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Are there "Byzantine" layers in the work of Kasimir Malevich?¹

*"An image, when the original is not present, sheds a glory like the original;
but when the reality is there the image itself is outshone,
the likeness remaining acceptable because it reveals the truth."*

(Clement of Alexandria, quoted by Patriarch Nicephorus)

Over the last few decades interest in the Russian avant-garde movement seems to have concentrated on the "Big Break" happening at the beginning of the 20th century.² Casting off the fetters of tradition that had previously confined them, artists felt free to explore new horizons. Their quest for the "new" included the questioning of existing values, leading them into a constant search for a new identity. As the theory and practice of Modernism is reviewed to determine the interrelationship between "old" and "new", it becomes ever more apparent that the precise role of tradition needs further investigation. In my essay I focus on the question of Byzantine influence on Kasimir Malevich. Few scholars who have made studies of his art, have failed to emphasize the strong influence that icon-painting had on the artist.³ How precisely this influence is expressed in Malevich's painting is an issue that still needs further exploration. My aim in this paper is not only to trace back specific features in the major works of Malevich to their Byzantine sources, but also to link his image theory to the image theory of the Byzantine period.

Around the first decade of the 20th century many young artists involved themselves in a major intellectual effort to turn away from older aesthetic traditions. The main idea of "avant-garde" poets, painters, sculptors and architects was to divest themselves of all previous conventions and to create in an entirely new style. What was new about this Modernist Movement was its internationalism. Paris and London were now not the only centres of the new art, Moscow and St. Petersburg had also become significant. As a result of close contact with leading art centres (especially Paris), an intrinsically Russian modernist movement emerged. It is usually known as "Cubo-Futurism", based as it is on the theories promulgated in Futurist manifestos and the abstract artistic language of Cubism.

Kasimir Malevich was one of those Russian artists who from about 1910 worked for some years in the flexible vocabulary provided by Cubo-Futurism. In his career as

a painter he had passed through several different periods of artistic development. Following an earlier stage, when he seems to have painted in a realistic style much like Repin and others,⁴ he adopted Impressionism in the years 1903-1905. Moving to Moscow, where he finally settled as an artist in 1907, his mode of visual expression underwent a sea change. He began responding to influences coming from Russian Symbolist circles and the art of the French Fauves. Only from about 1912 onward did Malevich start to use the modernist language of "Facet Cubism" and "Collage Cubism" which had swept over Europe after originating in Paris. All these Western-inspired ways of expression turned out to be but mere evolutionary steps leading towards his own, authentically personal artistic style, which from 1915 onwards he called "Suprematism".

Apart from the various influences he had come under from modern Western art, during his first years in Moscow Malevich was confronted with yet another artistic phenomenon. Arriving in the metropolis, as he later stated somewhat surprisingly, he had to revise all his previous theories about art because of the impression made by the early icons he saw there.⁵ Naturally the icons in Moscow were not the first icons he had encountered. Icons were familiar to him since he had been a child. There had been icons in the house of his parents.⁶ Churches, monasteries and private households all over Russia were full of them. One wonders then, why Malevich should react so strongly to the icons he discovered in Moscow. What could have been so special about them? To find an answer to this we must familiarize ourselves with the history of Russian religious imagery.

"Icon" is a Greek word originally meaning "image", but has ended up being applied only to particular cult-images as opposed to other religious or secular pictures. Icons were among the first religious objects brought from Byzantium to Russia at the time when Vladimir, Great Prince of Kiev, accepted Christianity as the official religion of his principality and was baptized according to the Eastern Orthodox rite (988 AD).⁷ This was the period when the highly developed art of Constantinople became also the art of Kiev. The best artists from Byzantium were commissioned to build Orthodox churches in Kiev and to decorate them with splendid mosaics, frescoes and icons, representing in paint the religious ideas of the Eastern Church. Almost immediately local workshops sprang up not only in Kiev but also in Novgorod and Moscow, creating specifically Russian variants of Byzantine religious art.⁸

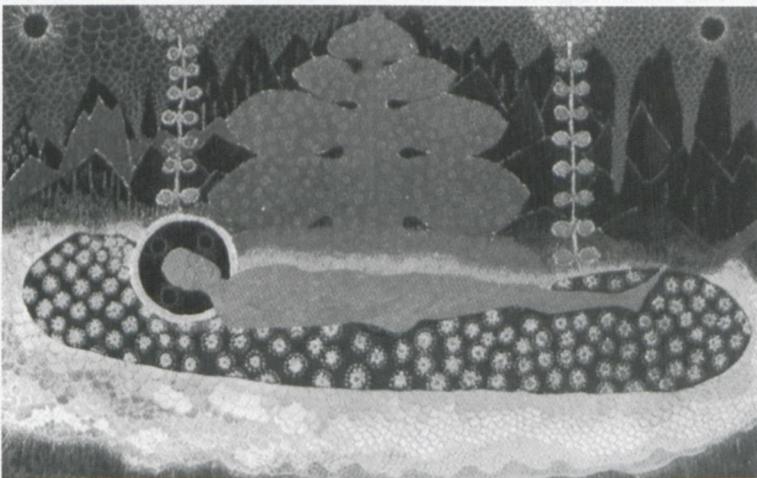
Icons usually belonged inside the churches where they were fixed on the iconostasis – a wooden screen separating the apse from the section occupied by the faithful during the liturgy. Icons were also placed at the entrance of the church for veneration. They were often taken out of the church in the course of holy processions when they attracted large crowds. Apart from their use in churches and monasteries it was also customary in Russia to give icons a place of honour in private houses.⁹

