

Suprematism and Constructivism

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Suprematism and Constructivism are two artistic movements that gained ground in the early to mid 1900s. This lesson covers:



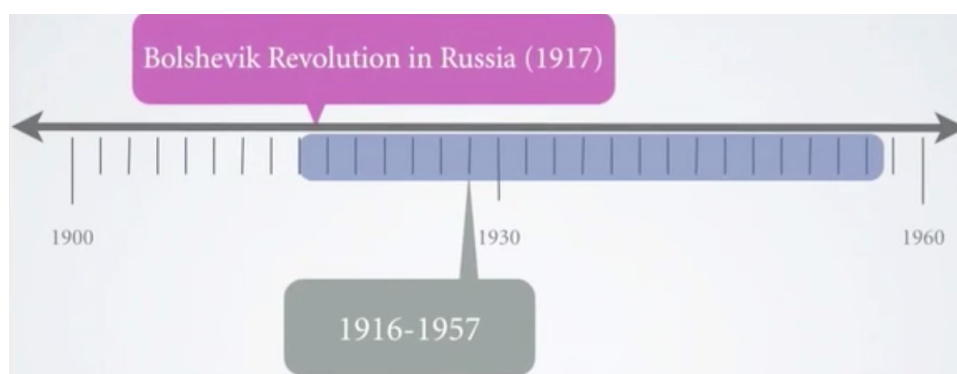
BIG IDEA

Suprematism was created with the intention of trumping all previous art forms. Constructivism had an original utopian function of serving the needs of the Russian or Soviet Revolution.

1. Period and Location: Suprematism and Constructivism

The artwork in this lesson is from the years 1916 to 1957, as highlighted on the timeline below. The geographical regions that will be covered in this lesson are:

- Saint Petersburg, or Leningrad, Russia—Home of Kasimir Malevich
- Bryansk, Russia—Naum Gabo was born here in 1819
- Moscow, Russia—Where Vladimir Tatlin lived and where Alexander Rodchenko died in 1956



2. “Suprematist Composition”

Russian artist Kazimir Malevich essentially created the basic concept of Suprematism. The name comes from the idea that this new art would be superior to the arts that came before and would create supremacy of pure feeling or emotion in the visual arts. It would not be linked to specific objects, which created an extremely

minimalistic visual style in a similar spirit as to the De Stijl movement that arose around the same time in the Netherlands.

Malevich's approach to the reduction of form with the elevation of feeling and emotion was to emphasize basic geometric shapes and colors. The elevation of his art form above those that preceded it was closely tied to the universality of its form. Because it was not tied to anything particular, this allowed the meaning to be constructed within each viewer. Each individual was able to connect to the piece in unique ways that weren't dictated by any specific form.

➞ EXAMPLE Below is an example of Malevich's "Suprematist Composition."



Suprematist Composition by Kasimir Malevich

1916

Oil on canvas

3. "White on White"

