

# RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

Revolution in the Arts



Press Information

# HERMITAGE

St Petersburg › Amsterdam

29 Jan 2022 | 8 Jan 2023

# Press Release

Amsterdam, 10 November 2021

Hermitage Amsterdam presents

## Russische Avant-garde

Revolution in the Arts

29 Jan 2022 | 8 Jan 2023

In 2022, as a sequel to *1917. Romanov & Revolution, the End of Monarchy* (2017) the Hermitage Amsterdam will present the long-awaited exhibition *Russian Avant-Garde – Revolution in the Arts*. This exhibition tells an intriguing story of Russian avant-garde art, from the final years of Imperial Russia, through the turbulent times surrounding the Revolution of 1917, to its end in the Stalin era.

The Russian avant-gardes, which most famously included artists Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky, became known for their radical innovations in painting. But they also devoted themselves to the design of interiors and theatre sets, utensils and books. By far the most surprising medium for the new artistic imagery was porcelain: the material traditionally preferred by the tsars. It was readily available and completely white, reasons that led many artists to work with it. So much of it has been preserved that porcelain can tell the entire story of the Russian avant-garde like no other material. About five hundred works on canvas, paper, textiles and especially porcelain, will display the avant-gardes' imagination, that of their predecessors and their followers. They demonstrate a revolution in the arts.



Wassily Kandinsky  
*Landschaft. Dünenberg bei Murnau*, 1913  
©State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg



UNOVIS artists group photo, just before  
their departure to Moscow, 1920

### A revolution on porcelain

After the Russian Revolution, the Imperial Porcelain Factory was handed over to avant-garde artists. The factory became a breeding ground for ingenious ideas, where old stocks of unpainted plates and dishes could serve as a canvas for their innovative work. They also used it for a new revolutionary visual language, influenced by Suprematism, the movement founded by Malevich. It was completely devoid of figuration: predominantly depicted were geometric figures such as the square, the circle and the rectangle, in primary colours, white and black. The parallels between the work of the Russian avant-garde and the Dutch

MORE INFORMATION

[hermitage.nl/en](https://www.hermitage.nl/en)

NOTE TO EDITORS, NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Download information and images  
about the exhibition, masterpieces and  
the background story here:

[hermitage.nl/en/press](https://www.hermitage.nl/en/press)

HERMITAGE AMSTERDAM

Department of Communication,  
Education & Marketing

Martijn van Schieveen, Stella Küçüksen  
and Marissa Waller-Akersloot

+31 (0)20 530 87 55

[pressoffice@hermitage.nl](mailto:pressoffice@hermitage.nl)



Kazimir Malevich  
Plate 'Dynamic composition' and drawing  
of the design, 1923  
©State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

**Press release**

*Russian Avant-garde*

artists of De Stijl, founded by Theo van Doesburg, are very apparent. For Malevich, Van Doesburg and Mondrian, abstract art was *the* new direction for the future. Yet in Russia, the movement was short lived. Gradually, the factory was purged and the avant-gardes were marginalized. Abstraction gave way to the hard realistic imagery of Socialist Realism, which celebrated the achievements of the utopian state, including Stalin's personality cult. Visit hermitage.nl for more information.

**The makers**

A team from the Hermitage Amsterdam and the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. The exhibition curator is Birgit Boelens (Hermitage Amsterdam), the guest curator is author, Slavist and specialist Russian art of the early 20th century, Sjeng Scheijen. The designers of the exhibition are Carlo Wijnands (spatial design), Vanessa van Dam (graphic design) and André Cremer (UNA designers, publicity campaign and catalogue).

**Time line: Russian Avant-garde**

The story and prominent masterpieces of the exhibition are displayed in a historical time line, available on the website.

[hermitage.nl/en/press/images-exhibitions](http://hermitage.nl/en/press/images-exhibitions)

### Tijdlijn: Russische avant-garde

### Time line: Russian Avant-garde

**1913** Pavel Filonov en Anatoly Lubin *Beeldje 'Bees uit Kjaas'*, 1913  
Pavel Filonov and Anatoly Lubin *Figurine 'Bees out of Cheese'*, 1913

**1914** Wassily Kandinsky *Landscap*, 1913  
Wassily Kandinsky *Landscap*, 1913

**1915** Kazimir Malevich *Zwart vierkant*, 1915  
Kazimir Malevich *Black Square*, 1915

**1916** Aleksandr Rodtchenko *Beeld 'Kubus met kansen'*, 1916  
Alexander Rodtchenko *Model 'Cube with chances'*, 1916

**1917** Sergej Tsjebuchin en Michail Pechenegov *Beeld 'Kubus met kansen'*, 1916  
Sergey Chibrikov and Mikhail Pechenegov *Model 'Cube with chances'*, 1916

**1918** Vladimir Tatlin *Beeldontwerp 'Managements voor de Indes Internationaal'*, 1919  
Vladimir Tatlin *Model design 'Management for the Indies International'*, 1919

**1919** Vladimir Tatlin *Beeldontwerp 'Managements voor de Indes Internationaal'*, 1919  
Vladimir Tatlin *Model design 'Management for the Indies International'*, 1919

**1920** Wassily Kandinsky *Tekening van decoratieve voor een ontwerp*, 1920  
Wassily Kandinsky *Drawing of a decoration for a window (book)*, 1920

**1921** Wassily Kandinsky *Tekening van decoratieve voor een ontwerp*, 1920  
Wassily Kandinsky *Drawing of a decoration for a window (book)*, 1920

**1922** Kazimir Malevich *Beeld 'Dynamische compositie' en tekening van het ontwerp*, 1923  
Kazimir Malevich *Plate 'Dynamic composition' and drawing of the design*, 1923