From the early 19th century onward academic interest in Byzantine art steadily grew in Europe as well as in Russia.¹⁰ From 1850 onwards Russian scholars like Th. Uspenskij and N. Kondakov devoted themselves to extensive studies of Byzantine and medieval art and archaeology.¹¹ While the majority of the public still looked upon icons solely as sacred objects of veneration, wealthy merchants turned to collecting icons for their significance as unique and precious works of art.¹² The traditional

attitude towards icons changed even more as "...in 1904 did the significance of Russian painting as a national art dawn upon professed Russian students when the golden riza studded with jewels, which since the time of Boris Godunov had hidden the ikon of the Holy Trinity at Troice-Sergievskaja Lavra, was removed and the resplendent masterpiece of Rublev was revealed. A new era in the study of Russian painting then began."¹³

In my opinion it is crucial to understand, that Kasimir Malevich arrived in Moscow,¹⁴ in time to be involved in a radical change of vision that led the public to experience icons in a totally different way. Instead of being confronted solely with the "sacred" in these images as had been the case for centuries, the artist (like the rest of the public) began to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the icon. Russian museums and collections were about to become the new "temples" of religious imagery taken out of its original setting. As the process was promoted by a series of exhibitions and a number of articles in widely circulated art journals, this new type of appreciation of Russian religious art quickly spread to artists and art students who, as a result, adopted a modernist style called "Neoprimitivism".¹⁵ According to his own later statements, Kasimir Malevich, also started to work in a "primitive style" by imitating icon-painting.¹⁶ Are we to think then that he began to produce faithful copies of a given religious prototype so as to support spiritual renewal through revitalized faith just like traditional icon-painters used to do?¹⁷ In order to find out what the artist had in mind we have to turn to Malevich 's paintings themselves.

There is one important piece of evidence that gives us a clue to what Malevich 's commitment to icon-painting actually meant in terms of visual expression. In 1908 the artist finished a painting called the "Shroud of Christ".¹⁸ Much is known of the long and illustrious history of the "Shroud" in Byzantium. Its origins ultimately go back to the historical linen cloth in which Christ's body was wrapped for burial. As the result of the archetype being the famous cloth relic which had held the Saviour's body, the



Kasimir Malevich

The Shroud of Christ

Το Σάβανο του Χριστού



Epitaphios/Επιτάφιος

many medieval versions two (or more) angel-deacons are represented behind the outstretched figure of Christ fanning the body with liturgical *rhypidia*, while six-winged cherubs may also appear. Sometimes a ciborium is depicted, all these iconographic details linking the historical event of Christ's death with its commemoration in the rites of the Orthodox liturgy.²³ As to the astral symbols of the sun and the moon which also appear in some instances, they represent the changes in the cosmic order as a result of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Consequently, some kind of religious experience seems to be the key to Kasimir Malevich's "Holy Shroud". Taking a closer look at the painting however, we understand, that Malevich was not simply producing a new version of the conventional "*epitaphios*", ready for use by the Church, but that he was experimenting, using older image formulas in order to create a new visual language in art. Drawing on Byzantine concepts the artist made some meaningful changes in his work, thereby adapting the subject to his own time and purposes.

Malevich depicts the dead body of Christ lying in a garden of blossoming flowers. In contrast to the Byzantine formula which takes great care to show Christ's body complete, with all limbs visible, Malevich presents a body seen sharply from the side, thus "cutting off" Christ's left arm and leg. This has to be regarded as a major break with Byzantine image convention, as medieval artists always avoided disturbing the visual integrity of the figure (and especially of the divine figure of Christ). Another break with old image conventions is that instead of showing Christ with long brown hair, the artist depicts a shaven Christ with no hair at all – leaving us with the impression that we see before us a bald, new-born baby rather than contemplating the corpse of a fully grown man.²⁴ But there are further alterations: instead of Christ's traditional golden nimbus symbolizing divine light, a black halo surrounds Christ's head. Within the halo we detect three circular forms beaming light. As they are positioned in the form of the cross, they serve to evoke the memory of Christ's crucifixion and through this, the salvation of mankind. Two more circular astral bodies –reminiscent perhaps of the Byzantine symbols of the sun and the moon– made up

motif usually appears in the medium of richly embroidered silks.¹⁹ The subject however made its appearance in other media as well, as the precious Byzantine enamel of the 12th century, kept in the Ermitage in St. Petersburg demonstrates.²⁰ In Byzantine art the image of the dead Christ lying outstretched on a raised platform covered with a cloth (or bier) was called "*epitaphios*".²¹ Christ is depicted in side view with hands across his lower body, which is covered with a loin-cloth.²² In

of black centres and radiating forth golden sunlight can be seen in the red cell-like sky which opening over a range of steep black mountain peaks. The force of that light seems to bring nature to life. Flowers in a stylized, ornamental form can be seen everywhere.²⁵ Especially in the blue cloth, the "Shroud" of Christ, which is covered with red and yellow buds. The red tree, placed centrally behind Christ's body, also shows a variety of flower-buds and reminds us, perhaps, of the Christian "tree of life", a symbol of resurrection and salvation. We may ask ourselves how the art of Kasimir Malevich benefited by experimenting with medieval models.

By using bright primary colours instead of the refined Byzantine chromatic scale, including gold as a symbol of divine light, Malevich modified the visual language of his models to a remarkable extent. The decisive "modern" look of his painting seems to reflect the latest ideas of Symbolist art theorists, who by the time the "Shroud" was executed, had put much emphasis on the fact that a picture is essentially a flat surface, which should be covered with flat simplified shapes and brilliant un-natural colours.²⁶ For the purposes of our argument it is important to note, that Byzantine artistic language is strangely congruent with modern art theory. The study of Byzantine works of art reveals figures and objects presented in a radically two-dimensional world which has no counterpart in our own experience. What Malevich learned from the complex technical system of Byzantine art was that colours, lines and volumes are used to just one end: not to simulate our world of natural phenomena, but to depict *the Invisible*.