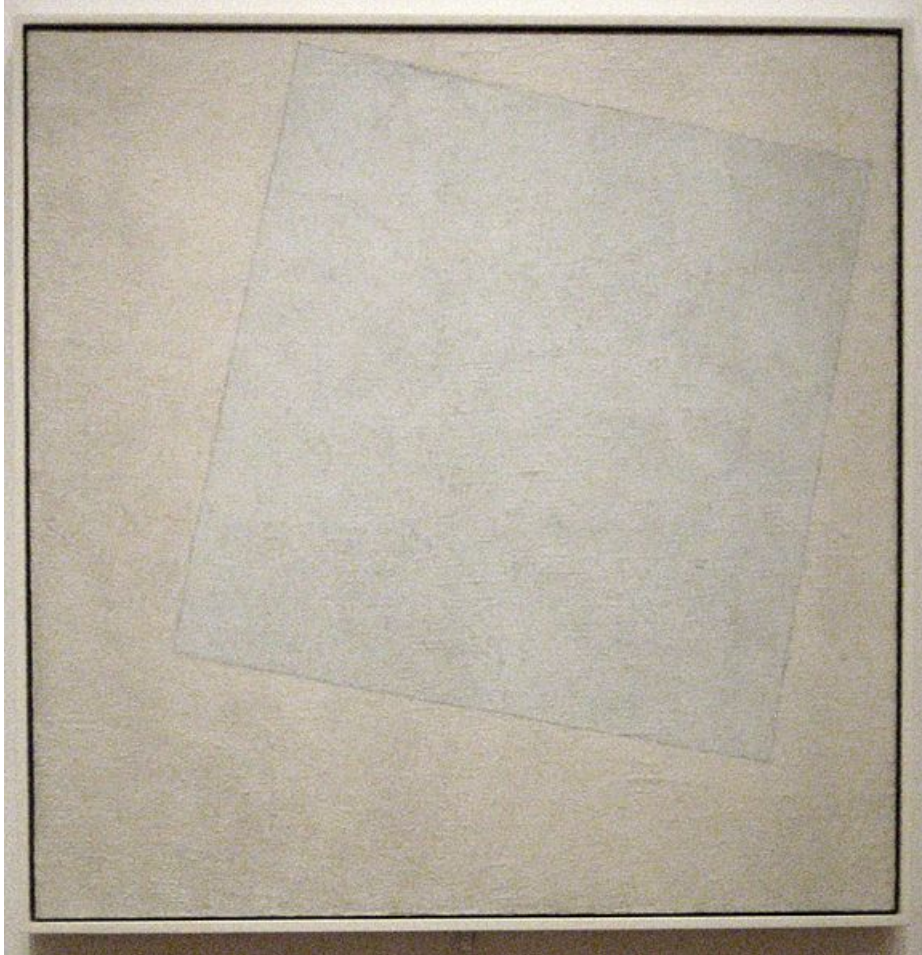
Throughout his career, Malevich continued to work towards achieving what he called a zero point in his artwork.



DID YOU KNOW

The goal of a zero point was to reduce his compositions down to the most basic elements in order to come to the point where art was at its most essential. To proceed any further would cause the art to cease being art.

➞ **EXAMPLE** An example of this might be a black circle on a white background. The canvas below, with squares painted in two shades of white that are almost imperceptible, also depicts this threshold. If you take away the slightly askew square, you're basically left with a frame and little else.



White on White by Kasimir Malevich

1918

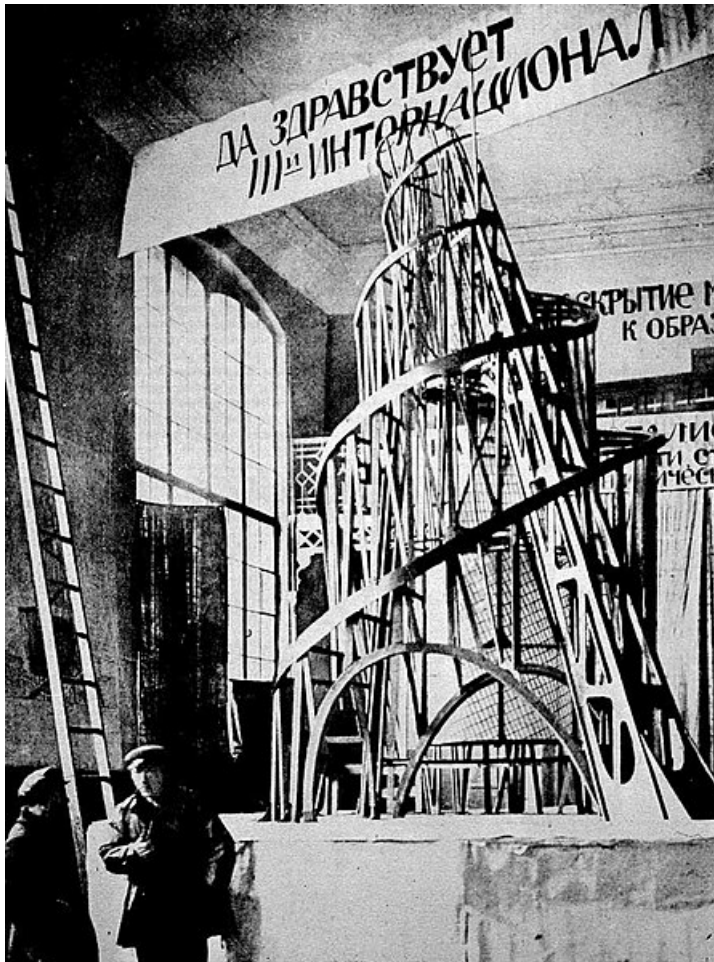
Oil on canvas

4. “Monument to the Third International”

Where **Suprematism** was confined to the visual arts, the development of **Constructivism** by Russian artists such as Vladimir Tatlin extended **abstraction** into all of the arts, including sculpture design and architecture. The connection to Constructivism was important in the early Soviet Union. Originally, Constructivism had a **utopian** function, serving the needs of the revolution.