**1923** Nikolaj Bogoljov *Ontwerp met dekfel*, 1923  
Nikolay Bogoljov *Design with lid*, 1923

**1923** Kazimir Malevich *Ontwerp met dekfel*, 1923  
Kazimir Malevich *Design with lid*, 1923

**1923** Kazimir Malevich *Beeld 'Dynamische compositie' en tekening van het ontwerp*, 1923  
Kazimir Malevich *Plate 'Dynamic composition' and drawing of the design*, 1923

**1924** Zinaida Kuljebkova *Beeld met portret van Lenin*, 1924  
Zinaida Kuljebkova *Plate with a portrait of Lenin*, 1924

**1925** Kazimir Malevich *Beeld 'Op een bad ontworpen'*, 1923  
Kazimir Malevich *Model 'On a bath designed'*, 1923

**1926** Kazimir Malevich *Beeld 'Op een bad ontworpen'*, 1923  
Kazimir Malevich *Model 'On a bath designed'*, 1923

**1927** Kazimir Malevich *Beeld 'Op een bad ontworpen'*, 1923  
Kazimir Malevich *Model 'On a bath designed'*, 1923

**1928** Kazimir Malevich *Beeld 'Op een bad ontworpen'*, 1923  
Kazimir Malevich *Model 'On a bath designed'*, 1923

**1929** Harelja Dvorka en Tatjana Selezjewa *Beeldontwerp 'Sportswomen'*, 1924  
Harelja Dvorka and Tatjana Selezjewa *Model design 'Sportswomen'*, 1924

**1930** Harelja Dvorka en Tatjana Selezjewa *Beeldontwerp 'Sportswomen'*, 1924  
Harelja Dvorka and Tatjana Selezjewa *Model design 'Sportswomen'*, 1924

**1917** Russische revolutie  
Russian Revolution

**1919** Oprichting agitatieve paravels  
Rise of agitprop paravels

**1921** Russische revolutie  
Russian Revolution

**1923** Russische revolutie  
Russian Revolution

**1924** Russische revolutie  
Russian Revolution

**1927** Russische revolutie  
Russian Revolution

Rudolph Wilde and Stepan Chekulin  
Jug 'RSFSR' and drawing of the design, 1921



№ 3027  
3



# A Brilliant Experiment!

## Avant-garde artists take tsarist product by storm

### Sjeng Scheijen

*Author and Russia expert, guest curator of the exhibition*

This article is published in the exhibition catalogue.



Photo: Bob Bronschoff

Early in the twentieth century, something remarkable happened in the world of Russian painting. A large number of painters with widely varying approaches and backgrounds, felt constrained by the world of oil paint and canvas. Bored with two-dimensional image, they threw themselves into the three-dimensional worlds of theatre design, interior design, and the design of household objects and books. From the turn of the century onwards, the number of Russian painters turning to such design fields is really striking. While a similar trend can be detected throughout Europe (think of the work of Henry van der Velde and later Theo van Doesburg), in Russia it appears that virtually an entire generation of artists was gripped collectively by the urge to extend the sphere of their activities in a multidisciplinary direction.

This new spirit found its most glorious and influential expression among the artists we now call the Russian avant-garde. This radical group, defined by a mentality rather than a shared set of ideas, was not content to extend art merely to other disciplines; they wanted to make the whole of life the subject and setting of their art. They expressed themselves via performance, poetry, installations, the clothing they designed and wore, culinary culture, and the design of buildings and machines. No area of life was proof against their creativity.

This exhibition at Hermitage Amsterdam showcases the imaginative world of these avant-garde artists, their precursors and their followers, who between them brought about a Russian revolution in the arts. The emphasis is on the oddest and most unexpected discipline in which they engaged: the design of porcelain.

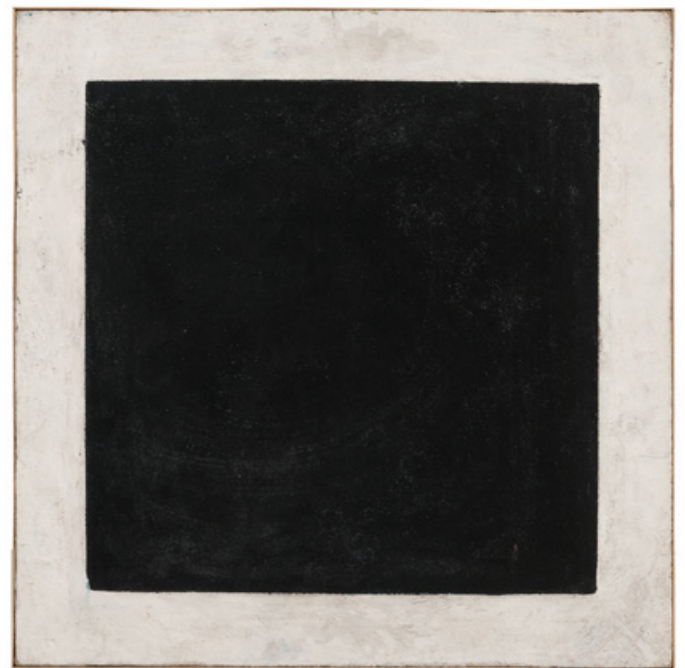
We think of porcelain as exclusive and delicate. But shortly after the Russian revolution this fragile, high-end product was used by avant-garde artists to propagate their totally non-traditional and revolutionary visual idiom. Nowhere in the world have artists of such international repute (figures like Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky) produced such daring designs for it. So how did these iconoclastic avant-garde artists come to use this apparently incongruous medium? What were they trying to do? And what did the new leaders – Communists seeking to found a model proletarian state – hope to achieve through the production of such porcelain?

In other words, how did porcelain, a product so closely associated with the tsars, become the bearer of revolutionary messages and forms?

