Nikolai Shchekotov, Nikolai Punin (whose work in the field of icons is discussed in Chapter 10), and a few others, the Old Russian icon was described as a painterly art that could be understood only by way of a profound investigation of its artistic form. In this regard we can also find the deconstruction of the symbolic system of the Old Russian icon. As we know, the theory of poetic language was linked to avant-garde artistic practice at the beginning of the twentieth century; for example, avant-garde poets were deconstructing the linguistic structures that formalists were studying. A similar process was under way in the visual arts. To single out and apply in practice a set of archetypal symbols was a task upon which avant-garde artists and researchers were working in parallel. Two key personalities came to prominence in this respect: Pavel Florensky (1882–1943), a prominent Russian religious philosopher, and Kazimir Malevich (1878–1935), the founder of Suprematism. Their worldviews were directly opposed, but their methods of deconstructing the artistic form of the icon brought their work closer together. Both regarded the sacral visual image as a symbolic system to be deconstructed and as a system of culturally and historically determined signs.

Florensky was the first scholar to regard the icon as a self-contained symbolic structure. Simultaneously, he explored different levels of analyses of the artistic language of the icon. The answers to problems he was solving in the theory of language were being transferred to his theory of representation. In that sense, Florensky is considered the founder of the semiotics of the icon. He demonstrated the metaphysics of the symbolic language of icon-painting in his famous work...
The Iconostasis, the article ‘Reverse Perspective’ which he published in 1920, and in lectures on three-dimensionality in the pictorial arts, which he read early in the 1920s. As we know, science and art during the first two decades of the twentieth century shared the problems of time and space. The posing of these questions led art historians to analyse linear and reverse perspective, that is, the conventional devices used to portray spatial and temporal relations on canvas. For example, the German art writer and theoretician Oskar Wulff published an article about reverse perspective in 1907, in which he traced its forms to an inner viewpoint. In the well-known essay, ‘Perspective as a Symbolical Form’ (1927), Erwin Panofsky regarded the system of reverse perspective as projection on a spherical surface. Unlike Wulff and Panofsky, however, Florensky treated reverse perspective as projecting the artist’s wandering glance onto a surface — or, to be more precise, as a synthesis of the inner and the outer viewpoints. In other words, the viewpoint of the artist was permanently changing, while the viewer figuratively entered the icon to see it from the inside and outside at the same time. “The composition [of the icon],” Florensky wrote, “is constructed as if the eye were looking at different parts of it, while changing its position.” This synthesis of the various viewpoints defined the principal quality of the arrangement of the artistic space of the icon. Thus an icon painter could sum up different viewpoints in space, that is, the visual impression of a thing regarded from many points (hence the rounded forms, auxiliary surfaces, and all kinds of broken shapes). An icon painter could also synthesise several viewpoints in time, and so portray one figure twice in one icon as it appears at different times. Florensky seems to have been the first to pose the question of how to apprehend an icon of a saint with scenes from his life (‘vita icon’), and the function of their frame in the organisation of time and space. Structural formal analyses also dominated the scholarly mind within the context of Russian Formalism.

Malevich’s interest in icons arose on the back of the wave of interest in ‘primitive’ art, which had emerged in Russia just as it had in western Europe. During his Primitivist stage he shared the Russian avant-garde’s general fascination with the icon as ‘primitive painting’ and an original aesthetic system. Moreover, as he later wrote: “Icons have influenced me greatly [...]. I sensed a connection between peasant art and icons [...]. In fact I came to understand the peasantry through icons.”

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particular features of the avant-garde’s preoccupation with the icon are outlined in two books by the artist Aleksei Grishchenko (1883–1977). In the words of Grishchenko, the avant-garde “posed the problem of a new realistic depiction of objects by means of deconstruction”.14 His first book, On the Links of Russian Painting with Byzantium and the West (O sviazakh russkoj zhivopisi s Vizantiei i Zapadom), came out in 1913.15 The other, which appeared in 1917, The Russian Icon as the Art of Painting (Russkaia ikona kak iskusstvo zhivopisi), was a fuller development of Grishchenko’s oral communication of 1915, ‘Why and How Did We Come Close to the Russian Icon?’16