Comparing Malevich's painting to the images of the Byzantine period we observe that the artist has stripped the medieval composition of all its original liturgical connotations. In the course of this process, Malevich arrived at a more archaic version of the subject, thus directly referring to the historical archetype: the miracu-



Επιτάφιος/Επιτάφιος



Επιτάφιος/Επιτάφιος

lous Shroud of Christ. At this point we have to mention the most important feature this holy textile possesses: awaiting resurrection Christ left the imprint of his body on the cloth. The "Shroud" is a representative of the most famous group of Byzantine images called *acheiropoieta* or images "not made by human hands".²⁷ In visual terms this meant that the image on the cloth was not a copy linked to the original by mere likeness but that this image miraculously was the original.²⁸ Being the trace of Christ's body it cannot be called an "image" at all, because every image by definition is handmade, except – which is important in our case – the mental image.²⁹ Byzantine sources on the topic never fail to insist that icons, especially the *acheiropoieta* performed miracles through their innate sacred power. The sacred power was ascribed to the *charis* or divine Grace that dwelt in them and endowed them with their power. Consequently, *Acheiropoieta* are living images, active and miraculous through a hyperphysical power radiating from them.³⁰

Kasimir Malevich, like most of his contemporaries, was certainly aware of how the *acheiropoieta* were believed to work. From his own later remarks about pictures that influenced him in his youth we can draw the conclusion that he was thinking about images in terms of representations *made by human hands* and *acheiropoieta*, the latter having a special artistic meaning for him. In his description of a visit to Kiev as a young boy, he vividly recalls a painting he had seen in a shop, showing a "Girl peeling Potatoes". The picture of the girl seemed to be as real as nature itself: "I saw her duplicate and felt that it was made by human hands".³¹ Seen together with his painting of the "Holy Shroud" Malevich's remarks lead us in the direction of an influence of Byzantine image theory on the artist. Once we have established this argument, we can go one step further and investigate the question: if the Byzantine influence on Kasimir Malevich continued, and in what way it expressed itself in later years at the time he started to develop Suprematism.

In the summer of 1913 three young avant-garde artists set about staging a Futurist opera which they called *Victory over the Sun*.³² Alexei Kruchenykh was to write the libretto, Mikhail Matiushin to be composer while Kasimir Malevich was responsible for the stage and costume designs.³³ For the third act, Malevich had created a scenic drop showing a black square on white ground. In the course of action – strange as it seems – this curtain was torn apart, revealing what was going on in the space behind it. I think we should concur with Werner Hofmann, who in a recent study has argued that this action should be seen as an allusion to the biblical temple curtain which was riven apart the hour Christ died on the cross (Math. 27:51).³⁴

There is additional proof that the young Futurists often made use of a precise religious subtext for their creations. I wish to refer to two poems of Alexei Kruchenykh, also written in the year 1913. As F. Ph. Ingold has demonstrated, they can be directly related to Christian prayer.³⁵

It is well known that the concept of *zaum* was central to Russian Cubo-Futurist poetry of this period. Basically *zaum* meant a trans-sense language, one that went beyond the borders of logical structures. Supporters of *zaum* in the field of language and in the field of the visual arts were looking for a different pattern behind the *sensus litteralis*. That makes them strangely akin to medieval representatives of biblical exegesis, who - behind the literal sense of the texts - were searching for a higher

spiritual sense. The result of their interpretation was a revelation or apocalypse (*Αποκάλυψις*) that describes prophetic visions of the future. K. Eberlein has brought to our attention that ...*ihr Ergebnis ist eine Enthüllung relevatio, wie sie durch das Zerreißen des Vorhangs im jüdischen Tempel beim Kreuzestod Christi vorgebildet und als Möglichkeit begründet wurde...*³⁶ a reference that fits our case perfectly. Malevich's own words give further proof that he had in mind a sort of revelation: *Künstler(...)sind Leute, welche die verborgene Welt entbergen und sie ins Reale verkörpern. – Der Künstler entbirgt die Welt und bringt sie dem Menschen zur Erscheinung. – Vor Augen eine neue Welt, eine reine, war außerdem niemand zu Gang im offenen Paradies...Hinein brachen Fremdlinge(...) und rissen den Vorhang des Geheimnisses auf.*³⁷

The particular form of words Malevich uses here indicates an artistic task, similar to the original task of Byzantine artists in the field of religious imagery: "to reveal a hidden world of invisible forms"³⁸, exactly the kind of function artists in the Byzantine period had to perform. The sole goal of Byzantine art throughout the Middle Ages had in fact been to depict the Intelligible. Byzantine art was based on the idea that the ordinary image which is conveyed to our eyes (in a physical sense) could under special conditions initiate a process, through which the spectator (through his mental eye) would be able to contemplate a higher spiritual reality. Consequently, the artist's task was to evoke this hidden but intelligible world. This he achieved, by dematerializing the (material) representations. It seems to me that this was exactly the point that was taken up by some Russian avant-garde artists.³⁹ I cannot discuss in detail the well-known artistic ties that connected M. Larionov and Kasimir Malevich. Suffice it to say, that from about 1910 onward - together with other "Neoprimativists" - they concentrated their interest on Russian popular art as well as the so-called *lubki* and icon-painting of the past centuries.⁴⁰ In