#### Art as strategy

Porcelain production in Russia began in the eighteenth century as a means for the Russian monarchy to compete with the great royal houses of Europe. The Imperial Porcelain Factory was intended as Russia's answer to the Meissen, Wedgwood and Sèvres potteries that were providing the Prussian, British and French courts with tableware, vases and objets d'art. So it played the same role as the museum art collections, the art academy, the music conservatory, the ballet and the university – all institutions that appeared in Russia within the space of around a hundred years as part of a cultural offensive designed to transform the backward Russian state into the leading power in Europe.

When the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, they might well have been expected to shut down production and dismantle the porcelain factory. After all, what use were its elite products to the people? There were certainly some within the Bolshevik party who advocated the factory's



**Kazimir Malevich**  
*Black Square*, 1913 / c. 1932  
©State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

## A Brilliant Experiment!

Sjeng Scheijen



**Wassily Kandinsky**  
**Drawing of a decoration for a water bowl**, 1921  
 ©State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

permanent closure. But an important subset of party members, including Lenin, had other ideas. The former elitist culture was not to be destroyed but democratised. The cultural institutions should be opened up to the general public. Cultural knowledge and products should be widely disseminated. To achieve this, the arts must be rescued after the revolution and subsequently nationalised.

The rescue of the factory also served other purposes. The Bolsheviks needed the support of upper middle-class people in St Petersburg. They occupied key management positions in the ministries and industries, and the Bolsheviks could not rule the country without their cooperation. So it was vital to the Bolsheviks to allay the understandable distrust of middle-class people by presenting themselves as responsible leaders. Since the great cultural treasures of Russia – of which imperial porcelain was certainly one – were seen by them as a matter of national pride and confidence, safeguarding those treasures was part of the Bolshevik strategy to win the trust of the middle class.

On the other hand, the Bolsheviks felt that the porcelain factory could not continue on the same footing and that its products should be modified to conform to the new state ideology. Accordingly, they decided to place the factory in the hands of a new generation of artists, initially under the direction of designer and graphic artist Sergei Chekhonin.

It was a surprising choice, because Chekhonin had built up a reputation as a fashionable decorator for the aristocracy and wealthy industrialists. One of Chekhonin's admirers, the then well-known art critic Abram Efros, was dumbfounded: 'His Soviet manifestation was completely unexpected. There had been nothing to presage it. His art and sympathies were entirely with the ancien régime. He was the charmer and idol of fashionable ladies. He was an enameller, jeweller, porcelain designer and watercolourist to the wealthy. He was the heraldry expert of hereditary plutocrats and the designer of aristocratic emblems.'<sup>1</sup> How could such a man possibly be put in charge of a Bolshevik-led cultural institution?

In fact, Chekhonin's appointment was typical of the pragmatism displayed by both artists and Bolsheviks. Chekhonin wanted to continue his creative career and artistic development. The ideological beliefs of his clients were of little interest to him. The Bolsheviks wanted someone



**Nina Zander**  
**Plate 'Silhouette of factory chimneys'**, 1919  
 ©State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

who had the professional skills to act as artistic director and who was prepared to make the management reforms they demanded. Many other artists proved equally inclined to reach such compromises. Furthermore, Chekhonin was the son of moneyless peasants; he knew about poverty and inequality at first hand. Even though he had served the aristocracy and wealthy bourgeoisie and certainly did not regard himself as a Bolshevik, it is not inconceivable that he had some sympathy with Communist ideals.

### Political porcelain

Chekhonin and the artists he recruited began to use the porcelain to express their commitment to the revolution. They painted explicit political slogans and symbols on stocks of existing blanks, produced figurines representing ordinary people, and at the same time used porcelain as the platform for a new, revolutionary visual idiom. The idea that porcelain

## A Brilliant Experiment!

Sjeng Scheijen

could convey political messages was not, in fact, entirely new. Even before the revolution, some porcelain had had a political function, albeit an implicit one. For example, the long series of *Peoples of Russia* presented the tsarist empire as an unending multi-ethnic domain that was home to hundreds of different nations. This was a way for the Russian empire to present itself as the ideological antithesis of the European nation states.

It was this tradition of politicised porcelain that Chekhonin perpetuated and expanded. He incited a wide range of artists to work for the factory, but it was representatives of the avant-garde who responded most positively. From the start, they had seized the opportunity provided by the revolution to give shape to their ideas about the integration of art and life. Feeling that a new society called for a new look to everyday life, they threw themselves into the design of posters, products and fashion. The ideas about multidisciplinary art developed before the revolution acquired an extra political dimension. Artists were soon starting to produce industrial goods: lamps, chairs, chess and other tables, interiors, kiosks and buildings. Seen in this context, it is not so odd that they also turned their attention to porcelain.



Pavel Kamensky and Anatoly Lukin  
Figurine 'Peasant from Ryazan', 1913  
©State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

From 1919, artists like Nathan Altman, Ivan Puni and Wassily Kandinsky worked at the porcelain factory, designing abstract decorative designs to be applied to plates and cups by the factory's porcelain painters. When Chekhonin was dismissed in 1923, his place was taken over for a short period by Nikolai Punin. He was a well-known left-wing intellectual and art theorist who enjoyed the confidence of some Bolsheviks. However, they had not realised that Punin was also an advocate of the most radical movements within the Russian avant-garde: Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism and Vladimir Tatlin's Constructivism.

Shortly after his appointment, Punin invited Malevich to join the factory. The artist's arrival triggered a radical change in the design of porcelain. He and the students he brought with him wanted to use it not so much as a material to paint on, but to create entirely new forms. Since the revolution, Malevich had rejected all forms of two-dimensional art and since 1918 he had virtually stopped painting. He thought that only entirely new, non-utilitarian forms could adequately express the revolutionary changes gripping the country. According to him, artistic forms should not simply be reflections of material reality, nor even of an abstract reality, but be the harbingers and tools of an expanded consciousness – a new mode of being. That was the true purpose of the revolution. Since 1919, he had been working with his students in the provincial town of Vitebsk on what he called 'architectons': serene, white, three-dimensional sculptures. These were the first results of the quest for new forms. And now Malevich was keen to translate those forms into porcelain.