➞ **EXAMPLE** This monument to the Third International was a model built by Tatlin for a structure that was to eclipse the Eiffel Tower in terms of size and modernity. It parallels the formation of a new world

order taking place in Russia.



Monument to the Third International (also known as Tatlin's Tower) by Vladimir Tatlin

1919

Model only (never built)

Unfortunately, the project never left the concept stage, for a number of reasons. One of the main ones may have been the lack of materials. Steel was scarce in post-war revolutionary Russia. The movement was also eventually abandoned by the state as being too radical.



TERMS TO KNOW

Suprematism

A 20th-century Russian art movement that is characterized by its focus on sensed feelings through expressions of pure forms, for example circles, rectangles, lines, and colors.

Constructivism

An avant-garde art movement (1913-1940) characterized by abstractions, geometric forms, and themes that commend machines and technology.

Abstraction

In the arts, the simplification of form down to its most basic elements.

Utopia

Idealized states of perfection.

5. Advertisement for the State Press of Leningrad

If you're a fan of the band Franz Ferdinand, you may be familiar with this next image, as it inspired the cover art on their second major release. The construct photographer, Alexander Rodchenko, a student of Tatlin, was another pioneer in the art of photomontage. He inspired countless photographers in the decades to come with his unique approach to photography.

By taking images from unique angles, such as from below or above the central figure, he created a sense of dissociation with the viewer. This was a technique that came to be known as **distanciation**, essentially making the familiar unfamiliar.

There is an interesting underlying dichotomy to Rodchenko's work. It was limited in scope in many ways by the state, but at the same time, the government afforded him the ability to reach a huge number of people that he might not have been able to reach without the state's help.

➞ **EXAMPLE** There is also the apparent irony of using capitalistic-style advertising, as in his work below, to extend the socialist agenda of the government.



Advertisement for the State Press of Leningrad by Alexander Rodchenko

1924

Color poster



TERM TO KNOW

Distanciation

A technique that is used to produce a feeling of dissociation.

6. Stylized Flower

Naum Gabo was another constructivist whose artistic vision changed over time as he exposed himself to more and more of the collective knowledge outside of his native Russia. He pioneered such areas as kinetic art, or art that moves. He also looked to the influence of Kandinsky, for example, in his approach to abstract art. This was done to attempt a chance to evoke the spiritual in his creations and explore a sense of space by actually reducing the amount of mass in his objects.

➔ EXAMPLE Below is Gabo's untitled stylized flower sculpture from 1957.



Stylized Flower by Naum Gabo

1957

Steel tubes and wire mesh

Gabo attended academic lectures, becoming familiar with the ideas of Einstein related to space, time, and relativity. These ideas likely influenced his ever-refining artistic style, which transcended the three dimensions of conventional art, incorporating the fourth dimension of time itself.



SUMMARY

Two artistic movements that gained ground in the mid to late 1900s were Suprematism and Constructivism. In this lesson, you learned about the **period and location of Suprematism and**

Constructivism. In doing so, you explored several examples of these artistic movements, including:

- “Suprematist Composition”
- “White on White”
- “Monument to the Third International”
- Advertisement for the State Press of Leningrad
- Stylized Flower

Source: THIS WORK IS ADAPTED FROM SOPHIA AUTHOR IAN MCCONNELL.



TERMS TO KNOW

Abstraction

In the arts, the simplification of form down to its most basic elements.

Constructivism

An avant-garde art movement (1913-1940) characterized by abstractions, geometric forms, and themes that commend machines and technology.

Distanciation

A technique that is used to produce a feeling of dissociation.

Suprematism

A 20th-century Russian art movement that is characterized by its focus on sensed feelings through expressions of pure forms, for example circles, rectangles, lines, and colors.

Utopia

Idealized states of perfection.