1913 their common attempt to explore former primitivist art resulted in a famous exhibition organized by Larionov.⁴¹ Next to *lubki* and 129 icons from Larionov's private collection, the exhibition showed so-called *podlinniki* or "authorized versions", which are manuals for the use of icon-painters, containing the rules of icon-making and a body of tracings.⁴²

In 1912, Larionov together with Goncharova and Malevich exhibited their Neoprimativist paintings in an exhibition called "Donkey's Tail".⁴³ Describing their aims in mounting this exhibition Malevich put much emphasis on the fact that their paintings wanted to express the "spiritual traits of peasants' faces, in which there were reflected a form originating in icon-painting".⁴⁴ To demonstrate what Malevich



Kasimir Malevich
Peasant's Head/Κεφάλι Χωρικό

actually had in mind by making this curious statement we have again to look at the visual evidence. In a drawing by Malevich dating from the year 1912 called "Peasant's Head" we see within a red frame of roughly square dimensions a male face in complete frontality.⁴⁵ The man wears a long full beard, his hair is parted in the centre. His eyes seem to watch us with a serious expression. It may come as a surprise that Malevich's *Peasant's Head* shares the same typological features that can be found in an icon, which I want to present in this context. It is the famous "Mandylyon"-icon of Novgorod, dating from the 12th century. This icon could be seen and venerated in the Uspenie-Cathedral (Ascension of the Virgin Mary) in Moscow up to the Revolution.⁴⁶ To compare the two works, we can in part rely on K. Onasch's detailed description of the Novgorod icon.⁴⁷ The formal features that he once detected in the Mandylyon-icon may to a considerable extent be also found in Malevich's *Peasant's Head*. Let us then list the icon-features, the modern artist was careful to preserve in his work:

- The *Peasant's Head* shows only a face but does not include the subject's neck.
- The two halves of the face are perfectly symmetrical, including hair-style and beard.
- Special weight is given to the expression of the wide-open eyes.
- The right eyebrow is drawn up slightly higher than the left. This subtle change of symmetry helps to give the face the expression of life in spite of its overall un-natural appearance.



The Holy Mandylyon
To Άγιο Μανδύλιο

As a consequence Malevich's *Peasant's Head* has more than one similarity to the most famous icon of Byzantine and Russian times: the so-called *Mandylyon* or "Holy Face of Christ". Like the *Holy Shroud* the *Mandylyon* also was considered to be an authentic likeness of Christ which he himself had produced by wiping his face with a towel. It derived its sacred power from the trace of Christ's face and from very early times had a reputation for performing miracles. Everybody in the Byzantine Empire knew the famous legend of king Abgar of Edessa. According to this story, Abgar who had fallen ill, begged Jesus to come and heal him. Instead of coming in person, Christ sent the Holy Towel which instantly cured the king. In the Persian wars of the 7th century emperor Heraclius carried the Mandylyon-icon into battle as a Christian military standard. It not only protected the army through its divine power, but also gave victory to those who believed in God. In a later period this custom from Byzantium spread to Russia. We should perhaps be aware of the fact, that even in the Russia of 1914-18 the army carried standards representing the Face of Christ into the battles of World War I.⁴⁸ Consequently, we should not underestimate the power of the icon of the Holy Face of Christ to arouse an emotional reaction in people. Icons for centuries had offered a spiritual outlet for emotions.⁴⁹ In this context the custom of processions with icons has to be seen as one of the basic means of enhancing and consolidating a sense of



Mikhail W. Nesterov

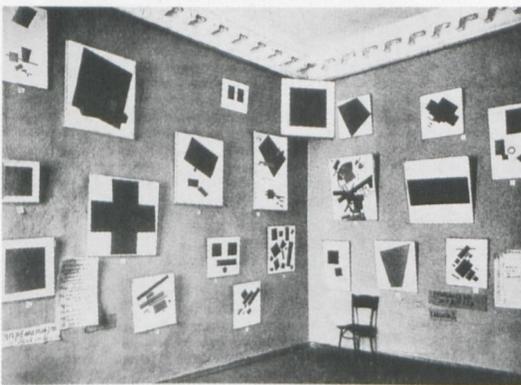
The Russian Lands - The Soul of the People (detail)

Η Γη της Ρωσίας - Η Ψυχή του Λαού (λεπτομέρεια)

These were additional reasons that it came as a major shock for the public to find the art of the Russian avant-garde artists closely connected to the field of icon-painting.⁵² There are in fact strong arguments to support my view that residues of a special Byzantine subtext could still be detected in the work of Kasimir Malevich as late as 1915, when he managed to establish Suprematism as a new art form. To find out more about this aspect, one has to turn to Malevich's key painting, marking the advent of Suprematism: *the Black Square on White Ground*.⁵³

Looking at a photograph showing Malevich's group of Suprematist paintings for the exhibition *0,10* we can observe that the artist placed the *Black Square* diagonally in the upper corner of the exhibition-room, thus setting up a direct connection with the symbolic space of the icon common in Russian households.⁵⁴ It seems clear that Malevich wanted us to see the *Black Square* as an icon.⁵⁵ There is an additional piece of evidence to support the idea that Malevich regarded his painting as an icon. In a 1935 photograph we see the artist on his death-bed, surrounded by his family. Instead of the usual icon which Orthodox Christians in Russia placed above the head of the deceased, here we see the *Black Square*.