The result was Malevich's now iconic tea set, with its famous 'half-cups'. It turned the porcelain factory into a platform for radical innovation. Among the most paradoxical results of the early Soviet Union is the fact that these artists – already marginalised figures under enormous pressure – found a home in this formerly hyper-elite institution.

However, most of the Bolsheviks had bourgeois, conservative tastes in art. Malevich's experiments went much too far for them and Punin was soon dismissed. Malevich and Kandinsky had to give way to makers more in line with the conservative tastes of the Bolsheviks. Moreover, following the launch of Lenin's 'New Economic Policy' (1922), the factory had to generate a large part of its income by producing marketable goods. Malevich and his students could expect little good to come of this. Their avant-garde porcelain designs were so extraordinary that mass-production was a practical impossibility: too few people wanted to buy them even in Russia.

### Window-dressing in Europe

At the same time, the Soviet regime used the new porcelain to bolster its image in Europe. Pieces were exhibited extensively outside Russia – a way for the new regime to

## A Brilliant Experiment!

Sjeng Scheijen

demonstrate both its intention to safeguard the cultural heritage and the ability of the Soviet Union to breathe new life into an outdated and somewhat dead-end art form. Not for nothing was porcelain often associated with ballet: another art form typically associated with royalty and then in decline in Europe, but which had enjoyed an exciting renaissance in Russia. This parallel may explain why, at this period, the factory's production included so many pieces – both dishes and figurines – that referred to Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, a company then widely regarded as a relic of tsarist culture.

The success of the avant-garde in gaining (and to some extent retaining) a place in the development of new porcelain was therefore partly to do with the image the Soviet Union wished to project in Western Europe. The new Soviet state was keen to show its most attractive face to Europe, and more especially to progressive European intellectuals. Accordingly, it devoted much attention to the presentation of forward-looking artists in international exhibitions. The work of modernist and avant-garde artists was showcased, and porcelain was prominent in this regard. At the renowned 'First Russian Art Exhibition', held in Berlin and Amsterdam in 1922 and 1923 respectively, porcelain was extensively represented and there was a strong focus on the avant-garde. The pieces on show were also offered for sale. In the Russian press, David Shterenberg boasted about the 'remarkable success of the parts of the exhibition featuring the porcelain factory'<sup>2</sup>. In Berlin, almost all the porcelain in the exhibition found buyers virtually immediately, making 385,000 marks. A new stock of Soviet porcelain was imported for the follow-up exhibition in Amsterdam. It raised a further 52,600 guilders, probably exceeding the value of the Berlin sales in German marks (which were subject to rapid devaluation).<sup>3</sup> These were no mean successes for the new revolutionary state (which was not yet even officially recognised by the Netherlands). They confirmed that Soviet porcelain could count on admiration in Western Europe and therefore help to boost the image of the new revolutionary regime. From then on, porcelain was a regular part of Soviet entries to international exhibitions. The Monza Biennials of 1923 and 1925 and the Venice Biennale of 1924 featured large displays of Soviet porcelain, as did the World's Fair held in Paris in 1925, where the Soviet Union – the self-proclaimed proletarian utopia – exhibited 557 pieces of this once so imperial product.<sup>4</sup>

### Malevich's teapot – an enemy of the people

From the mid-twenties, the state exerted ever stricter control over all areas of public life, including culture. The Bolshevik leaders aimed to homogenise and democratise the arts. The public's participation in culture was to be increased and the arts were to serve the masses. Independent and eccentric work was therefore deliberately marginalised. In the thirties, under Stalin's totalitarian regime, the arts were increasingly used for propaganda purposes. Failures in agricultural

production, even resulting in famines, had to be disguised; figures for industrial production were falsified; leaders were glorified. All this is reflected in the porcelain.

Porcelain was also used in social propaganda. It conveyed messages to the Soviet population about improving the condition of children, female emancipation, the inclusion of ethnic minorities, the importance of literacy, and improvements in personal hygiene. This made porcelain the reflection of the dreadful paradox of the Soviet Union in the late twenties and thirties, when a rising standard of living was accompanied by increasing political repression.

To ensure that it fulfilled its role in propaganda, the porcelain factory came under increasingly strict political control. Even so, one of Malevich's students, the brilliant Nikolai Suetin, would continue to play a major role in its activities right through to the 1950s. This was primarily because he was a gifted artist and a skilled professional much respected by his colleagues. People like him remained indispensable.

But that did not stop Stalinist hardliners in the cultural world placing heavy pressure on Suetin. In the early thirties, the cultural world was ravaged by the 'anti-formalist campaign',



Kazimir Malevich  
Teapot with lid, 1923  
©State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

the aim of which was to purge the arts of the last remnants of the avant-garde and other modernist movements. Europe learned about the campaign primarily because of the assault on the composer Shostakovich, but in fact the regime attempted to force all those active in the arts who had modernist roots either to stop working or to comply with the new, populist and propaganda-ridden norm. This included the avant-garde artists at the porcelain factory. In a report published by the state printing office on 'tableware for the



## A Brilliant Experiment!

Sjeng Scheijen

masses', Malevich was described as a hanger-on of the 'capitalist bourgeoisie' while Kandinsky was denounced for the 'petit-bourgeois roots of his ideology'. Malevich's teapot was selected for particular criticism as a shining example of 'formalism in tableware' and was described as betraying 'ideological content alien to the proletariat'. These were serious charges, intended principally to undermine Suetin's position. After all, he was a disciple of this 'style actively hostile to proletarian art'.<sup>5</sup>