For the Russian Neoprimitivists, including Malevich, the Old Russian icon was “art of the highest order”.17 Together with other examples of ‘primitive’ art, it offered the opportunity of escape from the academic imitative image to ‘pure art’. Henri Matisse, visiting the Ilia Ostroukhov Museum in Moscow in 1911, was in raptures over the beauty of the Old Russian icon, finding it “genuine primitive” popular art and a priceless source of new ideas for his own painting.18 Grishchenko maintained that the achievements of French painters had helped the Russian ‘Neoprimitives’ to acquire a “new range of artistic concepts” in general and in the field of Old Russian icon painting in particular.19

During the period of his interest in ‘primitive’ art Malevich studied the formal structure of the icon.20 We can also find the same new reading of the icon in the works of Natalia Goncharova. We know that Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov collected folk icons and prints (lubki) and staged an exhibition of these in 1913 in Moscow.21 The exhibition, Icon Patterns and Lubki, ran concurrently with Goncharova and Larionov’s latest group exhibition called Target (Mishen’). At this time Kandinsky also collected

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15 Ibid.
17 Aleksei Grishchenko, Russkaia ikona, pp. 7, 37. It is to be noted that Florensky shared with the artists of the avant-garde the precept that “forms should be grasped in the light of their own life, take expression in terms of themselves, openly to the understanding, not in accordance with predetermined perspectives” [emphasis mine], in Pavel Florenskii, ‘Obratnaia perspectiva’ in Pavel Florenskii, Sochineniia, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Mysl’, 1990), p. 60.
18 Utro Rossii (27 October 1911).
19 A. Grishchenko, ‘Russkaia ikona’, p. 26; see also pp. 17, 250, 259, and 262.
21 For the catalogue, see Vystavka ikonopisnykh podlinnikov i lubkov organizovannay M. F. Larionovym [The exhibition of icon patterns and lubki, organised by M. F. Larionov] (exh. cat., Moscow, Bol’shaya Dmitrovka, Khudozhestvenny salon 11, 1913). See Chapter 6 of this volume for a discussion of the influence of lubki in the art of Goncharova and Larionov.
Bavarian religious painting on glass as well as Russian folk icons and lubki.\(^{22}\) As a result of this interest we can see the reflection (or imprint) of the sacred composition of an icon in a number of works by these artists. In these works the picture plane is no longer defined from a single viewpoint. The picture demands to be looked at from inner or even multiple viewpoints. Such a position of the viewer was discussed a few years later by Florensky.

Meanwhile, at this stage, Malevich was seeking in his art to elide the boundaries of received aesthetic norms, and move towards metaphysical essences and realities. He wrote later:

Acquaintance with the art of icon painting taught me that it was not a question of studying anatomy or perspective, it was not a question of whether nature had been truthfully reproduced — the important thing was a feeling for art and artistic realism. In other words, I saw that reality, or a subject, is what must be re-embodied in an ideal form coming out of the heart of an aesthetic.\(^{23}\)

Consequently, the artist transgresses the beauty of the Old Russian icon in order to enter another dimension of reality. He uncovers a subject to contemplate that is transcendental — absolute nothingness, the potential existence of certain forms, the universal symbol of pure form. He sees his God “in the absolute, at the ultimate boundary, as it were in non-objectivity. Attainment of the finite is attainment of non-objectivity”.\(^{24}\) The composition of a Suprematist painting, therefore, is a view into the meaning of things, achieved through the transformation of ‘pure forms’ as the primary elements of art. The eye of the viewer of a Suprematist painting falls on a network of the artist’s metaphysical experience, and visions of boundless, infinite space. Beyond the visible and chance phenomena of our external world there are no laws of harmony, as in Classicism, nor chance clashes, as in Romanticism; there is only infinite emptiness, nothingness. Hence comes the revolutionary transformation of the aesthetic at the centre of which is the viewer’s perception of a work of art. Now the personality of the artist comes into the foreground.

The Old Russian icon was a canonic image; that is, an authentic revelation which the icon painter could only depict, not interpret. On the other hand, Renaissance mimetic painting was based on the interpretation of the idea of divine beauty, and its reception was thus dependent on visual perception. But the Suprematist image had arrived at a new threshold, opening onto a different reality. Hence Malevich’s Quadrilateral (Chetyreugol’nik) (now known as Black Square) (1915) (fig. 5.2) was a new icon, which testified to the presence of a direct link with the transcendental — a link the painter himself had experienced. The painter wrote to Alexandre Benois in May 1916 of his

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celebrated work: “I have done one icon of my time, bare (as a pocket), without a frame […] [emphasis mine].”\(^{25}\) This renunciation of a frame of any kind and the claim of a new transcendental icon as a construct of the human mind meant a complete break with all previous cultural tradition, and a declaration of a radically new view of the world. Malevich’s starting-point was the icon, but he gave it a contemporary guise.