Moreover, a statement by Kasimir Malevich himself leads us to relate his Black

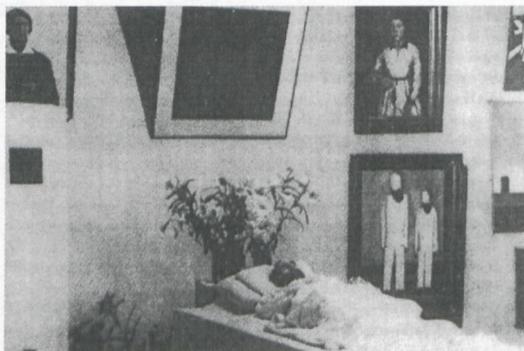


Photograph of the *0,10* exhibition

Φωτογραφία της έκθεσης *0,10*

community.⁵⁰ This was especially true of the processions involving the "Mandylion"-icon with its strong connotations of protection and victory which seem to have been regarded as the last attempts to unite the Russian people at a moment, when the "Big Break" in society was already apparent. As a revealing example of this momentum I offer Mikhail W. Nesterov's painting *In Russian Lands/ The Soul of the People* executed between 1914-16.⁵¹

Square directly to the icon of the Holy Face of Christ. And I, too, am peering into a mysterious black space – one which is becoming a kind of form of the new face of the Suprematist world.(...)Oh, no, I see in it what people at one time used to see before the face of god.⁵⁶ If one actually compares the *Black Square* to the common type of *Mandylion*-icon in Russia, one is astonished to observe their strong formal similarities, despite the fact



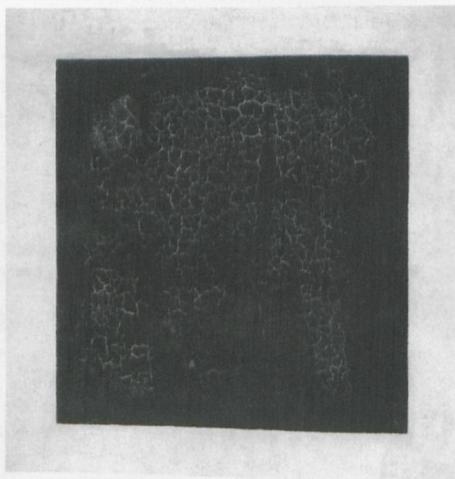
Photograph of the dead artist
Φωτογραφία του νεκρού καλλιτέχνη

also is not a colour but rather a symbol of divine *light*⁵⁷ and a limited variation of red, brown and black hues. Another common feature the two paintings share is the differentiation into an inner field of painting, called *kovtscheg* in Russian icon-painting, (in Malevich's case it takes the form of a monochrome colour field), and an outer frame-like border, which in icon-painting is called *kiot*.

These facts lead us to the conclusion, that Malevich in the exhibition *0,10* consciously provided a special frame of reference which drew heavily on Byzantine and Russian image conventions. There is, however, a second stratum of meaning in Malevich's artistic solution. With the special hanging of his pictures in the exhibition *0,10* Malevich, in my opinion, referred also to the recent transformation of Russian cult-images, which by that time had become highly prized works of art as a result of the frequency of their exhibition in show-rooms, museums and private collections. By providing a "pseudo-religious atmosphere" in the corner where he exhibited the *Black Square*, the artist seems to invert this development, thereby giving his Suprematist paintings the aura of cult-images. For this reason scholars like to call the *Black Square* the first "icon" of modern art.⁵⁸

But what is important for the subject of this article is the fact that Kasimir Malevich in creating the *Black Square* obviously returned once again to the Byzantine *acheiropoieta* as a source of inspiration. The *Mandyliion* (as well as the *Shroud*) reproduced an archetype, whose essence was actually *invisible* to the eyes of the material world.⁵⁹ It was this old Byzantine concept that manifested itself in the icons of the *Mandyliion*

that while the icon shows a likeness of Christ, Malevich's work shows nothing but an "empty black window". Both images appear as square shapes (Malevich's *Black Square* measuring 79,2 x 79,5 cm, the *Mandyliion*-icon: 77 x 71 cm). They also both use a radically reduced colour-scale, Malevich's painting uses only black and white (which are basically not colours at all), the *Mandyliion*-icon makes lavish use of gold (which



Kasimir Malevich
Black Square
Μαύρο Τετράγωνο

and the *Shroud*, which in my opinion had most appeal for Kasimir Malevich. *Acheiropoieta* gave him the theoretical background to develop Suprematist art by way of analogy. As he was taking the step to non-objective painting, Malevich was confronted with the problem of representing his own personal *invisible* images. As an artist, he had constantly before his "inner eye" mental images, which he discovered in a trans-sensual world. The way to materialize the artistic visions or ideas was to make an imprint



Ivan Kliun
Portrait of Kasimir Malevich
Πορτραίτο του Kasimir Malevich

of them on the canvas, the mental archetype thus duplicating itself, while the act of painting had to be reduced to the fewest possible elements. The highly valued Byzantine *acheiropoieta* had demonstrated for centuries that the public believed that this special kind of image was actually possible. It therefore seems to me, that Byzantine image theory provided the original background for the art of Kasimir Malevich. As I have tried to demonstrate, the existence of a strong Byzantine subtext gives us a concrete clue as to where he drew his inspirations for Suprematism from. Suprematist art unveiled a world of ideas molded after the former Byzantine world of intelligible reality, a world, however, that in the art of Kasimir Malevich was to become unequivocally modern.

¹ This text is the revised version of a short paper occasioned by the International Conference on the subject *Modernist Movements and Byzantine Art*, held at the State Museum of Modern Art Thessaloniki, 11th–16th March 2002. I wish to thank the director of the Museum, Professor M. Papanikolaou and the organizing committee of the conference for giving me the chance to present my views.

² Felix Philipp Ingold, *Der große Bruch – Rußland im Epochenjahr 1913*, Munich 2000 (cited as: Ingold, 2000).