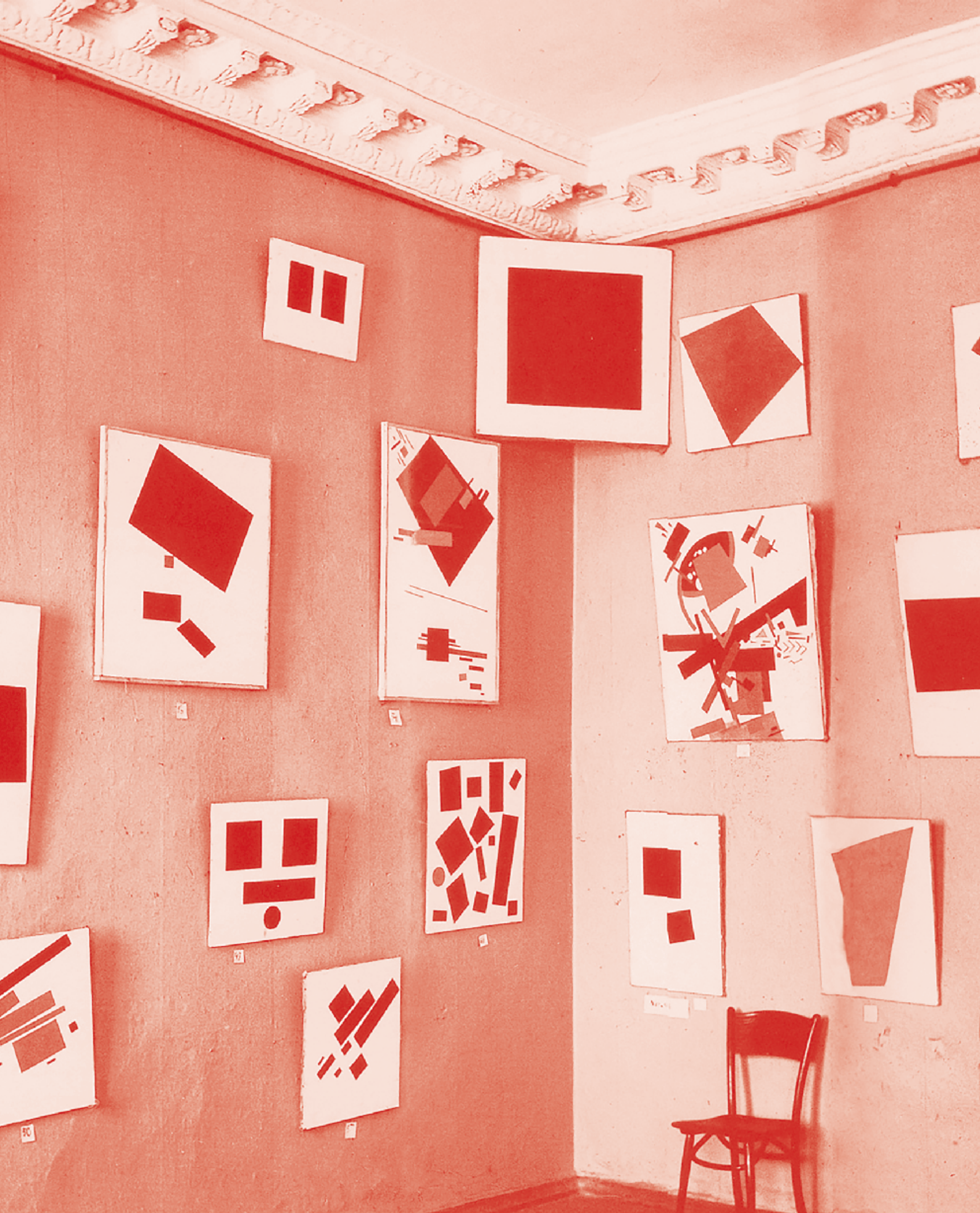
From the early thirties on, avant-garde porcelain no longer featured in exhibitions outside Russia. Nevertheless, Suetin managed to retain his post at the porcelain factory. This was partly due to the support he enjoyed among his colleagues there and partly to his own ability to conform and to integrate the qualities of his work – uncluttered lines and a splendid feel for balanced proportions – into pieces of porcelain that seemed outwardly to serve the purposes of the state. In 1937 Suetin was even appointed chief designer of the Soviet pavilion at the Paris World Exhibition. But by that time the art of Malevich, Chagall and Kandinsky had long since vanished from the walls of every museum in the Soviet Union. Thanks to Suetin's special status in the history of Soviet porcelain, the Suprematist porcelain that he and Malevich designed were the first items to return to public display in museums following the death of Stalin. While Malevich's paintings continued to be banned from public view until the mid-eighties, his teapot and teacups were for many years the only examples of his work on display to the public.<sup>6</sup>

In short, the chronology of Soviet porcelain tells a remarkable story. It reflects both historical developments in the early Soviet Union itself, and the important role that artists played in them. In no other discipline that complex relationship is so surprisingly apparent.