The phenomenon of revelation, as, in principle, a crossing of the un-crossable boundary between the earthly and the divine, traditionally studied by mystical theology, appears here as a palpable example of transgression taken by the artist from cultural tradition. The same could be said of Theosophy, which opened up an awareness of other levels of being for Malevich. It was not by chance that this artist noted that his time was “the age of analysis, the result of all the systems that have ever been established”.\(^{26}\) The new experience of seeing the transcendental presupposed the mastering of the most diverse practices in art and meditation. Transgression of the boundary into the invisible world not only ensured the openness of the numinous to the metaphysics of the image, but reduced the role of the frame as a recognisable boundary, as it had been in preceding cultures.

The new horizon that appeared as a result of this breakthrough was truly new in the sense that it possessed the status and the energy to deny all earlier culture. Such was the meaning of the Cubo-Futurist opera Victory over the Sun (Pobeda nad solntsem, 1913), on which Malevich collaborated with Aleksei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Matiushin, and in which he later claimed that the ‘black square’ symbol had first appeared. Victory over the Sun, Matiushin explained, “is all about victory over the Romanticism of the past, over the conventional idea of the sun as ‘beauty’. The sun of the old aesthetic was conquered”.\(^{27}\) The culture of all preceding periods was thereby seen in an eschatological perspective. With the ‘killing of the sun’ it was plunged into chaos, to be mystically regenerated for a new world.

Thus Suprematism was formed and conceived as a spiritual system with a universal cosmic dimension, endowed with the capacity to transfigure the world in accordance with the laws of ‘pure form’. Such a quest brought Malevich fame as a prophet. He began to feel relieved by his messianic role in as much as his creative activity was based on the clear desire to change the organisation of the world. Hence his famed painting, Black Square, accumulating the artist’s creative energy and opening a new world, was intended as a ‘new icon’ — a ‘cult object’, having an influence on social reality.

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25 Otdel Rukopisei Gosudarstvennogo Russkogo Muzeia (ORGRM) (State Russian Museum, Manuscript Division, St Petersburg), fond 137/1186/2, reverse. This letter was written in response to Benois’s criticism of the Futurist exhibition ‘0.10’ held in Petrograd in 1915. For Benois, ‘Black Square’ evoked iconic associations, on which Malevich also commented (see A. Benua, ‘Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka’, Rech’ (9 January 1916)).


5.3 Photograph of The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10 (‘Zero-Ten’), 1915. Photograph in the public domain. Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0.10_Exhibition.jpg

5.4 Display of Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square* (1915), Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2006. Photograph © Oleg Tarasov, CC BY 4.0.
Malevich first showed his Suprematist works at the Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10 (‘zero ten’) in 1915, placing his Black Square in the corner of the exhibition hall where the icon corner was traditionally set up (fig. 5.3). This placing of the work and (as in the case of other works by this artist) the absence of a frame had a conceptual significance. In the artist’s words, Black Square was “zero form”, “the face of the new art”, “a regal infant”. And, being a self-sufficient form, it did not, of course, need a frame, the long-standing symbolic boundary separating a picture from surrounding space. This work was itself ‘reality’, cosmic emptiness, frameless, and as such was intended to float in the infinite cosmos and give new form to the real world. It did not even need the narrow canvas surround that emphasised the uniqueness of the abstract painting as an aesthetic object, its composition being an enclosed system. The ‘framing’ effect of the white surround formed a black square, and the square formed the framing, which transformed the whole construction into a ‘point’, a fons et origo, which the artist saw as “the first step of pure creativity in art”. Here the Suprematist project began to be regarded as a kind of new religion, and a Suprematist painting took on the function of a new form of icon, a ‘cult object’ having an influence on social reality.

In the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow a few years ago Black Square was displayed in a frame (reminiscent of an icon case) hung against a grey wall (fig. 5.4). Thus the viewer was invited directly to feel the impact of the painting on the real world, as if it were a twentieth-century icon.

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