³ See most recently B. Pejic, *The icon effect*, in: *Avant-Garde Masterpieces of the Costakis Collection*, exhibition cat., State Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, 2001; V. Krieger, *Von der Ikone zur Utopie. Kunstkonzepte der russischen Avantgarde*, Cologne 1998; V. Rakitin, *Artisan and Prophet: Tatlin and Malevich – Notes on two artists' biographies*, in: *The Great Utopia*, exhibition cat., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1992; For further bibliographical material concerning the art of K. Malevich consult Felix Philipp Ingold, *Welt und Bild, Zur Begründung der suprematistischen Ästhetik bei Kasimir Malevic*, in: *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. G. Boehm, Munich 1994, 367-410.

⁴ *Kasimir Malevich, 1878 - 1935. Katalog zur Ausstellung*, Washington, Los Angeles, New York, 1990/91, Fragments from "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography", 1930, p.174 ff, quoted after Hans-Peter Riese, *Kasimir Malewitsch*, Hamburg 1999, p.23 (quoted thereafter as: Riese, 1999).

⁵ Fragments, p. 174ff (quoted after Riese, 1999, p.23).

⁶ Larissa Shadowa, *Suche und Experiment. Russische und sowjetische Kunst 1910-1930*, Dresden 1978, p. 288 (quoted after Riese, 1999, p.10.)

⁷ John Meyendorff, *The Orthodox Church*, New York 1981, esp. Chapter VI: The Russian Church from its

Beginning to 1917.

- ⁸ V. N. Lasarew, Rußland, in: *Propyläen Kunstgeschichte, Byzanz und der christliche Osten*, Berlin.
- ⁹ A vivid description of the popular Russian custom of greeting the principal icon on entering a house is given by Herberstein in: *Rerum Moscoviticarum commentarii Sigismundi Liberi Baronis in Herberstein, (...) in: Rerum Moscoviticarum auctores varii, unum in corpus nunc primum congesti, Francofurti MDC*, p.40f. (after: H. Skrobucha, *Von Geist und Gestalt der Ikonen*, Recklinghausen 1961, p.64).
- ¹⁰ Christine Stephan-Kaissis, Bayern und Byzanz Zum romantischen Byzantinismus deutscher Künstler im 19. Jahrhundert, in: *Mitteilungen zur spätantiken Archäologie und byzantinischen Kunstgeschichte* 3(2002), 125-151. V. Krieger, *Von der Ikone zur Utopie*, Cologne 1998, esp. pp. 67-75. For an excellent study on the revival of Byzantine art in Russia see J. Kiritschenko, *Zwischen Byzanz und Moskau*, Munich 1991.
- ¹¹ See the biographical note on Uspenskij by M.V.N. Beneséciv in: *L'art byzantin chez les Slaves, dédié à la mémoire de Th. Uspenskij*, Paris 1932, I-VI. At the end of the 19th century Kondakov published a major work on Byzantine art called *Histoire de l'art byzantine considéré principalement dans les miniatures*, II, Paris 1886-91.
- ¹² N. Misler-J.E. Bowlit, Der Primitivismus und die russische Avantgarde, in: *Russische Avantgarde und Volkskunst*, exhibition cat., Kunsthalle Baden-Baden 1993, p. 17 (cited hereafter as: N. Misler-J.Bowlit, 1993). See also Jewgenia Kiritschenko, *Zwischen Byzanz und Moskau*, Munich 1991, as well as Ingold, 2000, p.44.
- ¹³ Thomas Whittemore, The Place of four Ikonen in the History of Russian art, in: *L'art byzantin chez les Slaves, dédié à la mémoire de Th. Uspenskij*, Paris 1932, p. 212.
- ¹⁴ The date of Kasimir Malevich's arrival is given either as 1902 or as 1904. Compare *Russian Avant-Garde Art, The George Costakis Collection*, New York 1981, p. 251 and Riese, 1999, p. 16.
- ¹⁵ On this issue consult: N. Misler-J.Bowlit, 1993, p.17 (with further bibliography) and Ingold, 2000, p. 44 – 48. On the avant-garde icon-reception in general see V. Krieger, *Von der Ikone zur Utopie*, Cologne 1998, p. 86ff.
- ¹⁶ Fragments, p.175 (quoted after Riese, 1999, p.26).
- ¹⁷ "While Malevich was very interested in the Russian icon, any attempt to regard Malevich as an Orthodox believer should be discounted. No doubt Malevich would have been highly amused to see his Suprematist paintings hanging on the iconostasis of a disused church in 1921". See John E. Bowlit, *Beyond the Horizon*, in: Kasimir Malevich. Zum 100. Geburtstag. Katalog der Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne 1978, p. 232-252 (esp. p. 237, p. 238).
- ¹⁸ Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery, TR 84, Gouache on cardboard, 23,3 x 37,4 signed and dated. See *Russian Avant-Garde Art, The George Costakis Collection*, New York 1981, p. 253, pl. 479. I wish to express my gratitude to Mrs. Aliko Costaki for providing me with a colour slide of the painting.
- ¹⁹ G. Millet, *L'Épithaphios*, in: *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* (1942), 408ff; idem, *Broderies religieuses du style byzantin*, Paris 1947.
- ²⁰ Illustrated in: H. Belting, *An Image and its Function in the Liturgy: The Man of Sorrows in Byzantium*, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34(1980), fig. 19.
- ²¹ For early examples of the type see Belting, 1980 (as cited in note 20).
- ²² A second type shows the body of Christ as seen from directly above as is the case with the famous *Turin Shroud*. An illustration of the second type in Belting, 1980, fig.18; see also J. Wilson, *The Turin Shroud*, London 1978, and recently R. Cormack, *Painting the Soul - Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds*, London 1997, 114f.
- ²³ H. Belting has emphasized the evolution of different image types of the *epitaphios* according to its different functions in the rites of the Orthodox Church. See Belting, 1980, 1-16 and H. Belting, *Das Bild und sein Publikum im Mittelalter*, Berlin 1981, esp. chap. 5 E, 189-196. A Russian example of the *epitaphios* from the beginning of the 20th century is illustrated in: *Russische Ikonen und Kultgerät aus St. Petersburg*, exhibition cat., Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Cologne 1991, 144, cat. 166.
- ²⁴ In a letter concerning the mysteries of Day and Night in Gen.1:5, Pavel Florensky expressed himself in 1913 with words that perfectly seem to fit the idea of Malevich's painting: "(...) *Tod und Geburt verflechten sich ineinander, fließen ineinander über. Die Wiege ist der Sarg, der Sarg die - Wiege. Geborene - sterben wir, und sterbend werden wir geboren...*" in: *Auf dem Makovez* (1913), from the correspondence with Vassilij V. Rosanov in: P. Florenskij, *Die umgekehrte Perspektive*, Munich 1989, p.80.
- ²⁵ A remnant of the Byzantine angel-deacons holding circular fans may perhaps be seen in the two flower motifs next to the central tree-shape.
- ²⁶ The year 1907 saw the first big exhibition on Symbolism in Moscow, where Malevich could make himself