**Natalia Danko and Tatiana Seidenberg**  
**Inkwell 'Sports women', 1934**  
 ©State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg

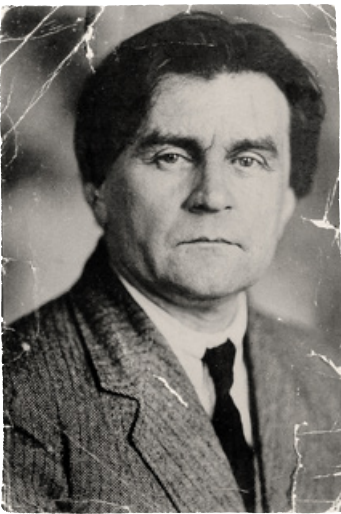
- 1 A. Efros and N. Punin, *Чехонин* [Chekhonin], Moscow/Petrograd [1924], p. 9.
- 2 Interview with D.P. Shterenberg, *Зрелища* [Spectacle], 1923, no. 19, p. 15.
- 3 See V.P. Lapshin, 'Первая Выставка Русского Искусства. Берлин. 1922' [First Russian Art Exhibition], in: *Советское Искусствознание 1982 – I* [Studies in Soviet Art 1982 – I], Moscow 1983, pp. 359 and 361.
- 4 A.A. Sidorov (ed.), *Бюллетен ГАХН* [Bulletin of the State Academy of Art Sciences], 2–3, Moscow 1925, p. 11; *Жизнь Искусства* [The life of art], 32, Leningrad/Moscow 1924, p. 12.
- 5 A.V. Filippov (ed.), *Художественное оформление массового посуды* [The artistic design of mass-produced tableware], Moscow/Leningrad [1932]: OGIZ-IZOGIZ, pp. 14, 17, 60.
- 6 M. Kostrich, 'Прикладное искусство и экспозиция выставки. Супрематический фарфор' [Applied art and an exhibition display], in: *Творчество* [Creative arts] 1989, no. 6, pp. 19–20.



**Last Futuristic Exhibition of Paintings '0.10'**  
(zero-ten), 1915–16  
Malevich exhibited 39 paintings. This included *The Black Square* (1915), which became an 'icon' of Suprematism, the most famous work of Malevich.

# Protagonist biographies

## Kazimir Malevich



Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935) was a painter, graphic artist, designer, creator and founder of Suprematism, teacher, philosopher. He studied at the Kiev Drawing School, in the studio of F. Rerberg in Moscow, was a volunteer at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. In his development, he went from realism to becoming one of the leaders of the avant-garde movement. The date of creation of Suprematism is considered to be 1915, when at the *Last Futuristic Exhibition of Paintings '0.10'* Malevich exhibited 39 paintings. This included *The Black Square* (1915), which became an 'icon' of Suprematism, the most famous work of Malevich. Being a kind of abstract art, Suprematism aimed at the search for absolute harmony in geometric forms. The representation of both objects and ideas was rejected. For Malevich, art and spirituality were interconnected. He regarded each painting as a 'frozen' image of an eternal movement through an ideal space of dimensions; no up, no down, no right and no left. The white in his paintings stood for infinity. The same colour of porcelain, the material he started working on after 1918. In November 1919, Malevich in Vitebsk led a workshop at the People's Art School, where he created the group 'Unovis' (*Affirmers of New Art*), consisting of teachers and students.

In the summer of 1922, Malevich, together with his students, moved to Petrograd. In 1923 the new artistic director of the State Porcelain Factory, Nikolai Punin, recruited him and some of his students including Nikolai Suetin.

The years around 1930 are characterized by a complete limitation of artistic freedom, and Malevich's work was interpreted as formalistic. In 1930, he was arrested because of his connections with German artists. After his release he was allocated studio space in the State Museum. Towards the end of his life, Malevich painted in a post-suprematist, more figurative style. He died of cancer in 1935 at the age of 56. The exhibition includes several paintings by Malevich, from various periods, as well as a dozen pieces of Suprematist painted and unpainted porcelain.

## Wassily Kandinsky



Kandinsky (1866–1944), painter, graphic artist, founder and theorist of abstract expressionism, is considered a pioneer of abstract art. He was born in Moscow and grew up in Odessa (Russian Empire, now Ukraine). He received his art education at the Munich studio school of A. Ashbe, the Munich Academy of Arts. In 1911 he co-founded the artists association *Der Blaue Reiter*, named after an earlier painting by him. The exhibition presents two of his paintings of that period (1911–1914). Kandinsky returned to Moscow in 1914, at the beginning of the First World War.

After the revolution, Kandinsky was an active participant in the process of organizing a new artistic culture. He was a member of the People's Commissariat of Education. For the State Porcelain Factory he created sketches for porcelain. On display are a number of paintings for porcelain in 1921, and accompanying painted porcelain. In the 1920s, in exile, Kandinsky taught at the Bauhaus School of Art and Architecture in Germany until it was closed by the Nazis in 1933. He then emigrated to France, where he died in 1944.

## Protagonist biographies

### Sergey Chekhonin



Sergey Chekhonin (1878–1936) was a graphic artist, artist of applied art, theater artist, portraitist and illustrator. He studied at the Central School of Technical Drawing of Baron Stieglitz, at the Drawing School of the Society for the Encouragement of arts, at the school-workshop of M.K. Tenisheva and with I.E. Repin. He was a representative of the art association *Mir Iskusstva* ('World of Art'). He is known for his works in the field of magazine and book graphics, satirical caricature. Chekhonin was engaged in architectural and interior ceramics, was familiar with the technique of miniature on enamel. He enjoyed a reputation as a fashionable decorator. In August 1918, he was elected artistic director of the State Porcelain Factory and became the creator of a new direction in porcelain - agitation. From December 1918 he also headed the school of the painting shop of the State Porcelain Factory, organized in the former school of Baron Stieglitz. In May 1923, he went to work in Novgubfarfor (the former enterprise of I.E. Kuznetsov) to increase the level of mass porcelain. At the end of 1925 he returned to the management of the artistic part of the State Porcelain Factory until his departure for France in 1928. Over the years, he has executed many samples for copying on porcelain, sketches of paintings and several forms, including the form of the Narkombros service. He died on 23 February 1936 at the age of 58 in Lörrach, Germany. The exhibition presents dozens of sketches and works by Chekhonin in porcelain, as well as his book graphics.

### Natalya Danko



Sculptor and ceramist Natalia Danko (1892-1942) received art education at the Stroganov Art School in Moscow, at the City Art School of J. Janson in Vilnius, in the studio of M. Dillon and L. Sherwood in St. Petersburg. She worked as a sculptor at the Imperial Porcelain Factory from 1914. After the revolution, in 1919, she became the head of the sculptural department. Danko is considered one of the most famous authors of porcelain figurines in the Soviet Union. She created more than 300 porcelain figurines and compositions. Many of them can be seen at the exhibition. During the siege of Leningrad, in early 1942, Danko was evacuated to the city of Irbit, where the porcelain factory was evacuated. On the way she died.

### Nikolai Suetin



Nikolai Suetin (1897–1954) – regarded as one of the leading Suprematist artists, was the most consistent student of Malevich, designer, graphic artist, painter. From 1923 to the spring of 1924 he worked at the State Porcelain Factory, creating forms and Suprematic paintings. In 1932 he was appointed chief artist of the art laboratory of the plant. Despite the increasingly strict requirements of socialist realism, he managed to work very fruitfully and consistently carried out the principles of Suprematism in the art of porcelain. He designed several exhibitions, including the interiors of the USSR pavilion at the International Exhibition *Art and Technology in Modern Life* in Paris in 1937 and the USSR pavilion at the World Exhibition *The World of Tomorrow* in New York in 1939. He continued to play an important role in the factory until the 1950s. The exhibition presents dozens of works of Suprematic porcelain by Suetin.

# The Saint Petersburg Porcelain Factory as a breeding ground for avant-garde

The Imperial Porcelain Factory was founded in 1744 by Empress Elisabeth (1709–1761) and came under the direction of the Russian mining engineer Dmitry Ivanovich Vinogradov (1720–1758). He developed the unique recipe for Russian porcelain and managed to extract the necessary raw materials from Russian soil. Initially, the factory produced exclusively for the Imperial family. As a result, the artistic identity was determined mainly by the Romanovs themselves. For example, porcelain for Elisabeth was mainly influenced by Western styles, while the reign of Catherine the Great was a golden age for grandiose ensembles in the form of ceremonial sets with allegorical sculptural decorations. Porcelain also served as a canvas with which to promote Russia, carrying political messages, ideological expressions and portraits of peoples living in Russia.

Elegant rococo and strict classicism were best represented in eighteenth-century imperial porcelain, historicizing styles were predominant in the nineteenth century. However around 1900, the porcelain factory was already producing some items in the Art Nouveau style. Around that time, the factory was steeped in the aesthetics of the artist group called *Mir iskoestva* ('The World of Art') which spanned multiple disciplines: painting and graphic art, costumes, interiors and drama. They also produced Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*. One of the younger members of the group was Sergey Chekhonin, who was later appointed the factory's artistic director in 1918.

When in the summer of 1914 the First World War broke out, the imperial factory had to refocus on military assignments: technical porcelain. Artistic production was severely limited, the zeitgeist was about to change drastically. After the revolution of 1917, the porcelain factory became the property of the state. Initially, that status change only concerned the factory's branding: the tsar's monogram was replaced by the national double-headed eagle *without* tsarist crown. Radical changes took place after the manufactory was transferred under the control of the People's Commissariat for Education in March 1918 and launched into being an exemplary institution for socialist crafts. A logo consisting of hammer, sickle and cog soon appeared.

The first years after the revolution became a time of hope for the avant-garde. At that time the terms futurism and revolution were considered almost synonymous. The

State Porcelain Factory soon became the place to be for innovative artists: Nathan Altman, Ivan Poeni, Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich. At the same time, the factory was commissioned to make agitation porcelain, intended to incite the viewer to revolutionary action. That suited the general mood in the new socialist Russia. The same slogans and themes appeared on the porcelain as on the posters, banners and signs throughout the city. The traditionally imperial porcelain now spoke the language of the revolution.

The first exhibition of the State Porcelain Factory (summer 1919) featured 463 objects manufactured after the revolution. The former imperial factory's production came to exemplify the new craftsmanship that linked modern and applied art to one another. During the first ten years after the revolution, well-attended exhibitions of the new porcelain took place in various (capital) cities Tallinn, Stockholm, Paris, Lyon, Milan, Amsterdam (1923, Stedelijk Museum).



The first exhibition of the State Porcelain Factory, 1919

Towards the middle of the 1930s modernist trends in porcelain were supplanted by Socialist realism. The abstraction disappeared and was replaced by a hard realistic, visual language: an all too rosy portrayal of 'reality' that celebrated the achievements of the socialist utopian state including a personality cult of Stalin.

## The Saint Petersburg Porcelain Factory as a breeding ground for avant-garde

The factory was known in Soviet times as the Leningrad Porcelain Factory named after Michail Lomonosov. It was privatised in 1993, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and became a joint stock company. In 2001 the collections of the manufactory museum were transferred to the State Hermitage Museum, which set up a scientific department and a permanent exhibition on the territory of the manufactory. Nowadays the factory is once again called the Imperial Porcelain Factory and has the double-headed eagle as its coat of arms.

### De Stijl and the Russian avant-garde

There are clear parallels between the work of the Russian avant-garde and that of the Dutch artists of De Stijl, founded by Theo van Doesburg. Although Malevich never met Van Doesburg or Mondriaan, but when he saw reproductions of the De Stijl artists, he was very surprised. Malevich, van Doesburg and Mondriaan regarded abstract art as a new direction for the future.

Van Doesburg did meet other Russian avant-garde artists, such as painter and graphic designer El Lissitzky. They found one another through their shared advocacy for 'the faith in the square,' the square, as a form for the new visual language in art. Lissitzky became a member of De Stijl, wrote and illustrated for the magazine *De Stijl* and for the architecture magazine *Wendingen*. Van Doesburg later distanced himself from Malevich's work on porcelain, which he dismissed as 'bungled arts and crafts'. He may not have been alone in that opinion at the time, however nowadays it is viewed very differently.