- familiar not only with the ideas of the French Nabis, but also with the latest works of young Russian artists. See Riese, 1999, p. 28f. On Russian Symbolism see S. Frederick Starr in: *Russian Avant-Garde Art, The George Costakis Collection*, New York 1981, p. 18.
- ²⁷ G. Vikan, Ruminations on Edible Icons: Originals and Copies in the Art of Byzantium, in: *Studies in the History of Art*, 20(1989), 52ff.
- ²⁸ H. Belting, "In Search of Christ's Body. Image or Imprint?" In: H. Kessler, G. Wolf, *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation*, Bologna 1998, p. 1ff. During the period of Iconoclasm the *acheiropoieta* or images *not made by human hands* had been put forward by Byzantine iconophiles as strong arguments against those who denied the use of images and especially those of Christ. *Acheiropoieta* were proof of the fact not only that Christ existed but also that he wished to leave an image of himself for later generations. Bringing his own image into being by miraculously duplicating his body, he himself was authorizing a standard version of his portrait.
- ²⁹ See Belting, "In Search of Christ's Body", (as note 28), p. 6.
- ³⁰ For the viewers' reception of icons in Byzantium see R. Cormack, *Painting the Soul, Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds*, London 1997, esp. p.93ff (icons of Christ). Proof that not only icons but also works of art were seen as an *everflowing ἐνέργεια [energia] of the spirit* is in P. Florenskij, *Die kirchliche Liturgie als Synthese der Künste* (1918), in op.cit. (as note 24), p.112.
- ³¹ Kasimir Malewitsch. *Zum 100. Geburtstag*. Katalog der Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne 1978, p.14f. (quoted after Riese, 1999, p.13, translated into English by the author).
- ³² See Ingold, 2000, p.126 (with further bibliography).
- ³³ See Catalogue: *Sieg über die Sonne. Aspekte russischer Kunst zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1983, L.S. Boersma, *The last Futurist Exhibition of Painting: 0, 10*, Rotterdam 1994.
- ³⁴ W. Hofmann, *Die Moderne im Rückspiegel*, München 1998, p. 274.
- ³⁵ Ingold, 2000, p.323, note 3 states that the order of the vowels in Kruchenykh's poem: "o e a i e e i a e e e" follows the Russian Lord's Prayer. According to Ingold, Kruchenykh's other famous poem: "je u ju i a o o a o a je i je ja[...]'" refers to the Russian Orthodox Creed; Ingold, 2000, p. 175f.
- ³⁶ J. K. Eberlein, Inhalt und Gehalt, in: *Kunstgeschichte - eine Einführung*, Berlin 1986, p.172.
- ³⁷ K. Malewitsch, *Der Künstler*, (German translation quoted after Ingold, 2000, p.361).
- ³⁸ "Ich stelle mir eine Welt vor von unerschöpflichen Formen von unsichtbaren – der Künstler findet die Schönheit". op.cit. (as note 37, p.361).
- ³⁹ Describing the aims of Rayonism, Mikhail Larionov seems to express the old Byzantine issue in the modern language of his time: "Das Bild kommt gleichsam ins Gleiten, es vermittelt die Empfindung des Außerzeitlichen und Außerräumlichen – in ihm ergibt sich die Empfindung dessen, was man die 4. Dimension nennen kann, denn die Länge, Breite und Dicke seiner Farbschichten sind die einzigen Merkmale der uns umgebenden Welt; alle anderen im Bild sich ergebenden Empfindungen gehören bereits einer anderen Ordnung an". Michail Larionow, *Strahlenkunst*, (quoted after Ingold, 2000, p.376).
- ⁴⁰ See the remarks by Malevich himself in: Kasimir Malewitsch, *Russisches Kunstleben um 1913* (Aufzeichnungen zu einer geplanten Autobiographie) in: Ingold, 2000, p.522-531; for Neoprimitivism see N. Mislser-J.Bowl, 1993 passim.
- ⁴¹ N. Mislser-J.Bowl, 1993, p.16,18; Ingold, 2000, p.253; Malevich himself gives a detailed report on the range of subjects with which the Neoprimitivist art group was occupied primarily in this period. See Malevich, *Russisches Kunstleben*, in: Ingold, 2000, p.522-531.
- ⁴² The research on painter's manuals was brought into vogue by Russian scholars. In 1868 P. Uspenskij published a Russian translation of a Greek "Hermeneia" manuscript he had earlier copied in Jerusalem. In the 1890's N. Kondakov encouraged further work on the text. For a discussion of painters' manuals see P. Hetherington, *The "Painter's Manual" of Dionysios of Fourná*, London 1974, 1978. E. Berger in the year 1897 brought the attention of yet a second type of Russian manual called *stoglaŭ* which seems to refer directly to the art of A. Rublov and Dionysij, calling the work of Dionysij "miraculous and divine". See E. Berger, *Beiträge zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Maltechnik*, Munich 1897, p.68, 69.
- ⁴³ Some of Goncharova's paintings are reproduced in J. Kiritschenko, *Zwischen Byzanz und Moskau*, Munich 1991, p. 265, fig. 290, 291, 292. See also *Russian Avant-Garde Art, The George Costakis Collection*, New York 1981, p.106 - 108. Report of the exhibition by Malevich in: K. Malewitsch, *Russisches Kunstleben*, in: Ingold, 2000, p.523.
- ⁴⁴ Quotation translated into English by the author. Compare K. Malewitsch, *Russisches Kunstleben*, in: Ingold,