Magazine cover of the first issue *De Stijl*. *Maandblad voor de beeldende vakken*, 1917  
Vignette design: Vilmos Huszár



*Wendingen*, Volume 4, nr. 11, 1921  
Magazine cover design: El Lissitzky



**UNOVIS artists group photo, just before their departure to Moscow, 1920**

Malevich in centre, holding a dish. To his left, El Lissitzky with a hat and beard. A black square is clearly visible on his cuff.

# Introductie ontwerpers

## Introduction designers

**De Hermitage Amsterdam maakt deze tentoonstelling samen met de collega's van de State Hermitage Museum in Sint-Petersburg en een team van ontwerpers.**

The Hermitage Amsterdam produces this exhibition in collaboration with the colleagues from the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg and a team of designers.

### ONTWERPERS DESIGNERS



**Publiciteitscampagne** Publicity campaign  
**Catalogus** Catalogue

**UNA designers | Amsterdam**

andcremer@unadesigners.nl

André Cremer



**Tentoonstellingsontwerp 3D**  
3D Exhibition design

**Carlo Wijnands | Amsterdam**

carlowijnands.com

Carlo Wijnands

foto: Photo Raad van der Peijl



**Tentoonstellingsontwerp 2D**  
2D Exhibition design

**Vanessa van Dam | Amsterdam**

vanessavandam.nl

Vanessa van Dam

### CONSERVATOREN CURATORS

Hermitage Amsterdam

**Birgit Boelens**

**Tentoonstellingsconservator**

*Exhibitions curator*

**Sjeng Scheijen**

**Gastconservator**

*Guest curator*

State Hermitage Museum | St Petersburg

**Anna Ivanova**

**Museum Keizerlijke Porseleinfabriek**

**Afdelingshoofd en tentoonstellingsconservator**

*Museum Imperial Porcelain Factory*

*Head of the department and Exhibitions curator*

**Mikhail Dedinkin**

**Afdeling West-Europese Schilderkunst**

**Adjunct-afdelingshoofd**

*Department of West European Painting*

*Deputy head of the department*

**Anna Kumzerova**

**Afdeling Wetenschappelijke Bibliotheek**

**Senior conservator**

*Department of Scientific Library*

*Senior curator*

**George Sokolov**

**Afdeling Russische cultuurgeschiedenis**

**Junior conservator**

*Department of History of Russian Culture*

*Junior curator*



## RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE Revolution in the Arts

### EXHIBITION

**Russian avant-garde – Revolution in the Arts**

### LOCATION

**Hermitage Amsterdam**

Amstel 51 Amsterdam

### DATES

**29 January 2022 – 8 January 2023**

For current opening dates and times [hermitage.nl/en](https://www.hermitage.nl/en)

### WEBSITE

[hermitage.nl/en](https://www.hermitage.nl/en)

### CATALOGUE

**Russian Avant-garde – Revolution in the Arts**

€ 39.95 Publication Hermitage Amsterdam | WBooks

### TICKETS

For an overview and current [hermitage.nl/en](https://www.hermitage.nl/en)

### GUIDED TOURS

Groups of max.15 people

€ 90 per hour

Inquiry [rondleidingen@hermitage.nl](mailto:rondleidingen@hermitage.nl)

### LECTURES

In one of the meeting rooms

€ 175 per lecture (excl. entrance exhibition and room rental)

[rondleidingen@hermitage.nl](mailto:rondleidingen@hermitage.nl)

### PROGRAMMING

Various activities are organized during the exhibition.

View the current overview on [hermitage.nl/en/activities](https://www.hermitage.nl/en/activities)

### FAMILIES

3+ **Play with magnetic geometric shapes**

6+ **Scavenger hunt**

12+ **Grand Art Game**

15+ **#Tour**

### FOR MORE INFORMATION AND IMAGES

#### HERMITAGE AMSTERDAM

*Press Office*

Martijn van Schieveen, Stella Küçüksen  
and Marissa Waller-Akersloot

**+31 (0)20 530 87 55**

[pressoffice@hermitage.nl](mailto:pressoffice@hermitage.nl)

[hermitage.nl/en/press/](https://www.hermitage.nl/en/press/)

### EDUCATION

**Basic** (greater Amsterdam) School package for groups 4, 5 and 6. Preparation at school, visit to the exhibition and workshop in the Hermitage for Children

[hermitage.nl/en/education](https://www.hermitage.nl/en/education)

**Continued** Talent programme for different levels.

### MUSEUM SHOP

*Winner MuseumShop Prize 2020*

10.30–17.30 hrs, no ticket needed

### CAFÉ-RESTAURANT HERMITAGE

First floor. Open 10–17.30 hrs. Courtyard terrace open from (at nice weather) 10-17.30 hrs

### AUDITORIUM

Suitable for various purposes [events@hermitage.nl](mailto:events@hermitage.nl)

### ROOMS

Available for lectures and meetings [events@hermitage.nl](mailto:events@hermitage.nl)

### ROUTE

**Coach** In and out: Weesperstraat, group entrance: Nieuwe Keizersgracht 1

**Boat** Jetty in front of main entrance Amstel

**Car** Parking garages: Dutch National Opera & Ballet, Waterlooplein, Markenhoven

**Public transport** Tram 14 (Waterlooplein), metro 51, 53, 54 (Waterlooplein, exit Nieuwe Herengracht)

### ACCESSIBILITY

The entire building is easily accessible. Wheelchairs and walkers to borrow, reservation recommended. Two disabled parking spaces available, reservation required in advance.

**+31 (0)20 530 87 55** or [mail@hermitage.nl](mailto:mail@hermitage.nl)

Rudolph Wilde  
Dish 'Sickle, hammer and cog', 1922



FOUNDER

**VRIENDENLOTERIJ**

HOOFDSPONSORS MAIN SPONSORS



ONTWERP DESIGN

UNA designers