- 2000, p. 523: "Solcherart hatte die Ausstellung eine nicht nur rein-malerische Tendenz, sondern (war) Ausdruck der nationalen, geistigen Züge bäuerlicher Anlitze, in denen eine Form reflektiert war, die einerseits von der Ikonenkunst ausging(...)". It should perhaps be remembered that in 1928/29 Malevich once again took up this subject in a similar composition, this time adding a red cross behind the peasant's head. Compare fig. 42 in: exh. catalogue Kunstforum Wien, 5. September - 2. Dezember 2001, Vienna, Petersburg 2001, p. 119.
- ⁴⁵ Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, pencil on paper.
- ⁴⁶ Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery, no. 14245, Tempera on wood. This work is supposed to be the oldest Russian *Mandylion*-icon. It was taken from its original church-setting to be restored in 1919 and has ever since been part of its collection. See T. Talbot Rice, *Die Kunst Rußlands*, Zurich 1965, p. 38, p. 40.
- ⁴⁷ See K. Onasch, *Ikonen*, Berlin 1961, p.347, 348.
- ⁴⁸ I. Wilson, *The Shroud of Turin. The Burial Cloth of Jesus Christ?*, New York 1978, fig. B b, p. 146, Imperial War Museum, London, Ref. No. Q 32210 (quoted after H. Belting, *Bild und Kult*, Munich 1990, p.640 and note 25).
- ⁴⁹ On this see the excellent study of R. Cormack, *Painting the Soul - Icons, Death Masks, and Shrouds*, London 1997, p. 101-111.
- ⁵⁰ It should be noted that the 12th century *Mandylion*-icon of Novgorod was one of these famous procession-*icons* in Russia. See T. Talbot Rice (as quoted in note 46), p. 40.
- ⁵¹ For an analysis of this painting as to its attempt to create a national-religious identity see the recent article by W. K. Lang, "Zur Konstruktion einer national-religiösen Identität in Michail Nesterows Gemälde *In russischen Landen oder Die Seele des Volkes* (1914-16)", in: *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 64 (2001), 404 - 416.
- ⁵² J. A. Sharp, *The Critical Reception of the 0,10 Exhibition: Malevich and Benua*, in: V. Rakitin, *Artisan and Prophet: Tatlin and Malevich - Notes on two artists' biographies*, in: *The Great Utopia*, exhibition cat., Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1992, p. 116.
- ⁵³ Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery, Oil on canvas, 79,2 x79,5. For a usefull list of all hitherto known "Black Squares" by Malevich see J. Simmen, *Kasimir Malewitsch. Das schwarze Quadrat*, Frankfurt 1998, p. 100f.
- ⁵⁴ See also B. Pejic, *The icon effect*, (as quoted in note 3), p. 568.
- ⁵⁵ While Malevich presented the "Black Square" to the public as an "icon" it goes without saying, that this painting was not an icon in the old sense, but of a new kind: an "icon" of art. H. Belting *Das unsichtbare Meisterwerk*, Munich 1998, p. 341ff.
- ⁵⁶ Kasimir Malevich, A letter to Pavel Ettinger, in: *Von der Fläche zum Raum. Rußland 1916-1924*, exhibition cat., Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne, 1974, p.54f. - In a recent study on "*Kasimir Malewitsch. Das schwarze Quadrat*", Frankfurt 1998, J. Simmen takes up a position differing from the ideas I develop in this essay. Following a suggestion by the artist Elsworth Kelly Simmen describes the "Black Square" as a human portrait and more specifically relates it to a self-portrait by Malevich from 1908/09 (ib., p. 42). Although the author also discusses the medieval *Mandylion* - icons (ib., p. 42-46) he does not arrive at my conclusions. The *Mandylion* -icon rather leads him to believe that this image has to be regarded as the *Ur-Ikone* of the Eastern Christian Church - to which he opposes Malevich's "Black Square" as the modern *Anti-Ikone* (ib., p. 47).
- ⁵⁷ Compare K. Onasch, *Ikonen*, Berlin 1961, p. 28,29,30 on this point.
- ⁵⁸ "[...] Malewitsch beschloß ein Urbild zu malen, mit dem er seine suprematistischen Bilder einleiten wollte". Belting, 1998 (as in note 55), p. 344.
- ⁵⁹ Only through incarnation had God become visible and therefore representable, as the iconophiles of the Byzantine period never stopped arguing.